

THE ART OF READING SCRIPTURE

Edited by

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Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story

Richard Bauckham

The church's reading of Scripture has usually presupposed its narrative unity, that is, that the whole of the Bible — or the Bible read as a whole — tells a coherent story. Any part of Scripture contributes to or illuminates in some way this one story, which is the story of God's purpose for the world. If Scripture does indeed tell the story of God's purpose for the world, then we should certainly expect to find unity and coherence in it. But the idea of reading Scripture as a unified narrative seems problematic from at least two very different perspectives: (1) that of biblical scholars for whom the great diversity of the biblical texts makes the claim of unity inconsistent with the nature of the Bible and (2) that of postmodern critics for whom a unified narrative would establish Christianity as the oppressive metanarrative that historically it has very often been.¹ This essay begins with a section that responds mainly to the first perspective. The argument about the Bible is then interrupted by a critical consideration of the second perspective (the postmodern critique of metanarratives) in order to resume, in the third section, a discussion of the biblical story with some conceptual tools provided by the postmodern approach.

I. The Biblical Story — Unity and Diversity

We should first be clear about the senses in which Scripture is clearly not a unified narrative. First, not all Scripture is narrative. Those books that are in

1. There is a third perspective the essay does not address: that of Jews for whom the Christian reading of the two Testaments as a unified narrative is problematic.

narrative form sometimes contain nonnarrative material within the narrative context (e.g., law in Exodus–Deuteronomy). Some books contain no narrative material at all, but it is not difficult to see that the canon implicitly gives some nonnarrative books (e.g., Psalms, Lamentations) a narrative setting within the story told by the narrative books. In a sense, this is true of the largest category of nonnarrative works in each Testament: prophecy and apostolic letters. (The Hebrew Bible explicitly signals the narrative context of prophecy by calling the historical books from Joshua to 2 Kings the Former Prophets and the prophetic books the Latter Prophets.) Prophecy and apostolic letters are intrinsically related to the biblical story, to which they constantly refer, even summarizing and retelling parts of it. The biblical narrative of God, his people, and the world structures their theology and is presupposed in the way they address the present and the future. The apocalypses, Daniel and Revelation, like parts of the Prophets, presuppose “the story so far” in envisioning its eschatological conclusion. Thus, while not all Scripture is generically narrative, it can reasonably be claimed that the story Scripture tells, from creation to new creation, is the unifying element that holds literature of other genres together with narrative in an intelligible whole.

However, there are a few books of which this is more difficult to say: Song of Songs, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes. Association with Solomon links them extrinsically to the story of Israel, but they seem to lack intrinsic connection with it.² The presence of these books in the canon might suggest that Scripture finds its unity not in the story it tells but in the God about whom it speaks (though the problem of a book that does not speak of God at all — Song of Songs — would still remain). But this is not a convincing distinction, since Scripture in general knows who God is from the story it tells of God, his people, and the world. The solution surely lies in recognizing that, although this story focuses on the particularity of God's activity in history, it also, especially in its beginning (Gen 1–11), recognizes God's general relationship as sovereign Creator to the whole creation and all people. In any case, it is important to note, with the trend of scholarship since the demise of the biblical theology movement, that the shape of the canon is distorted if biblical theology focuses on salvation history at the expense of either the wisdom literature of the Old Testament or the significance of creation throughout the canon.

There is also a second sense in which Scripture is not a unified narrative. The Bible does not tell a single story in the way that either a novel or a

2. But note the way Ellen Davis finds that the imagery of the Song of Songs links it with significant parts of the Old Testament story in Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2000).

modern work of historiography by a single author might. Whatever unity it has is not the kind of coherence that a single author might give to his or her work. The narrative books in fact adopt a wide variety of kinds of storytelling and historiography, while the future completion of the story can naturally be indicated only by narrative means quite different from those that tell, in whatever way, a story set in the past. Moreover, no one before the final editors or compilers of the New Testament canon even planned the assembling of precisely this collection of works. Of course, Christians believe that God's Spirit inspired these books and God's providence guided their collection, but this does not warrant our supposing that the Bible must have the kind of unity a human author might give to a work. God's inspiration has evidently not suppressed the diversity of the many human minds and circumstances that, at the human level, have made Scripture the collection of widely varied materials that it is. Perhaps we could appeal to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the polyphonic novel, in which the voices of the various characters and even the narrator are autonomous and equal.³ The unity of such a novel consists in the dialogue of conflicting voices. The relation of the author to a polyphonic novel might constitute a kind of analogy for the relation of God to Scripture, but it would remain an analogy. Scripture has neither the *kind* of diversity nor the *kind* of unity a polyphonic novel does.

While the Bible does not have the kind of unity and coherence a single human author might give a literary work, there is nevertheless a remarkable extent to which the biblical texts themselves recognize and assert, in a necessarily cumulative manner, the unity of the story they tell. The books from Genesis to 2 Kings constitute a single edited history from creation to the exile, though the editors, especially of the Pentateuch, were evidently content to let stand a good deal of variety in the traditions they incorporated. In this they serve as something of a model for the compilers of the canon itself. The books of 1-2 Chronicles span the same period as Genesis-2 Kings, employing genealogy in the first eight chapters as a sophisticated means of representing the history from Adam to David. Although Ezra-Nehemiah is not placed after 1-2 Chronicles in the Hebrew canon, the editorial replication of the opening verses of Ezra at the end of 2 Chronicles does create a link, indicating the continuation of the same story. As well as these two parallel narratives, stretching from creation to, in one case, the exile, and in the other, the reconstitution af-

3. See Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), ch. 3. One of Bakhtin's major examples of the polyphonic novel was Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*; but whether he was correct in regarding the various voices in the novel as equal is debatable. The issue bears some resemblance to debates about unity and diversity in the Bible.

ter the exile, the Old Testament contains three short stories: Ruth, Esther, and Jonah.⁴ Each gives a perspective significantly different from those represented within the two major narrative sequences, but this is possible only because each is explicitly linked to the larger story of Israel (Ruth 1:1; 4:17-22; Esth 2:5-6; Jonah 1:1 with 2 Kgs 14:25).

The one biblical book that, in its way, matches the span of the whole canon is the Gospel of John, which begins with a deliberate echo of the opening words of Genesis and ends with a reference to the parousia (John 21:23, "until I come," Jesus' last words and the last words of the Gospel before the colophon), a reference that corresponds to the prayer with which Revelation concludes (Rev 22:20, "Come, Lord Jesus!"). The Gospel of Matthew opens with a genealogy that recapitulates the whole Old Testament history from Abraham onward, at the same time evoking the promises to Abraham and David, and closes with a reference to "the end of the age" (Matt 28:20). (It is worth noting that, whereas the biblical narratives in general leave a chronological gap between Old and New Testament stories — even if the deuterocanonical books of Maccabees are taken into account — the two genealogies of Matthew and Luke do create a kind of narrative link across the gap.) Throughout the New Testament, of course, the story of Jesus is treated as the continuation of the story of Israel and as initiating the fulfillment of the prophetic promises to Israel.

A sense of the unity of the biblical story is also given by a number of summaries to be found in both Testaments, though there is no summary of the whole story from creation to new creation. There are several summaries, of varying scope, of the story of Israel:

- Deut 6:20-24 (exodus to occupation of the land);
- Deut 26:5-9 (settlement in Egypt to occupation of the land);
- Josh 24:2-13 (Abraham to occupation of the land);
- Neh 9:6-37 (creation + Abraham to return from exile);
- Ps 78 (exodus to David);
- Ps 105 (Abraham to occupation of the land) and 106 (exodus to exile),
cf. 1 Chr 16:8-36;
- Ps 135:8-12 (exodus to occupation of the land);
- Ps 136 (creation + exodus to occupation of the land);
- Acts 7:2-50 (Abraham to Solomon).

4. The book of Jonah appears among the Twelve prophets in all canonical orders, but it clearly differs generically from the other components of the Twelve.

As different in focus and intent as these various summaries are, they tend to highlight the same major landmarks of the story. Just one of them virtually summarizes the whole Old Testament story: Neh 9:6-37, placed at the chronological end of that story, recapitulates the whole story from creation to its own time. Rather surprisingly, the Bible contains only one summary of the Old and New Testament stories as one: Acts 13:17-41 begins with the patriarchs and ends with the resurrection of Jesus and the preaching of the apostolic message. The New Testament contains many, mostly very short, summaries of the story of Jesus, some of which, like the later creeds of the church, project the story to its future end at his parousia (e.g., Acts 10:36-43). Despite such anticipations of the end of the story, it is important to notice that all these summaries are *situated* within the biblical story. Scripture does not and could not summarize its story from a standpoint outside the story, which is unfinished. The summaries are themselves part of the story and even contribute to the story's own development.

Another way in which the canonical texts themselves assert their unity is found in the book of Revelation. I have elsewhere described Revelation as "the climax of prophecy,"⁵ because it presents itself as the summation of the whole biblical tradition of prophecy, not least in its prolific allusion to a broad range of Old Testament prophetic texts whose continuing surplus of eschatological reference it affirms and interprets. As a prophetic text, Revelation offers in some sense an overview of the story from the perspective of its end, but even here the end is anticipated from within the still-continuing story.

In these and other ways, we can see that it is not alien to the biblical texts themselves, read as a cumulative whole, to seek a unitary story that encompasses the whole. For warrant to do this, we do not need to rely solely on the mere existence of the canon or the church's tradition of reading it,⁶ nor need we make a simply arbitrary decision to read Scripture in this way, but we can appeal to significant features of the texts in themselves. At the same time, however, we must recognize that the unity of the story cannot be a simple one handed to us on a canonical plate. The narratives are told from various junctures within the story and from a variety of perspectives. In the Old Testament, we have something like a master version of the main story up to the

5. Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993).

6. I am less happy than Loughlin to rely on the church's "traditional reading rules" (doctrines) for reading Scripture as a unity without also seeking what there is about Scripture that makes such rules appropriate. See Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 46-51.

exile (Genesis-2 Kings), but we also have diverse rereadings of it and interactions with it in the Prophets, a significantly different retelling of it in 1-2 Chronicles, tangential narratives that seem to offer corrective angles on it (Ruth, Esther, Jonah), and books that challenge essential features of its theology (Job, Ecclesiastes). In the New Testament, we have fresh and diverse rereadings of the Old Testament story (e.g., Paul and James on Abraham), while the story of Jesus is told in no less than four different versions in the Gospels, along with comment and interpretation in Paul, Hebrews, 1 Peter, and Revelation. The fourfold Gospel is the most obvious and telling example of diverse renderings of the biblical story, but the other instances we have mentioned show that this feature is not unique to Jesus' story but of a piece with the general character of Scripture.

At this point it may be helpful to remember the distinction that the narratologist Gérard Genette makes between story and narrative.⁷ A literary narrative may differ in many ways from the story it tells (regardless of whether the story is construed as fictional or true). For example, the order in which events are narrated may differ from the order in which they occur in the story. A narrative need not tell all the events of the story, while it may recount some events a number of times — from different points of view (whether of characters or narrators), from different temporal junctures within the story, conveying different information, highlighting different aspects of significance. This important distinction between story and narrative may help us see that the plurality of narratives in Scripture — many of which recount the same events differently and none of which tells the whole story — is not in principle an obstacle to seeking in the Bible a single coherent story, which all the narratives together tell and each partially tells.

It is important also to recognize that the diversity of biblical renderings of the biblical story is distinctly limited. This is evident through comparison with, for example, other versions of the Old Testament story in texts among the Dead Sea Scrolls or the versions of the gospel story to be found in the gnostic gospels from Nag Hammadi. The Gospel of John tells recognizably the same story as the Synoptics, whereas the gnostic gospels do not. In part because of specialization and the narrowing of horizons that it entails, much recent scholarship has tended to exaggerate biblical diversity.

Nevertheless, the diversity is such that readers of Scripture have their own work to do in discerning the unity of the story. Moreover, the diversity of different versions of the story is not the only feature of Scripture that requires

7. Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, pp. 52-62, summarizing the account in Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. J. E. Lewin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

such work. There is the sheer profusion of narrative material in Scripture, the narrative directions left unfinished, the narrative hints that enlist readers' imagination, the ambiguity of stories that leave their meaning open, the narrative fragments of the stories of prophets in their books or of writers and churches in the apostolic letters, the very different kinds of narrative that resist division into simple alternatives such as "history" and "myth," or "fiction," the references to stories external to Scripture. Such features, even apart from the bearing of the nonnarrative literature on the narrative, make any sort of finality in summarizing the biblical story inconceivable. Summaries are more or less essential, which is why we find them, as we have seen, in Scripture itself and why the creeds of the early church feature them prominently, but in neither case does just one summary emerge preeminent. Essential elements in a summary would not be hard to list. But the summaries cannot replace what they summarize; the story they summarize resists closure. The church must be constantly retelling the story, never losing sight of the landmark events, never losing touch with the main lines of theological meaning in Scripture's own tellings and commentaries, always remaining open to the never exhausted potential of the texts in their resonances with contemporary life.

There are perhaps two ways of understanding what is going on in retellings of the story, both within and beyond Scripture. One, located at the fashionable confluence of midrash and the postmodern, would understand it in terms of intertextuality. Texts are constantly being reinterpreted. There is obvious truth in this, but if it is the whole truth, if there is nothing outside the texts, the story risks being subject to the interests and designs — or mere intellectual playfulness — of its interpreters. Another approach (consistent with Genette's distinction between story and narrative) is to recognize that, while the telling of a story can be true, it can never be adequate to or exhaustive of the reality it renders. In this case, the fact that versions and interpretations multiply — especially in the case of the story of Jesus — is testimony to the importance of not reducing his reality to the limitations of a single rendering. The existence of the four Gospels, not to mention commentary in the apostolic letters, keeps readers aware that Jesus is neither captured in the text nor existent only as a textual construction but that he had and has his own reality to which the texts witness.

The considerations in this essay have largely concerned formal characteristics of the biblical texts rather than their material content. We have barely touched on what sort of a story it is that the Bible tells. To discuss the coherence of the biblical story in terms of the content of its narratives requires a biblical theology, which obviously cannot be undertaken here. But some sig-

nificant features of the biblical story will be discussed in the third section of the essay, where they will be required to distinguish the biblical story from oppressive metanarratives of the kind that have suffered the critique of postmodern thinkers — a critique to which we now turn our attention.

II. The Postmodern Critique of Metanarratives

The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard⁸ (d. 1998), in his *La condition postmoderne* (1979), famously and influentially defined the postmodern as "incredulity towards grand narratives" (or metanarratives — the terms are interchangeable).⁹ A metanarrative is a totalizing theory that aims to subsume all events, all perspectives, and all forms of knowledge in a comprehensive explanation. Lyotard's parade examples were the systems of Hegel and Marx. He later thought *La condition postmoderne* put too much emphasis on the narrative form, since his target was comprehensive systems of explanation that do not necessarily take that form. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that most such systems in the modern period do have a narrative character. Along with Hegel and Marx, these would include other versions of the idea of progress and scientific accounts, such as the currently popular elevation of Darwinism into a comprehensive explanation of human as well as other life. Even Platonism had a metanarrative; the term surely remains appropriate. Lyotard also later recognized that his own story of the obsolescence of all metanarratives in postmodernity was paradoxically itself a kind of metanarrative, at least in its absolutist claim to be the truth about history, and he sought to avoid the idea of a historical succession of modernity followed by postmodernity. Whether he successfully resolved the paradox (arguably, it is a version of the kind of paradox that relativism cannot avoid) is relatively unimportant, since that paradox has remained characteristic of much postmodern thinking that follows him in repudiating metanarratives.

Lyotard's rejection of grand narratives does not bear directly on the biblical or Christian story, though a consideration of the latter can certainly profit from attending to Lyotard's critique. It does not bear directly on the

8. My account of Lyotard on metanarratives is indebted to Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 23-43; Gary K. Browning, *Lyotard and the End of Grand Narratives* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000).

9. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

biblical or Christian story because Lyotard's target is the project of modern reason that aspires to a comprehensive explanation of reality, including the human condition, and seeks rationally based universal criteria by which to order society and to liberate humanity through technology.

This modern project presumes that reality, both nature and human history, is fundamentally comprehensible to reason. Lyotard's opposition to it involves a skeptical epistemology, which stresses the opacity of reality to reason, and a radical espousal of pluralism and heterogeneity against universality and unity. The contingency of events and the intractability of "difference" resist any totalizing theory. Metanarratives are necessarily authoritarian and oppressive, since they can subsume difference only by suppressing it. Lyotard's affirmation of difference is extreme. He opposes any universal values in theory and any attempt to reach consensus in society for the sake of a social order. The diverse language games of postmodern society are incommensurable, and so plurality is irreducible. Order is always false and so oppressive. The centralized organization of society and cultural homogenization are features of the modern project and to be opposed. The only liberating kind of politics is agonistic, intensifying difference and so constantly resisting closure. The valorization of diversity and experimentation seems the only value, and the right of the different to be heard, the only justice.

The alleged incredulity toward metanarratives has a certain plausibility in contemporary Western society, but it can distract attention from the very powerful, late-modern grand narrative of consumerist individualism and free-market globalization, which aims to subsume precisely postmodern plurality. It appears liberating in its valorization of consumer lifestyle choices but is oppressive in the much more realistic sense that affluent postmodern theorists are liable to ignore: it enriches the rich while leaving the poor poor, and it destroys the environment. In this way it continues the kind of oppression that the modern metanarratives of progress have always legitimated. It is hard to acquit much postmodern theory of unintentional or intentional collusion with this metanarrative. Postmodern relativism offers no cogent resistance to this metanarrative, which is not threatened by diversity so long as its overarching framework of alleged economic reality goes unchallenged.¹⁰ Rather than the postmodern story that proclaims the end of metanarratives, we need a story that once again affirms universal values while resisting their co-option by the forces of domination. Terry Eagleton attempts a case for Marxism in

10. Cf. Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, pp. 30-32. "The delirium of free-market consumerism is made possible by the iron fist of capitalist technoscience that brooks no dissenters" (p. 31).

this respect.¹¹ A case for the Christian story, which has been at least equally compromised by oppressive distortions and collusion with the modern myth of progress, may depend on a retrieval of aspects of the biblical story that resist its ideological distortions. Lyotard's extreme epistemological skepticism and indiscriminate valorization of difference as such are hardly attractive from a Christian perspective, but his critique of the modern grand narratives can still be instructive.

We do not have to go to Lyotard's extreme to see that the dream of modern reason — that it could fully capture and articulate reality — was an illusion. Theories of universal history that explain it in terms of a unidirectional movement of progress stand exposed as legitimations of the modern West's domination of the world.¹² Lyotard is right to stress the contingency of historical events and the intractability of reality to fully rational explanation and control. The present global warming tragically illustrates the hugely powerful unintended consequences of the modern overconfidence in human mastery of nature and history. Auschwitz, of which Lyotard memorably said, "We wanted the progress of the mind, we got its shit,"¹³ has rightly acquired the representative role of the surd that defeats any attempt at rational explanation of history. Totalizing metanarratives that entail closure do seem all too friendly to totalitarian politics.

III. The Biblical Story as a Nonmodern Metanarrative

The biblical story is not a metanarrative by Lyotard's definition, which limits the concept to a characteristically modern phenomenon, but I am not the first to extend the meaning, and it seems useful to do so. We might properly call the biblical story a premodern metanarrative were this not to appear to buy into the same sort of metanarrative about metanarratives that Lyotard himself sees lurking in the postmodern talk of the end of metanarratives.

11. Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

12. Fernández-Armesto's magnificent world history, *Civilizations*, shows by contrast how there is no single unifying and progressive story of civilization, such as was embodied by the modern Eurocentric narratives. Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Civilizations* (London: Macmillan, 2000). Of course, this does not mean that stories about the development of civilizations can no longer be told. History does not dissolve into a merely random succession of change, as some postmodernism suggests. Fernández-Armesto speaks of process rather than progress (pp. 20-22). Experience is almost inescapably narrative, and we are bound to try to understand the past, as we do the present, by narrativizing it.

13. Quoted in Browning, *Lyotard*, p. 68.

Such a meta-metanarrative remains in thrall to the modern metanarratives of progress, for which the label premodern is equivalent to obsolescent. But from the biblical story's own perspective, its premodern origin is no bar to its contemporary truth or relevance. By calling the biblical story a nonmodern metanarrative, I distinguish it from the modern metanarratives that Lyotard opposes. Consideration of the ways in which it is and is not what Lyotard de-fines and deplors will help illuminate its character. This route to clarifying its character is particularly useful because there is a sense in which modern metanarratives are indebted to the Christian tradition and because the biblical story has been widely confused with them and their myth of progress in the modern period.¹⁴

(1) What justifies the term metanarrative is that the biblical story is a story about the meaning of the whole of reality. Just as surely as it must be disentangled from the modern metanarratives of human rational mastery of nature and history, so it cannot be reduced to an unpretentious local language game in the pluralism of postmodernity. It makes a thoroughly universal claim, which combines the universality of the one Creator and Lord of all things with the particularity of this God's identification of himself as the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ. The particularity of the claim is offensive to the modern metanarratives of universal reason; the universality, even more offensive to postmodern relativism. The combination explains the way the biblical story combines "mythical," or symbolic, narrative, especially and necessarily at its beginning and end, with particular historical narrative (which is not modern historiography but historiography of one sort or another nevertheless). But even in this light, a remarkable regard for the particular is evident in the way the main plot emerges from and often risks submersion or dissipation in the apparently redundant superfluity of little stories, as well as the already mentioned complexity and ambiguity the story entails.

(2) Unlike the modern metanarratives, the biblical story accounts for history not in terms of immanent reason or human mastery but in terms of the freedom and purpose of God and of human freedom to obey or to resist God. There is a feature of typically modern narratives of all kinds (novels, films, etc.) that coheres strikingly with the modern metanarratives: they are primarily about human achievement. Things happen to people — there is contingency and coincidence and meaningless tragedy — but on the whole, the point lies in what people can make of these, how they can surmount disaster and achieve their freely chosen goals. These are the little stories that the metanarratives of rational mastery subsume without difficulty. By contrast,

14. The most fervent believers in the idea of progress I meet are often Christians.

the protagonists of traditional stories (fairy stories, for example) are typically much more accepting of what happens to them, and they win (for, of course, they do win) by means of the assistance of nature or the favor of supernatural powers or just wildly improbable luck. Their world is more mysterious than comprehensible, and they do not expect to master it. In the biblical stories, events are comprehensible insofar as God reveals his purposes and fulfills them. Human agency, of course, is important and is celebrated where appropriate, but its success follows divine initiative and requires divine concurrence.

(3) In the biblical story, there is therefore ample recognition of contingency in history in the sense that much, perhaps most, that occurs is not the intended result of human activity. The carefully plotted stories of Joseph and Esther show how the providence of God prevails through chance, coincidence, and the unintended results of human activity (cf. Gen 50:20) as much as through the obedient activity of servants of God. The biblical portrayal of divine providence cannot be equated with the immanent reason of history because it is contingent on the freedom of God and not open to rational calculation. So it invites trust, not mastery. God is to be trusted to be faithful to his promises, yet he remains free in his fulfillment of them.

(4) While the biblical storytellers recognize the hand of God in the contingency of history, some aspects of history remain intractable to comprehension in these terms. There is a tension between the divine moral order and incomprehensible evil. (This is surely the most dialectical aspect of biblical theology.) In the Old Testament histories and Prophets, there is a strong tendency to recognize moral order in the world over which God is sovereign. Rulers and nations get what they deserve, and although the God who is merciful as well as just may restrain his anger and remit punishment, the opposite is not equally true — that is, righteousness is not normally rewarded with suffering. What the historical books and the Prophets, from a salvation-historical perspective, assert about the fortunes of political societies, Proverbs, from a creational perspective, asserts about individual lives. In that sense Job's case is "countertestimony"¹⁵ against both Deuteronomistic history and so-called conventional wisdom. The trouble with Job's friends is not so much that they endorse the tradition of observing moral order in God's

15. The term is Brueggemann's, which he uses to characterize a variety of Old Testament texts that seem to oppose Israel's "core testimony" to YHWH. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), pt. 2. I do not find all the material he adduces very convincingly placed in this category, but the dialectical model of a legal dispute involving testimony and countertestimony helps show how texts such as Job and Ecclesiastes make an essential contribution without overturning the "core testimony."

world but rather that they do so in a spirit of dogmatic rationalism that cannot admit to a baffling exception, however obvious it might be. They exhibit the possible distortion of the biblical metanarrative into a rationalistic imposition of order that suppresses the real intractability of the evils of history. Job receives no explanation, only the assurance that God, because he is God, must in the end defeat evil, while Job, because he is human, cannot.¹⁶ The mastery of nature and history remains the more certainly in God's hands, but the inscrutability of his ways, for which he will not be answerable to Job, is majestically asserted against the all too knowing dogmatism of the friends. Within the Old Testament, it is Job above all that ensures that the biblical story is not a comprehensive explanation of reality, even a divinely revealed one. Meaningless innocent suffering is the intractable surd in the story. The canon's inclusion of Job is matched by the Psalter's inclusion of the utterly bleak Psalm 88, with its painfully unanswered complaint.¹⁷

Though Psalm 88 is the bleakest of the psalms of complaint, evincing scarcely any hope, others also voice the silence and absence of God in questions and complaints that remain unresolved. They entertain even the terrible possibility that God has abrogated his covenant and will not be faithful to his promises (Ps 89:39; cf. Lam 5:22). These psalms by no means contradict the testimony of the biblical story that God does act on behalf of the righteous. They presuppose it; it is only because of the belief that God does characteristically so act that they complain that he has not acted in their own case and insist that he must.¹⁸ These psalms, therefore — and all who are encouraged, by their inclusion in the Psalter, to pray them — live in dialectical tension with the testimony of Israel's story. This is perhaps a clue to the way the dying Jesus, in Matthew and Mark, makes his own the cry of desolation from the first verse of Psalm 22. The question arises precisely because God has so signally acted in the ministry of Jesus and promised the deliverance of his people through him.

The lack of a "literature of dissent" in the New Testament comparable to Job, Ecclesiastes, and the psalms of complaint might be understood by observing that the dialectic created by such material within the Old Testament acquires centrality in the New Testament story through the Matthean and Markan rendering of the cross. But what does this imply for the continuing openness of the biblical story to unassimilable evil? The cross and resurrec-

16. I read Job 41 in this sense.

17. Note also, with Brueggemann, the texts Phyllis Trible calls "texts of terror." Walter Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment: Psalms, Modernity, and the Making of History* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), pp. 49-50.

18. So Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment*, p. 52.

tion of Jesus have sometimes been understood as an answer to the Old Testament's question of theodicy, such that the psalms of complaint should no longer be prayed and Job's protest becomes redundant. In that case the biblical story, at its climax in Jesus, would achieve closure, and the intractable evils of history and experience would be overcome. However, the resurrection only anticipates eschatological closure. It bursts open the constraints of nature and history, promising an overwhelming good of a kind that will not, like any immanent theodicy, leave out the dead, the victims of history whose fate can never be justified by any product of history. Closure — meaning a finally satisfactory resolution of the problem of God's goodness in the world — is found in trust and hope, not in some explanation of the world that makes sense of evil, and still less in the claim of human power to eradicate the evil that human reason has understood.

(5) Although the matter cannot be explored here, we may note that, as well as the major dialectic within Scripture concerning moral order and incomprehensible evil, there are three other dialectics that the three Old Testament short stories open up within the metanarrative: between androcentric and gynocentric perspectives on the story (Ruth),¹⁹ between the evident activity of YHWH and his hidden providence (Esther), and between Israel's privilege and YHWH's concern for the nations (Jonah).

(6) In the Bible, Israel's story is rarely portrayed as the dominant metanarrative but rather as a story of resistance, up against the dominant narratives of the great empires from Pharaoh to Rome. Characteristically, these narratives proclaim their eternity (Isa 47:7-8; Rev 18:7) and celebrate their divine achievement of universal rule (Isa 14:13-14; Dan 4:30; Rev 13:5-8). They are certainly narratives of closure, justifying oppression and suppressing all dissent. It is against these dominant narratives that the biblical metanarrative takes on its most imperial and militant colors, especially in the visions of Daniel and Revelation, which assert the transcendent power of God over all would-be divine rulers on earth and foresee their destruction and supersession by the rule of God triumphant over all evil. These visions empower nonviolent resistance to oppression, enabling God's people to continue to refute the finality and divinity of the empires. They suggest, not that the kingdom of God is merely a more powerful or more successful version of the imperial powers, but that it is an altogether different kind of rule. The tragic irony of Christian history has been that so often Christian empires have taken over the symbol of the kingdom of God to justify the same kind of rule

19. See Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2002), ch. 1.

as that of the empires it was forged to oppose. What has happened in these cases is that the biblical metanarrative has been transformed into a metanarrative much more like those Lyotard rejects, that is, a metanarrative that functions to legitimate existing structures of power.

(7) Not only is the biblical metanarrative a story of God's repeated choice of the dominated and the wretched, the powerless and the marginal; it also breaks the cycle by which the oppressed become oppressors in their turn. This is the effect of the memory of exodus in Israel's laws (e.g., Lev 19:34). The cross is the event in which the cycle is definitively broken. The christological passage in Phil 2 means that Jesus' obedience to the point of identification with the human condition at its most wretched and degraded, the death of the slave or the criminal, is what qualifies him to exercise the divine rule from the cosmic throne of God. Only the human who has thus identified himself irrevocably with the lowest of the low can be entrusted with the power that God exercises characteristically on their behalf. Distortion of the biblical story into an ideology of oppression has to suppress the biblical meaning of the cross.

(8) While these characteristics of the biblical metanarrative make it a story uniquely unsuited to being an instrument of oppression in the usual senses of that term, postmodernism has invented a new sort of oppression or injustice that consists in any claim to universal truth, whatever the character of that claim. Disillusioned by the failure of the modern hope of the emancipatory power of reason, postmodernism has decided that, far from setting free, truth oppresses because it delegitimizes difference.²⁰ This claim must simply be contested. For a start, there is the relativist paradox: the need to insist that there is one truth — the truth that there is no truth — and one justice — the right of every voice to equal status. If the postmodern relativist claim is fully embraced, then the incommensurability of language games makes it impossible to persuade others of the need to respect difference. Agonistic politics becomes nothing more than a power struggle between the competing interests of the heterogeneous groups. By contrast, a perspective that recognizes and claims truth can be genuinely open to dialogue and the

20. William Placher gives an illuminating example: "In writing about the Spanish invasion of the Americas, Tzvetan Todorov compares Pedro de Alvarado, who murdered native Americans, with Bartolomé de Las Casas who, as a Christian, loved them, opposed violence, and sought to convert them. Todorov finds little enough difference: 'Is there not already a violence in the conviction that one possesses the truth oneself, whereas this is not the case for others . . . ?'" William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), pp. 120-21. Quotation from Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, trans. R. Howard (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 169.

truth of the other. Presumably, a metanarrative that really claims comprehensive understanding of reality and to have already subsumed all other narratives cannot be open to other truth, but it is fair to ask, with Eagleton, whether such a metanarrative²¹ is not now in any case something of a straw man. The threat of totalitarianism should not be neglected, but the fact that relativism appears to be its polar opposite does not make relativism the most effective safeguard against that threat. To the totalitarianism of twentieth-century regimes the biblical metanarrative has more effectively inspired resistance than has anything resembling postmodernism. The challenge to the church in the postmodern context is to reclaim the biblical story in a way that expresses its noncoercive claim to truth without imposing premature eschatological closure.

21. More precisely, teleological history. See Eagleton, *Illusions of Postmodernism*, pp. 45-