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Objectivity, Story, and the Bible

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Objectivity, Story, and the Bible

Abstract

"The power of these stories comes from the unique way they plug into human living."

Posting about the truth of Christianity from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/objectivity-story-and-the-bible/>

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Objectivity, Story, and the Bible

 inallthings.org/objectivity-story-and-the-bible/

Neal DeRoo

I'm no story-teller. My disciplinary training (in philosophy) doesn't exactly prepare me to entertain the crowds (except that my wife occasionally posts sentences from out of my scholarly work on her Facebook feed, because she thinks they're so boring, academic and stuffy as to be literally laughable). But I like a good story as much as the next person. There is, after all, something about stories that works on a deeper register. The best stories move us in ways that we can't quite articulate, may not even understand, but yet leave us looking at the world differently than we did before. Just like some images can't be unseen (why didn't I knock first?), some stories can't be unheard.

The power of these stories comes from the unique way they plug into human living. Donald Roth's piece about [operative metaphors](#) does a good job of exploring this from the perspective of how the Biblical story can shape our lives in different ways. After discussing the Scriptural metaphors of "Kingdom Citizens" v. "Pilgrims in exile," he points out that "while we may resonate with both of these metaphors at different times in our lives, we will never resonate with both equally at once. Nevertheless, both remain completely true at one time."

This idea that two interpretations of the Bible can be both different and simultaneously true is very common. We aren't really surprised to read such things about (at least some) Biblical stories, despite the fact that there are a lot of things in our lives that don't work that way. Normally, we do not expect things to be both different and simultaneously true. When referring to objects, especially, there seems to have to be one (and only one) right answer: if I say the grass is green and you say the grass is brown, we can't both be right at the same time. We are making a claim about the way things are (something just is like this or that), and that claim is either true (if that's how things really are) or false (if that's not how things are).

We often refer to claims of these kinds as "objective" claims, because they say something about objects, about the state of things in the world. But stories don't primarily make objective claims. That is, stories communicate truths differently than claims about objects do. This is the power of narrative, and it's why stories work on a level that is deeper than our understanding.

And they can do that so well because our primary orientation to the world is not an objective one. We are not created primarily to interact with the world as a collection of 'things,' or with God as an 'object.' Rather, we [relate to the world as creation](#), that is, as fellow creatures created to be in relation with God, who is a living person. Our primary experience of the world is that of creaturely dependence, not of objectivity.

Narrative, I think, reminds us (though not consciously) of this dependence. We don't evaluate the story at arm's length, we submerge ourselves in the story; we are drawn into a web of setting, characters, and action and are then taken along for the ride. We are swept up in a whole narrative world, and we learn a lot about ourselves and our world in the process. Both Howard (through [plot structure](#)) and Donald (through operative metaphor) have given us a great challenge to think more about how the story of Scripture impacts how we live out our faith.

But somehow we seem to be giving the impression that our biggest concern, as Christians, is with separating those who get it right from those who get it wrong (as Jim Schaap's [story](#) of his granddaughter literally turning her back on the public school kids because "they don't know Jesus" powerfully illustrates). I fear that, sometimes, we are more upset with the suggestion that the Bible is not trying to be "objectively

true” then we are by the claim that we aren’t living out the biblical story. Are we in fact more afraid of being wrong than we are of being idolatrous?¹

Of course, it need not be an either/or. To say the Bible is a narrative does not imply that it isn’t true. Of course it’s true, whether it’s a story, a history, or a love letter from God, and the truth of the Bible is essential to the [drama of Scripture](#).

But what if Christianity is true, not primarily because it describes the way the world is, but because it articulates for us the way we (truly) are (which is more than just how we ‘should be’)? After all, it is God’s actions (playing out in the setting God created through the characters God came up with) and not our ideas that will show the truth of Christianity.

So maybe the truth of Christianity is proven, not when our ideas perfectly capture how the world is, but first and foremost by our God working in and through us, helping us become what we (truly) are: image bearers of the one true God. Maybe the point of the Gospel story is to call us to a new kind of life, lived always in the presence of a God “who is with us always, to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:20), because following Christ is, first and foremost, an invitation to a life and a world transformed by the power and grace of God.

Now that is a story whose truth can (and does) resonate in the very depths of creation itself.

Footnotes

1. For a few excellent contemporary takes on idolatry, see Timothy Keller’s [Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex and Power and the Only Hope that Matters](#) and Kyle Idleman’s [gods at War: Defeating the Idols that Battle for your Heart](#). ↩