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Four Voices, Two Vistas, One Person: Why Understanding the Narrative Shape of the Gospels Matters



by Rikk Watts

Sound bites work because they strikingly capture a pithy thought, in a way that the average person can readily remember. For this reason—and in spite of their modern-media-attuned name—“sound bites” are not a new phenomenon. The ancients called them aphorisms, or “delimitations”—not quite as sparkling, but it meant what it said: an original, laconic saying that expressed something definitively. Your average first-century urbanite knew scores of them: “marry well,” “pick your time,” “a cost to every commitment,” “nothing to excess.”

Jesus was surely not the first to speak in such

ways. But he *was* among the most adept: “love your neighbor,” “Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath,” “blessed are the poor in spirit,” “I have come not to call the righteous but sinners,” and the justly famous “golden rule”: “do to others what you would have them do to you.” Self-important intellectuals might sometimes be tempted to smile at such rustic simplicity. But if one wants to change the world, one must engage with the mass of humanity. Given the gospel’s unrivalled influence on human history, Jesus clearly knew what he was doing.

Unsurprisingly, many Christians’ knowledge of Jesus consists largely of a scattering of these isolated sayings, along with a few stand-out stories (e.g. casting out demons, healings, multiplication of the loaves and fish, calming the storm, his encounters with Zacchaeus and the woman caught in adultery, and his final action in the Temple), all of which are bracketed by the annually celebrated events of Christmas and Easter.

But as a moment’s reflection reminds us, these sayings and actions do not just float about in some kind of Christian ether. They are drawn from the Gospels, which, as is now increasingly recognized, are carefully constructed and highly textured narratives. It is when we examine the four Gospels more closely that interesting questions begin to emerge.

As most of us know, the first three—Matthew,

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Mark, and Luke—not only share many of the same sayings and stories but follow much the same order. Hence the name “The Synoptics”—“with the one eye”: they share the same overall perspective.

But Matthew and Luke also have substantial additions of sometimes similar and at other times unique materials. One thinks here of Matthew’s justly famous Sermon on the Mount and Luke’s

In effect, Matthew is not following Mark but the Peter whose teaching Mark preserves.

several classic “journey-to-Jerusalem” parables—the good Samaritan and the prodigal son.

And these are not merely cosmetic. Matthew’s extra materials have their own structural integrity. Echoing Deuteronomy’s climactic offer of life or death, his five major concentrically arranged discourses move from an opening declaration of life-giving blessing to dreadful final curse. Luke’s parables and related additions expand Mark’s much smaller central “journey” section from essentially two chapters to almost nine—some four and half times as much.

Now as most scholars agree, the best explanation of all these phenomena—similar content, order, and additions—is that *Matthew and Luke follow Mark*.

But this raises an interesting question: why would Matthew, one of the Twelve, and to whom early tradition ascribes his own collection of Aramaic Jesus sayings, *follow the narrative of Mark*, who was NOT a disciple, *and do so in Greek!*? (I’m going to leave aside for the moment the complex debates that swirl around Matthean authorship).

I think the simplest and most convincing explanation is that Matthew knew that behind Mark’s Greek Gospel stood Peter. There are several good reasons for going in this direction. First, although Mark’s gospel is formally anonymous, it is difficult to believe that Mark’s gospel would have been published and accepted by the earliest Christians without their knowing the gospel’s au-

thor. It is also highly unlikely that this would be the new owners’ first book. Literate and reasonably well off folk, they probably already owned several other volumes, even if this was their first “gospel.” And in practical terms, the moment one has more than one book in one’s library, one would need external tags to distinguish them—no one wanted to have to undo a scroll every time he or she wanted to identify the author and the title of the work. The point is that *Mark’s name* would have most likely been physically associated with his gospel from the very earliest.

But this point immediately occasions a surprising observation. The single name “Mark” is itself very odd. As is often pointed out, Mark was one of the most common “given names” in the Empire. But since given names, i.e. *praenomina*, were only used by intimates, common practice adopted extra identifiers. Known as *cognomen*, they would include a patronym, e.g. Marcus Antonius Lavianus. Our Mark must have been so well *and* intimately known that no other identification was needed. This makes good sense when we consider the small numbers of early Christians—perhaps 6,500 by the time Mark wrote—few of whom could write, and even fewer had the community standing and wherewithal to produce this kind of work. Mark sufficed because everyone knew *who he was*.

Our fullest early evidence as to Mark’s identity comes from Papias (c. A.D. 125). He records John the Elder’s claim (c. A.D. 90) that Mark was Peter’s younger associate who recorded accurately all of Peter’s various teachings about Jesus and compiled them into a single work. There is no particular reason to doubt this.

Now the only New Testament figure that fits this bill is John Mark—again just his two given names. A bilingual Hellenist—John being his Hebrew name and Mark his Greek one—he was a relative of the wealthy Cyprian land-owner Barnabas (Col 4:10; cf. Acts 4:36). John Mark’s well-to-do family also occupied a significant place in the early Christian communities, first in Jerusalem and later in Antioch. His mother’s substantial house provided a focal gathering point for believers in Jerusalem. It was also the first port of call for a recently escaped Peter (Acts 12:12–16),

who when later writing from Rome described Mark as “my son” (1 Pet 5:13). Mark also joined Paul and his uncle Barnabas in an early missionary tour from Antioch (Acts 12:25; 13:3). And in spite of a falling out during that journey (Acts 13:13; 15:36–39), Mark later worked very closely with Paul (Col. 4:10; Phlm. 24), even being summoned to assist him in his last imprisonment and also in Rome (2 Tim. 4:11).

This being so, John Mark was well-placed to write his Gospel. The great bulk of his oral material would have come through his regular contact with Peter, while his mother’s women friends provided the information for which they are explicitly named: the events surrounding the empty tomb (Mark 15:40–16:8). Additionally, some of Mark’s insights into Jesus’ significance may well have come from Paul, to whom Jesus also later appeared (cf. 1 Cor.15:8). In effect, Matthew is not following Mark but the Peter whose teaching Mark preserves.

And the reason Matthew follows Peter is Peter’s priority. Not only does Peter appear first in all the lists of the Twelve, but only Matthew specifically mentions Jesus’ own affirmation, “You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). Leaving aside the later jockeying for primacy among the great churches of the great imperial cities—how one wishes that the zeal to claim Peter’s heritage was matched by a zeal to learn his lesson that following Christ had no place for arguing over who should be greatest—it is clear that Peter is the first both to address the Jews at the Pentecost out-pouring (2:22-39) and to witness to that same gifting of the Spirit upon Gentiles through the name of Jesus, God’s exalted Christ and Lord of all (Acts 10:36-43). That Luke, even with his Pauline bona fides, also follows Mark is therefore no surprise.

So what can we say about *Mark’s narrative*? Once regarded as a fairly simple and unpolished account of Jesus, this gospel has increasingly been recognized by scholars for its theological and literary sophistication.

I argued some 25 years ago that Mark’s narrative is primarily structured around one of Israel’s most prominent eschatological expectations: the fulfillment of Isaiah’s hope of a future new exodus

from exile. Still a matter of some debate, this possibility strikes me as the most natural explanation. Just as the first exodus featured God’s coming to his people, his performance of mighty deeds, a journey to the promised land, and an arrival finally in Jerusalem, so too did Isaiah’s prophecy foretell the return from exile: God would come to his people, perform mighty deeds of deliverance against the strong man Babylon, and lead his “blind” people along a way they did not know, back to Jerusalem. Central to all this would be the suffering of an enigmatic servant. This is the essential outline of Mark, and it explains why he begins with an appeal to the classic text of Isaiah 40:3, with its summons to prepare for God’s long-awaited redemptive return to his exiled people. Furthermore, this fundamental dominance of the second half of Isaiah—chapters 40-66—is exactly what we find in reconstructions of first-century Synagogue triennial readings of Scripture. Of the prophetic texts chosen to accompany weekly readings of Torah, two thirds come from Isaiah, and two thirds of those come from chapters 40-66: a total of 40 percent.

This being so, the really interesting question is this: *Who was it* who first thought of using this Isaianic new exodus pattern? For many scholars the answer is Mark. But I find this answer increasingly difficult to believe. First, if this was true, then surely we would have heard much more of Mark as one of the foremost creative theologians of the earliest church. But we do not; in fact, even within the New Testament itself he’s hardly a major player. Second, if Mark’s material comes largely from Peter, how likely is it, over the decades in which Peter preached Christ from Jerusalem to Rome, that Peter himself had never thought about how it all fitted together in the larger context of Israel’s national narrative and prophetic hopes?

Indeed, to put it this way reveals just how easily Jesus himself is marginalized in the entire process. That is, if we can imagine Mark, and before him Peter, thinking about these things, then why in the world not Jesus himself? Would it not be far more likely that the idea—that it was Jesus who inaugurated the fulfillment of Isaiah’s long-delayed new exodus return of Yahweh to his people—goes back to Jesus himself, a Jesus whose

genius, sheer weight of personal presence, and unmatched authority simply towers over that of both Peter and Mark as they would be the first joyfully to affirm?

This being the case, and recalling our opening comments on “sound bites,” it is not just various isolated sayings or individual stories that carry the stamp of God’s very own authority. The basic overall framework of the Synoptic Gospels carry that stamp too, precisely because that too goes back to God in Christ.

But *what about John?* I’ll never forget the time I was first accosted by the full realization of just how different John was from the Synoptics. The temple action comes first, not last. There is no voice from heaven at Jesus’ baptism; there are no parables and no castings out of demons. The Spirit, rarely mentioned in the Synoptics, is front and center. In the Synoptics the cleansing of the Temple is the catalyst for Jesus’ death. In John his raising of Lazarus is the catalyst. Not only does John “replace” the words of institution with the foot-washing, but the moment of Jesus’ glorification is not the Transfiguration but the cross. Finally, whereas in the Synoptics Jesus’ favorite topic is the kingdom of God, in John it is his offer of eternal life—and all this, not just on one journey to Jerusalem but spread out over many journeys.

So what do we make of these differences in the light of what we’ve just said about Jesus and Peter? Two brief observations must suffice.

Given the likely wide circulation of Mark by the time John wrote, it is almost inconceivable that John could not *and* did not presume a knowledge of Mark among his readers. Indeed, as Richard Bauckham has argued, it looks very much as if John expects his readers also to be aware of Mark. If so, John is not abandoning Mark and his outline—which if I am right is that of Jesus: he simply presumes it. That is, John expects his hearers to overlay his gospel on what they already know of Jesus from Peter through Mark.¹

Second, there is the strange case of the “disciple whom Jesus loved”—commonly known as the “beloved disciple.” This title has, understandably, been a little off-putting to some—“And who are you?” “Oh, I’m the disciple that Jesus loved!”... “hmm... and the rest of us?” “Not so much.”

Part of the key lies in attending to where the title occurs. Appearing relatively late in John, the “beloved disciple” is first introduced as the one who, at John’s very extended last supper, leans on Jesus’ breast, his *kolpos* (13:23). This word is striking, appearing elsewhere in John, only at the outset where he describes Jesus’ origins: Jesus alone is one with the father’s *kolpos* and the one who has made him known (1:18). Together these suggest that the “beloved disciple” is the one to whom Jesus revealed his heart.

This interpretation fits with some evidence we have of ancient practice, whereby a teacher would choose one of his closest disciples, explicitly to “interpret” his message to a broader community. The reason John looks so different from the Synoptics is precisely that it is his duty to interpret Jesus in ways that the others were not called to do. This is not to diminish Mark, Matthew, or Luke, much less Peter, who stands behind all three. It is instead to recognize how tricky it is to translate worldviews across cultures. Hence, John’s “eternal life” gets to the nub of what God’s kingdom offers. And his account of the foot washing similarly reveals that the words of institution are, for us, a

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summons to embrace the model of servant-hood exemplified by Jesus’ death on the cross.

Thus we have four voices—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—representing two vistas—the Synoptics’ new exodus, and John’s coming of the promised presence to which the feasts testified—*both of which go back to the one person, Jesus, the very presence of Israel’s unique and only true creator God among us.*

This being so, does it not also mean then that the literary frameworks of the Gospels are just as much a part of God's inspired word as their various constituent elements? Might not focusing primarily on isolated sayings and stories, even if annually bookended by Christmas and Easter, *effectively deny* the equally important message implied by the larger structure? If we claim that the content of the New Testament is our final authority in all matters of faith and practice, then surely this must also include the narrative outlook implied by the literary structures of those books. But how exactly does an awareness of narrative structure help?

Consider Mark: Just as Israel had a Mount Sinai *on its way* from bondage to the promised land, so too does Mark. But for him it's the Mount of Transfiguration, replete with tabernacles, a descending cloud, and God's voice. But the differences are what really matter. Here, Moses and Elijah speak not with God but Jesus, who, long before the cloud appeared, was already radiant in divine splendor. When God does at last speak, and it is at *the* last, the words are stunning. In marked contrast to Sinai's chapter after chapter of Torah and tabernacle instructions, we hear only a few simple words: "This is my beloved son, listen to him." We need no instruction for a tabernacle because, as John will later explain, Jesus—in becoming flesh, the new creational and life-giving word of God—has *already* tabernacled among us. And what of the Law? It is now fulfilled in Jesus' teaching. And *its* content? The entire emphasis of Jesus' new exodus "way of the Lord," this way of God's wisdom, this true sight, lies on cross-bearing discipleship. The new Torah, embodied in Jesus' own taking up of the cross, is primarily concerned with how we treat the least; not with how *we* are received but how we receive *others*. Jesus himself sums this new emphasis up in two commands: love God with all of one's being (which means to follow Jesus), and love one's neighbor as oneself.

Leaving Matthew aside for the moment, we turn to Luke. His extended account of Jesus' birth clearly echoes the Greek Old Testament, precisely to inform his Gentile readers that Jesus' story is the climax of *Israel's* story. Fully aware of what his second volume, Acts, will argue, he emphatically

declares that humanity finds its meaning and fulfillment not in Athens but in Jerusalem.

As briefly mentioned earlier, he also takes Mark's "journey along the way" and expands it with a range of some of his most beloved parables: the prodigal son, the good Samaritan, the lost sheep, etc. Together they illustrate who Mark's least might be: outsiders, sinners, women, and Gentiles. His Jesus, playing a new David to John the Baptist's Samuel, is likewise escorted by a rag tag and joyful band of all comers—a mixed multitude, if one likes—on his "exodus" way to Jerusalem. Over against Plato's static and oppressively stratified *Republic*, this one new community gathered around Jesus is racially and socially indiscriminate, testifying to the fact that this God is the God of ALL creation and not just a collection of independent ethnic churches.

We've not long ago celebrated Easter, and many of you have given up something for Lent—chocolate perhaps or your favorite beverage. This is good. But why not next year consider following Mark's and Luke's understanding of the "Way" Jesus himself prepares for Easter? Try giving up having to be the one who wins every argument, who has the last word, who in practice still seeks to exercise dominance by sitting at the right and left of Jesus in his power? Why not let go the primary concern to have one's own presence or opinion received and, instead, focus on receiving others? Why not give up our more comfortable but ethnically homogenous gatherings and focus on multi-ethnic ones that celebrate the true character of God's new humanity?

Matthew's five-part structure *also* speaks to what it means to be the new people of God. By collecting Jesus' teaching into five blocks, and presenting the opening Sermon on the Mount as a new Sinai, Matthew casts Jesus' teaching as the New Torah for the New People of God. But it is the differences that speak volumes. In the first Exodus, the mountain was fenced off, with no one, on pain of death, permitted to approach. Only a select few ascended into the impenetrable and veiling cloud. Here, there is no fence, and all who wish can come to him. Instead of the veiling cloud, all can look on the face of God in his Christ; and instead of warnings, there are a sequence of blessings. That Jesus

begins with “Blessed are the poor in spirit”—that is, blessed are those who *know* they do not have the spiritual resources to do this thing—should eradicate forever any sense of self-importance and self-righteousness on our parts.

But Matthew’s progression through Jesus’ teaching is also instructive. After laying out Jesus’ vision of God’s new humanity—summed up in his “do unto others as you would have them do unto you!”—he moves to the call to mission (Ch. 10), to the critical importance of hearing Jesus’

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words aright (Ch. 13), to the mutual forgiveness that must characterize life in this new people (Ch. 18), and finally to the terrible desolation that awaits not just Jerusalem but all who reject this offer of blessed life (Ch. 23-25).

Finally, John, in the past regularly mistaken for a Hellenistic theological gospel, is as Jewish and embedded in Israel’s identity as are the Synoptics. For all the universal appeal of his symbols—light/darkness, above/below, water/wine—each is thoroughly grounded in Israel’s unique story.

Notice, for example, how quickly the “logos,” so beloved of Stoic philosophers, disappears, being transvalued beyond all recognition as the focus shifts to the fully human, yet Yahweh-like, Jewish person of Jesus. For those who had not noticed in Mark, John’s treatment of the Tabernacle/Temple and the feasts, which both *remembered* God’s saving acts and provision for his people and *anticipated* their future repetitions, is to help his readers *see* that Jesus, the son, is also, however mysteriously, not just God but the self-revealing compassionate and

life-giving Yahweh, the I AM, himself among us.

Because Jesus, God’s presence tabernacling among us, fulfilled those feasts, this very life-giving presence can now dwell in us. And this is why John ends Jesus’ public ministry with the resurrection of Lazarus: it points to the resurrection of the one Temple that matters: Human beings, made in God’s image and so designed to be the home of the Father and the Son through the Spirit. It is also why he says so little about what we will later call the Eucharist and so much about the Paraclete-Spirit. It is, finally, the indwelling eternal-life-giving Spirit, not simply consuming bread and wine, that constitutes the new people of God. The kingdom of God is essentially about the gift of God’s eternal life.

Not only can we see then something of the richness that emerges once we start thinking in terms of connected narratives, but we can also hardly miss the utterly central and formative influence of Israel’s Scriptures in those narratives. And if these narratives are as much a part of God’s authoritative word to us as Jesus’ various deeds and sayings, then surely the way the Gospel authors, and Jesus before them, used Scripture is also canonically normative as well.

Now the last point is hotly debated. For many, the New Testament authors twist the Scriptures, wrenching them out of context. Unfortunately, we ourselves are so accustomed to thinking of piecemeal sayings and individual isolated stories that we seem naturally to think that this is how the New Testament authors understood their Scriptures, and a superficial reading seems only to confirm as much.

In reaction, and often presenting itself as a more pious response, though ironically assuming exactly the same cavalier disregard for context, is the currently “in vogue” revivification of the so-called “spiritual” or “Christological” readings, practiced by many of the later church fathers.

Stoics and Neo-Platonists, in a brilliant reverse-engineering of straightforward allegory, which itself was much more ancient, had earlier developed allegorical interpretation. In a simple act of hermeneutical violence—declaring that Homer himself spoke allegorically—they were able to save the father of Greek education from

his obvious falsehoods and at the same time legitimate their own philosophies by discovering their own views hidden therein. Homer and the philosophers now spoke with the one voice; as a result, allegorizing interpretation was vindicated, and the legitimating antiquity of Greek wisdom was preserved. The result was a comprehensively win-win situation—although of course Homer was no longer present to offer his opinion.

Beginning with Origen, this approach was applied to Israel's Scriptures, which both saved the often less than satisfactory Old Testament by universalizing it, and at the same time legitimated the gospel by creatively allegorizing the eternal logos, Jesus, back onto every prophetic high place and under every spreading Torah tree, whether he was actually there or not.

Aside from the fact that neither Jesus nor the New Testament authors do any such thing—neither the Galatians 4 “allegory” of Hagar and Sarah, nor the 1 Corinthians 10 “Christ was the following rock” is in fact an allegorizing interpretation—one wonders where in the world those fathers got the idea that Israel's Scriptures needed “saving” or “spiritualizing” in the first place—certainly not from Jesus or the New Testament.

In my considered opinion, both of these approaches—acontextual *and* allegorical, or spiritual readings—fail because their proponents do not attend closely enough to what the New Testament authors actually do. Neither they, nor the Jesus whose example they follow, in any way twist, allegorize, spiritualize, or impose. Instead, borne of the conviction that God himself was mysteriously present in Jesus, their careful and deeply contextually aware choice of texts reflects God's consistent character as he acts in Israel's history, Israel's narrative, to fulfill his promises to Abraham and his seed, Israel, through his Christ, for the redemption of his creation.

This brings us to our concluding comments: first a question, and then two final points.

Given the above, one now has to ask this question: how is it that we have lost this sense of reading all of Scripture as narrative? How is it that so few Christians are even vaguely aware of the narrative structure of the Gospels, let alone their deep embeddedness in Israel's story, without which we

miss so much of their power?

Several factors have contributed to this shift. There is the ancient and long-lived Hellenic idea that truth, because it is timeless, must be a matter of pure calculative logic and therefore is not to be found in changeful history nor properly expressed therein. The husk of Israel's and the gospels' historicism must be removed. The resultant spiritualized gems of universal truths, purified by means of cultural de-contextualization, were now free to be remounted in whatever setting a given theologian thought in his own eyes to be more universally appropriate. Thus, in its attempt not merely to converse with the intellects of the Imperial world but to claim what it judged to be the best of that heritage (e.g. allegorical interpretation, argument by analogy whether valid or not, and timeless Platonic “forms” but now relocated in the mind of God), theology became more philosophical. And the more philosophical theology became, the less weight theologians gave to the history, not only of Israel but also of Jesus as recorded by those who knew him best, whom he called to be with him and to be sent out by him.

A second reason is a deep-seated implicit Marcionism. Marcion, as you know, was the second-century son of a bishop who rejected the Jewish Scriptures because he considered the God of the Old Testament to be incompatible with the true God revealed in Jesus. Although his totalizing program was quickly rejected by the majority of his fellow Christians, Marcion won. Witness the marginalization of much of Israel's Scriptures in the lives of many Christians today. For example, who among us could give a coherent account of the book of Isaiah, by far the most influential prophetic writing for Jesus and the writers of the New Testament?

Finally, there is the widespread idea quickly promoted by the post-apostolic fathers and repeated through most of the church's history—and this in spite of Paul's explicit rejection of the very suggestion in Romans 9-11 (especially 9:4-5, 11:1, 7-11, 12-32)—that God had abandoned Israel for the church. Not only did national Israel's stumbling offer historical confirmation to those who judged that the only way Israel's Scriptures could speak to Christians was through allegorization,

but it also meant that the Jewishness of Jesus and the Scriptures to which he appealed was effectively ignored for more than a millennium.

Now to the two final points, one concerning authority and the other the place of narrative.

First, the recent welcome trend of taking seriously Jesus' Jewishness and hence the essential role of Israel's narrative in shaping the Gospels have benefitted us in too many ways to enumerate. Not least, for example, is the realization that it is not just John, with his famous "I am" sayings and his "the logos who was God" introduction, who has a high Christology. In enabling us to recognize the centrality of Israel's new exodus hope for the New Testament authors we now see what has been staring us in the face all along: That the identification of Jesus with Yahweh is there from the earliest.

Thus, Mark's opening sentence—a combination of Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1—speaks not of the coming of the Messiah but of Yahweh himself. Long before Peter's celebrated confession of Jesus as Israel's Messianic king, Mark at the very outset of his gospel declared Jesus to be, however mysteriously, the very presence of Yahweh among us. Mark's Christology gives nothing away to John. And if Mark, then Peter, and inexorably Jesus himself. Think about it: what Jew is going to stand up in a boat and presume to tell a storm what to do (4:39-41), let alone walk on the sea (6:47-52) or forgive sins (2:7-12)?

Now, *if* that is so, think on *this*. Moses enjoyed his exalted status as Israel's teacher precisely because God regularly spoke with him, face to face, as to a friend. And if this very same God was present in Jesus, what does that say of the Twelve with whom he spent *three years*, speaking face to face *as with friends*? Not only so, but Jesus' choosing them to be with him and, as apostles, to send them out echoes very closely the Scriptural idea of God's appointment of his prophets.

It is little wonder that nowhere in our gospels do their authors betray any hint of anxiety over whether or not "the church" will recognize their authority. Just like the prophets before them, their identity and authority lie in their divine appointment to declare the words of Yahweh, now expressed through Jesus, "my beloved son."

It is not the church that grants them their

authority. On the contrary, it is an obedient and submissive reception that determines *whether* the church is truly the church. As with Israel of old, to reject the authority of these new prophets, whom Jesus had promised to lead, through his spirit, into all truth (John 16:13), was to reject the Lord himself. And it is clear that Paul, even though as one untimely born, has exactly the same view.

This authority is what separates them from all others, from all later theologians, from "the Tradition," whether Great or otherwise, from all subsequent church councils, and from us: *THEY ALONE* were *especially* chosen by the Lord himself *to be WITH HIM*, and, as a way of life, to see Him and hear Him speak with them, face to face, as with a friend. This is why I am an evangelical and unashamedly affirm the absolute priority of Scripture in all matters of faith and practice.

Now finally to narrative. Why all this fuss? For several reasons. First, to know a person *requires* that one know his or her narrative, not just cursorily but intimately. And if the one true creator God is also a person, then the primary way to know *him* is through narrative. This is why the Bible looks so different from the writings of Heraclitus, Parmenides, Empedocles, Plato, Aristotle, etc. God is a person, not a big idea, and persons are known through stories of what God says and does. Furthermore, God's narrative should not be reduced to some generic narrative, e.g. creation,

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fall, redemption, and final realization. A generic narrative does not lead to knowledge of particular persons. Knowledge of particular persons comes from deep familiarity with particular narratives. And when it comes to knowing God, this is what the Bible actually gives us: the particular narrative of the one true creator God, a God unlike any other, who revealed himself particularly to Israel

through the particular patriarchs and especially at the Exodus and then throughout their inscripturated history, climaxing in the life of a particular Jesus and his words to Israel and through the particular New Testament authors to particular Graeco-Roman communities. On this view, a creation-fall-redemption-consummation narrative simply lacks the depth of particularity necessary for it to do its job. Can I suggest, too, that the extent to which this sounds novel probably reveals the extent to which we have wandered away from genuine biblical knowledge.

Along the same line, it has become increasingly clear over the past decades that humans are profoundly shaped, in our deepest being, by the narratives in which we live. Our individual identities are the product of our stories. Our emotions, far from simply “welling up untutored,” are in fact social constructs learned through our narratives, whether true or fictive. It is our stories that communicate to us our communities’ values and structures. But by the same token, stories are not just “cultural transmitters of a culture’s beliefs, attitudes, and emotions. They can also criticize the dominant culture by “unwriting” the dominant narratives: in this sense narrative and prophetic discourse can be one and the same (Nussbaum, *Narrative*).

Just as the Septuagint was produced to combat Alexander’s attempt to dominate the world with a canon of Hellenistic thought, so too these Gospels are intended to inculcate in *our* lives a different way of being in the world, to transform it, to turn it upside down. What we have is a profound clash of the most fundamental narratives.

This is why when facing capital charges on Mars Hill, Paul can *affirm* the pagan philosophers’ critique of idolatry *and yet declare in virtually the same breath* that for all that, those philosophers are still ignorant. Why? Because they are in the wrong story (Acts 17:24–31). It also explains why Paul says in Galatians that we, believing Jews and Gentiles together, are God’s Israel (Gal. 6:16); that the Christians in Corinth, Rome, and Philippi, Jew and Gentile together, look to Abraham and the patriarchs as their fathers.

For us, the problem then with isolated sayings and short gospel stories, as good as they are, is that they lack a larger narrative frame. It is little wonder

then that many Christians find themselves having such a difficult time living genuinely Christian lives. Called to be citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, we have little sense of the larger narrative that provides the foundation for and informs that citizenship. So rarely do we relate it to one another that it is swamped by the constant stream of counter-narratives of other citizenships, whether nationalist (why being Canadian, American, Australian, Chinese, etc. is best) or modernist metanarrative (why progress, science, education, unbridled capitalism lead to life!).

Without this story being firmly embedded in us, we will constantly find ourselves living against the grain, *not* of our culture—we find that all too easy to slip into—but of the *gospel*. And all this for the simple reason that we know our cultural narratives far better and deeper than we do God’s narrative as expressed in the Scriptures. It is, it seems to me, *imperative* that we choose this day whose narrative we will live in and by. And having made that decision, we need to let go all those other competing stories and bed this one down deep, deep into our souls.

Stepping back, if all this is so, we find that a provocative and troubling question emerges. When it comes to teaching Christian “theology,” what kinds of reasons would warrant our choosing some other fundamental framework for doing theology, i.e., knowing God, over the narrative shape God himself chose? Yes, as evangelicals we *faithfully* affirm the unequalled primacy of Scripture’s authority in all matters of faith and practice. Less clear is whether we allow Scripture’s inherently personalist-narrative structure to shape our teaching of its theology. But that is perhaps a topic for another time.

Endnotes

1. This kind of approach goes back a long way into ancient literary traditions. 1 and 2 Chronicles seem to assume a knowledge of 1 and 2 Kings and Philo’s L.A.B. (*liber antiquitatum biblicarum*) of the bible, while in the Greek world into which John wrote, Greek playwrights such as Sophocles, who presented during the Theban cycle, similarly assumed their audience’s prior knowledge of the various myths of Homer and Hesiod as the basis on which their works were to be heard.