A COMPACT GUIDE TO THE WHOLE BIBLE

Learning to Read Scripture's Story

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Preface

This book originates out of a particular faculty's collective experience as teachers of undergraduates and adult Bible studies in local parishes. Like many other religiously related universities, Seattle Pacific University requires its students to take a survey course in Bible, most often during their sophomore year. Those of us who have taught this course over the years have found ourselves in a rather tight place. On the one hand, a survey of the biblical text requires more than simply reading the Bible. Students must be *introduced* to the Bible, for it is a huge book incorporating a rich and complex story. In order to enter meaningfully into the text, students require basic information about its nature and identity, its unity and diversity, its plotline and problems. There is only so much lecture time available in a typical class session, and few of us want to spend that time communicating basic realities that students really ought to encounter before class by means of a well-written textbook.

On the other hand, all of us wanted our students to spend the bulk of their time gaining experience in reading the Bible itself. What could be worse than a biblical studies course that spends all its time teaching readers *about* the Bible but never creates space for a deep, extended encounter with it? What we've needed is a

short, accessible introductory textbook that would focus mostly on orienting readers to the *whole* Scripture in such a way that they are quickly enabled to pick it up and read the text for themselves.

And this has been the problem. The vast majority of introductory texts to the Bible provide, quite frankly, too much information. In the first place, most go to great length to introduce readers to a range of scholarly issues about the literary and **historical** background of biblical texts (terms appearing in boldface on their first appearance are defined in the glossary). We of course have no complaint about introducing students to critical issues. Our struggle, however, was to find a *short and readable* textbook that provided a relatively quick introduction to the Bible as *Scripture for the church*—as a book to be read and cherished by people in the pews; a book that is, by God's grace, accessible to everyone and not simply to scholars with specialized training in ancient languages and cultures. What we needed was a short "guide" of sorts that would provide just enough information to prepare the students to begin reading the Bible itself. Such a guide seems to us central to the educational mission of religiously related universities and Christian congregations.

After years of searching for the book we needed, we decided to write it ourselves. Apart from its obvious brevity, several features make this book distinct. First, because we believe the Bible was designed to function as Scripture for contemporary believers, this book begins with an extended reflection on what Christians believe about Scripture, and follows that up with a version of the Bible's **metanarrative** to help readers grasp the big picture of the biblical story. From there we introduce the biblical books according to the logic and sequence of their final form and not according to the various rearrangements provided by scholars who approach the text with a different set of (mostly historical) orienting concerns. For example, most introductory textbooks begin a study of the **Gospels** *not* with Matthew, where the New Testament begins, but with Mark, the agreed-upon earliest **canonical** Gospel; they read the Acts of the Apostles alongside the Gospel of Luke under the

assumption that the two originated together and so must be read together, rather than reading Luke as the third of a fourfold Gospel and Acts as a bridge between the Gospels and letters; and they read the Gospel of John alongside the three letters of John (and sometimes even with Revelation) instead of as the culmination of the Gospel collection. Again, there is value in this sort of scholarly analysis, but we feel compelled to introduce students to the Bible they have received from the church, not the Bible they might have had if the ancient church had made different decisions during the **canonization** process.

Indeed, our format takes seriously the cues provided by the ancient church, which in the "fullness of time" formed Scripture for subsequent generations of its readers. Rather than present the material book by book, as though each biblical text existed in isolation from the others, our chapters introduce readers to the Bible's larger canonical subunits with an eye toward the "big story of the Bible" that holds all the pieces together: the Beginning of the Story (Genesis–Deuteronomy); the Story of Israel in (and out of) the Land (Joshua–Esther); the Witness of Israel's Poets and Sages (Job–Song of Songs); the Witness of Israel's **Prophets** (Isaiah–Malachi); Israel in Waiting (The Time between the Two Testaments); the Story of Jesus (The Four Gospels); the Story of the Church (Acts and the letters); and the Story's Conclusion (the Revelation to John). It has been our experience that this sort of narrative-theological approach best enables students to take hold of the importance of Scripture for their lives.

Each of the canonical-unit chapters unfolds according to the same structure. We begin by framing the books within the "big story of the Bible" with a section called "The Story: Contribution to the Metanarrative." This is followed by a section called "The Shape of the Story: Arrangement and Placement," which focuses on the "logic" of how the unit as a whole is sequenced. After that comes "The Style of the Story: Literary Features" to unpack the distinctive literary forms readers encounter in that unit, and each chapter is drawn to a close by a section entitled "The Specifics:

What to Watch For," which focuses mostly on theological questions. We are convinced that any encounter with Scripture should teach us about God's will and God's ways, so this last section addresses three pertinent questions to that end: What do we learn about God? What do we learn about being God's people? What do we learn about God's world?

As editors, we wish to offer our thanks to our colleagues in the Seattle Pacific University Bible department, who worked so hard to produce such a rich set of chapters, and to Nathan Sosnovske, our faithful editorial assistant, who carried an especially heavy load on all our behalf. Thanks also to James Ernest, our editor at Baker Academic, whose invaluable editorial insights have improved the book immensely. Finally, thanks are owed to the students in our fall 2013 Christian Scriptures courses, who read initial chapter drafts and offered crucial feedback. If this book is able to reach its target audiences, both academic and congregational, it will do so in large part because we invited students to take part in the process of its production.

Robert W. Wall and David R. Nienhuis
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Reading the Bible as Scripture

Daniel Castelo and Robert W. Wall

This book is about reading the Bible as *Scripture*—the *church's* book, a *sacred* text. Our opening chapter seeks to set the table for the feast to follow, but not as most books like this one do. Those books introduce readers to the various strategies scholars use when studying the Bible as an anthology of ancient, religious texts. These are important matters, but first things first: the practices of biblical interpretation follow from the interpreter's core beliefs about what the Bible is. We have found that students need a compass to help navigate a pathway into the biblical text to mine its theological goods and assess their relevance for the life of faith today. This compass turns on what the church believes about Scripture.

There is good reason for us to begin the book here. Already in the seventeenth century, when science became the arbiter of enlightened truth in the West, the church's "Scripture" became the academy's "Bible." Scholars trained in biblical languages, literary art, and historical analysis became the Bible's most influential

readers. They interpreted biblical texts by wrapping them up in ancient history and languages to explain the author's intended meaning for the texts' original readers in the ancient Near East (Old Testament) or Mediterranean (New Testament) world. This hard work continues today, and we understand the church's book better because of it.

To be sure, the positive purpose for doing the scholar's work was to protect biblical texts from self-interested, biased use of them—often by earnest Christians. But modernity's interest in what the Bible must have meant for its first readers created a vast distance between what the Bible meant in the past and what it means today for faithful readers who seek to hear a word from the Lord to guide their witness and form their faith. This same distance often characterizes the gap between the concerns of an academic study of the Bible and those of rank-and-file believers who receive this same text in worship and spiritual instruction.

By referring to the Bible as "Scripture," we do not intend to privilege certain interpretive methods as better than other methods; in fact, all the tools of modern criticism are used as God's gifts in due season. Rather "Scripture" signals a way of thinking theologically about the Bible as God's Word for God's people, one that supplies the theological goods that fund spiritual wisdom and provide moral direction (cf. 2 Tim. 3:15–17). Readers are cued that the rigorous study of the biblical text that they are about to undertake targets more than their intellectual formation; it offers them a fresh way of thinking about God and God's vision of a transformed people and a new creation.

Scripture Is Important

The questions we seek to address in this chapter follow from our core convictions about the nature of Scripture as a sacred text appointed by God to do holy work. The different roles Scripture performs in a congregation's worship and instruction, in our

personal devotions, and in academic classrooms where biblical texts are rigorously studied should all logically follow from what we believe Scripture is.

In fact, this should be true of even the well-meaning skeptic for whom the Bible holds no religious importance. In this case, its texts are studied not for practical application to one's spiritual formation but out of deep respect for its importance for a particular religious community or in shaping Western civilization.

Our claim is that the Bible has always been much more than this for Christians. Jesus denied reports that he had come to abolish Scripture, claiming rather that the purpose of his arrival as God's Son was to fulfill the promises of God found throughout Israel's Scripture (Matt. 5:17–18). Christian readers approach Scripture the way that Christ does; they believe that what they find there discloses the full measure of God's promised salvation and then provides the hope that this salvation is graciously delivered by God's Spirit to all who believe in God's Son.

From its founding, the church has looked to the Bible to help believers understand their faith and guide their conduct in distinctively Christian ways. Christians believe that Scripture provides access to inside information about God. Studying the Bible is like entering a sacred place where the truth about God is encountered, which sometimes afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted. God's biblical portrait gives readers a working sense of what practices and beliefs both please and displease God. Scripture is indispensable, then, in forming God's people.

At the same time, readers should always study Scripture with other resources that the Spirit uses to draw believers into loving communion with God. For example, Jesus followers have always disciplined their daily walk by worshiping together, praying for one another, practicing good works, and receiving the sacraments (e.g., the **Lord's Supper**, **baptism**) as the means of receiving God's empowering grace. Scripture's promise that where two or three are gathered in Jesus's name, his Spirit is there among them (Matt. 18:20) is made real whenever and wherever Christians gather

together to worship God and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit is experienced. At the same time, we should be mindful of the Lord's instruction for individuals to practice their daily devotions in private (Matt. 6:1–6, 16–18). While we hope this book guides Bible study in the classroom and congregation, we also hope it aids the individual reader to engage in what we happily call a "recreational reading" of Scripture!

Interpreting Scripture Is Hard Work

While Protestants have always granted a special place of privilege to the Bible, all Christians recognize that Scripture has the authority to teach them the ways of God. For some Christians, however, the Bible functions as the one and only reliable source for knowing God. Often this belief is justified by the perception that the institutionalized practices and traditions of the church have become faulty, unfruitful, and even unfaithful over time. These concerns have always been at the pivot point of Christianity's reform movements. The Protestant Reformers claim that "the church is always to be reformed" rings true even today, ironically even within some Protestant communions!

The deeply held sentiment that biblical teaching establishes Christian beliefs and practices has limits. Especially during the modern period, biblical scholars have become increasingly aware that a community's core beliefs *about* the Bible and its practices of *applying* the Bible are shaped by the concerns and experiences of a particular context. Without doubt, Scripture is an indispensable resource for Christians—when used in the company of the Spirit—for maturing in their understanding of the ways of God; it is, however, more than a mere philosophical foundation by which to build a fortress of timeless thought. Scripture is a holy text that must be interpreted and applied to ever-changing lives in an ever-changing world. God's Word is living and active, and the activity of interpretation helps make it so. The reader's work

of adapting these precious but ancient texts to today's culture is no easy matter.

The reliance on Scripture alone to seek out the truth about God raises an important question: how is Scripture faithfully interpreted by all Christians in every generation of a global church? Interpretation is not a process of mathematical reasoning occurring in lockstep to arrive at the right answer. Texts are not puzzles or algebraic equations; they are collections of words that together form a meaning that relates God's Word to our lives. Interpretation is not only an intellectual exercise that requires knowledge of those "collections of words" but also an act of worship, requiring prayer and spiritual maturity that helps us adapt biblical teaching to daily life.

The Nature of Scripture

Scripture's importance and the hard work demanded of us to apply its teaching in formative ways are largely matters that recognize the special authority Scripture holds for a particular religious community. Christian theologians employ a wide variety of conceptions to describe and defend the importance of biblical teaching for the practice of Christian faith. Which among these conceptions provides the best account for Scripture's role in forming a robust faith?

Before we respond to this key question, remember what is at stake. The best way to protect a biblical text from a reader who mistakes or misapplies its teaching is to make certain that the content and consequence of biblical interpretation align with what the church believes about the Bible—about what it is and is not.

This entire book is organized by the straightforward conviction that the Bible is the church's book; it has special status and practical importance for every Christian. In part, this claim is based on a historical observation: there would be no Bible without the church that formed it (we believe under the Spirit's direction). But what we observe in the historical record is even more tightly

secured by a theological understanding of Scripture as God's Word for God's people.

This integral union between the church and its Scripture leads us to suggest a particular rubric in describing its nature. Even as the Nicene Creed describes the nature of the church as one holy catholic and apostolic, these same four marks are also true of the church's book. Scripture is one holy catholic and apostolic text.

Scripture Is One

The Spirit works through both the Bible and the church to form an abiding witness of the goodness and beauty of God and God's purposes for all creation. In this sense, Scripture is "one" book not because it says the same thing in the same way; it is an anthology of many collections, written in many different literary genres and from different theological perspectives. The Bible's unity is a theological claim about its singular purpose to heal the world God created so that it lives, flourishes, and thrives alongside and in the presence of God.

To describe it as unified also recognizes that the Bible tells a single story whose central character is the one and only God. From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture witnesses to who God always is and what God has already done, is now doing, and promises to do in the future. Even though this plotline is neither a simple one nor one that follows a straight line, the Bible's story has a beginning, middle, and stunning end that tell the story of God's salvation in a comprehensive and coherent way.

Scripture Is Holy

When the Bible speaks of "holy" things, it refers to an ordinary someone or something that God appoints and enables to perform extraordinary roles among God's people. Sometimes people shy away from using the language of "holy" because it means for them that something or someone is flawless. We approach holiness differently. We believe the term applies to creatures of God's own choosing that God sets apart to accomplish God's purposes.

When we speak of the "holy" Bible, then, we are not describing it as a flawless book. Yes, the Bible is a thing of great beauty. But when biblical writers themselves describe the act of writing a biblical text (e.g., Luke 1:1–4), they describe an ordinary literary process of collecting and arranging materials, writing them down to serve the needs of their readers, so that what they have written will be received and read like any other story, poem, or letter. What makes the Bible holy—set apart for extraordinary service—is the Spirit's decision to select these particular texts, to guide the church in first recognizing these texts as indispensable for its future and then collecting them together to form a complete Bible (we call this "canonization"), and finally to illumine the church's use of Scripture for holy ends. Second Timothy 3:15–17 identifies these holy ends as the formation of spiritual wisdom and maturity that enables a people to know Christ and live like him.

Scripture Is Catholic

The Bible is a "catholic" book because it is "the Word of God for the people of God." The word "catholic" (small "c") means global and so refers to the scope of Scripture's influence, which extends to every culture in every age. If the church is global, so is every Scripture, which promises to communicate God's Word to every kind of Christian. The Bible is nondenominational!

Of course, the particular social contexts in which the Bible is composed, collected, canonized, and considered all matter. So do those real settings in which a particular congregation picks up the same Bible translated into its own language and receives it as God's Word. All interpretation is local interpretation! These contexts matter only in light of the conviction that every believer everywhere is "in Christ Jesus" (cf. Gal. 3:26–29). Each is a citizen of a new kingdom that embodies and shows the renewal of all things. The Bible is "catholic" because God uses it to establish God's reign on all the earth.

Scripture Is Apostolic

Those who are familiar with the Gospel story of Jesus know that he appointed some of his **disciples** as **apostles**. They were those who from the beginning heard, saw, and touched the historical Jesus (1 John 1:1–3). They knew him best and were witnesses to what he said and did as God's Son. Scripture is "apostolic" because all its teaching lines up with the testimony of these first witnesses of Jesus. Their story is our story. They are our trusted forerunners in the faith. Christians find their witness reliable and good.

When the Gospel writers tell their authorized biographies of Jesus, they do so with materials received from these apostolic witnesses who knew the historical Jesus best and who experienced firsthand the salvation he brought into the world. The New Testament letters are pastoral writings of these same apostles (or their associates). Even Paul, who never met the historical Jesus, was personally schooled by the resurrected Jesus (Acts 9:3–6; 22:17–21; 26:14–18; Gal. 1:12, 16; 2:2). And even as their apostolic witness and transforming experience of the risen Jesus were first interpreted by studying Israel's Scripture (our Old Testament), so now the church's book also includes the **synagogue**'s book. Both Testaments, Old and New, are apostolic in content and consequence. Israel's Creator God is the very same God personified by Jesus Christ, whom the apostles met, trusted, and followed. We trust the Bible's teaching as followers of Jesus just as his apostles did.

This last point leads us to the most important claim of all: if the apostolicity of Scripture assures its readers that its teachings are of a piece with the apostolic witness, then every good interpretation of Scripture will necessarily always focus readers on the risen, living Jesus. The church has always taught that all Scripture, both Old and New Testament, illumines his ways, which alone hold the key to our happiness—or to use scriptural language, Jesus is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

A Few Good Questions

This book will not answer every question readers bring to the Bible. Its modest purpose is to provide an overview or framework of a particular way of thinking about the Bible that we hope will provide a way forward. But here are four good questions students constantly ask in the courses we routinely teach. We raise them in this opening chapter to illustrate how our understanding of Scripture carves out room for particular responses to familiar questions, which may also help readers see more clearly the Bible's enduring importance in their lives.

What Relevance Does the Bible Have for Its Non-Christian Readers?

The formation of Scripture (canonization) fixed a particular number of collected writings in a particular order to make clear their special significance in forming the faith and practices of Christian readers. But why should non-Christians be interested in stories that have no real bearing on a faith they don't share or a life they have no real interest in engaging?

First, if one accepts the Bible as a *cultural classic*, the citizen of the world may approach the Bible as a curious reader interested in a book that continues to exert power over the thinking and popular imagination of people, especially in the West. Even knowledge of the biblical story's plotline (see the next chapter) allows one to participate thoughtfully in a range of conversations about religion conducted in and for the public square.

Second, if one accepts the Bible as a *literary classic*, the well-educated reader may approach the Bible for the sheer pleasure that great works of art evoke. The appeal of its great stories, the memorable lyrics of the **Psalms**, the pithy wisdom of the Proverbs, the moral power of the Sermon on the Mount, and the arresting images of the book of Revelation have stirred the imagination of artists for centuries. Although Christians may not be disposed to think extensively about the Bible's literary

artistry, it remains a good reason for non-Christians to enjoy reading and studying it.

Finally, if one accepts the Bible as a *devotional classic*, which every well-educated person should read, even the thoughtful nonbeliever may look to its depiction of the Triune God as a repository of spiritual wisdom that adds layers of meaning to the other sources of human wisdom, including the sciences and humanities. Any robust conception of a text's full meaning will include a spiritual dimension that complements and even helps to explain the material world. Even nonbelievers, for example, have found significance in the moral teaching and example of Jesus or in the cautionary tales of the kings of Israel told in the Old Testament.

Should We Take the Bible Literally or Figuratively (or Nonliterally)?

The question of whether we should take the Bible literally or figuratively is sometimes asked to disguise the more honest question: Is the Bible for real or is it just another religious fiction? People think that because a fiction never really happened, it has no relevance in the reader's search for truth. It has entertainment value but no theological substance. Yet this distinction does not match up with what we already intuitively know and experience. For example, the fictional drama *Les Misérables* has moved countless audiences to tears in the process of enriching one's appreciation for the beauty and tragedy of real human experience. The point was once made by a seminary classmate: "I would rather have a meaningful myth than a meaningless fact any day of the week." Myths, fiction, and stories are compelling because they convey significance and meaning about the human experience. The same is true with the Bible: its significance does not rest strictly on the historicity of all its claims. For example, the story of Job in the Old Testament, which begins with an otherwise unknown character located in the fictional land of Uz, seems to be a "once upon a time" kind of story. Yet there is hardly a more powerful biblical book about God's response to human suffering than Job's.

The story's opening makes it clear that his story is every reader's story. Of course, these determinations require great care on our part. If Jesus were simply a fiction and the resurrection a hoax, all else of Christian faith would fall by the wayside. Paul is right about this (see 1 Cor. 15)! But the question regarding literal or figural reading strategies usually assumes quite a bit about what counts as important knowledge, including what can be deemed as "true" or "false." The question often functions (mistakenly) as a test of one's devotion to biblical authority; however, Christians throughout history have taken the Bible seriously while reading it both literally and figuratively.

What Translation of the Bible Is Best?

The decision of choosing the "best" English translation of the Bible results in much hand-wringing, in part because such decisions typically take into account a range of personal preferences. But choosing one translation over another is an important decision. Every translation, after all, is an interpretation; for this reason, translators have labored to render the text intelligible for the contexts in which they have found themselves. Translation is a context-specific activity, and each translation carries with it certain aims and concerns.

This has always been the case. For instance, did you know that the version of the Bible that Paul used and called "God-breathed and useful" (2 Tim. 3:16) was a Greek translation from the Hebrew original? (Greek was Paul's first language and the language used in the Christian congregations he founded.) Accurate and readable translations are important in making Scripture accessible to the masses who know no other language than their own. But accurate and readable translations are also theologically important since they encourage regular use of Scripture by which the Spirit instructs and forms God's people.

Our suggestion is not to settle on a single translation, even though your instructor or pastor might recommend one in particular. Read

two or three translations of the same passage to gain a better sense of the nuances and even significant grammatical and vocabulary differences, which often emerge in the process of translating the Bible into another language.

From Where and from Whom Did the Bible Come?

We have already said the church formed the Bible to help form the church, all under the direction of the Spirit. But we have said nothing about how, when, and by whom the Bible was formed. Unfortunately, a quick answer to this good question is impossible, because it requires the reconstruction of a long and complex history with large chunks of it unknown.

We do know that following their Babylonian **exile**, faithful Jews gradually produced two versions of their Scriptures, one in Hebrew and another in Greek (sometimes called the **Septuagint**). For the most part, the Greek version translates the Hebrew, but it would be a mistake to assume that where our current Hebrew text differs from our current Greek text the Hebrew readings are always older and better. The **Pentateuch** was produced first as Judaism's foundational text. Soon a collection of Prophets was finalized and placed with the Pentateuch to form the "Law and the Prophets." Later, a third collection of **Writings**, which included books of wisdom, a Psalter, and edifying stories, was added to complete the synagogue's biblical **canon**. The earliest Christian congregations often worshiped in Jewish synagogues and there were nurtured by Israel's Scripture from the beginning.

The Greek Bible, which was the primary translation used by the first Christians, is more chronological in shape and seems a better overall fit for the Christian Bible. Unlike the Hebrew Bible, which places its Prophets collection between the Pentateuch and Writings, the Greek version places its collection of Prophets last. When this ordering of the Old Testament is joined with the New Testament, an apt working relationship with the Gospels is created. When read together as a continuous whole, the Prophets immediately

precede the Gospels as though creation's healing promised by God through the Prophets is now brought to realization by Jesus according to the Gospels.

More is known about the formation of the New Testament than the Old Testament because its history is far less complex in scope and more compressed in time. Yet again the central feature of this historical moment remains the gradual gathering of individual writings into collections that respond to the challenges that faced the early church (and still do). The church recognized the right shape of a particular collection (e.g., four Gospels, thirteen letters of Paul) by actually using these texts in worship and instruction. The texts that worked well were preserved, while those that didn't weren't. Biblical collections were assembled, not written. And they were assembled as they were read and put into effect within congregations, and then copied and carried down the road to another congregation and then to still another.

The years 200 to 400 **CE** were the pivotal years of canonization. The social forces that shaped the formation of the New Testament were mostly intramural, pitting one version of Christianity against another. The conflict between different groups of Christians provoked the following question: What version of the **gospel** is true? The Bible was formed as a Spirit-guided means to weigh competing claims and convictions about what it means to be Christian and to do as Christians ought.

Any answer to this question should not regard the Christian Bible as a loose collection of writings from which the reader may pick and choose to study one sacred text in isolation from the others. The Old Testament and New Testament form a self-contained and singular whole. The ancient rubrics "Old" and "New" imply Scripture's integral wholeness: there is no other sacred text needed to gain wisdom needed for salvation beyond this one book of "Old" and "New" Testaments to one God's single gospel.

Moreover, the different collections that make up each Testament were carefully fitted together into a specific order during the canonization process. For this reason, we think the initial pass through

the Bible should be sequential—to get a good feel for the plotline of the Bible's story of God's salvation. If we believe that every biblical text is selected and inspired by God's Spirit for our theological understanding, their literary and theological diversity is reason for celebration, not disputation. Not only is it impossible to reduce the importance of any one part of the Bible as the only part that counts; the faithful reader relates the Bible's diverse witnesses together in ways that are mutually informing of God's full gospel. Only then does the church seek after a truly biblical understanding of God.

To Begin: A Theology of Scripture

Scripture has often been forced to fit what counts as true or respectable in any given age or social setting. But we have noted in this chapter that Scripture's interpretation must be Christ-centered, Spirit-led, and church-related in theological orientation and practical results. On this basis, two big-ticket ideas provide the beginning point of an intellectually and spiritually satisfying encounter with the church's one holy catholic and apostolic book.

If it were not for the Spirit and the church, there would be no such thing as a Christian Bible. The Bible does not just contain histories but itself has a history. This history involves the Spirit, who was active by providentially guiding the composition, transmission, collection, and use of these texts. The Holy Spirit used these texts to sustain the memory and proclamation of all that Jesus said and did. Also, the body of believers collectively known as the church has recognized certain texts as helpful in its task of mission and **discipleship**. This recognition is not strictly a human intellectual achievement; it is a worshipful and grace-laden development in which a Spirit-filled people come to recognize and know the ways of the Spirit so as to sense what does and does not contribute to the Spirit's purposes. Therefore, Scripture is a product of the Spirit working in the church to produce texts that can help this body as it grows toward God.

Only in the Spirit and in the church can one faithfully read the Bible as disciples of the risen One. Interpreting the Bible as Sacred Scripture is a spiritual activity; it beckons the Spirit's work of illumination. Words on a page or digital screen are just characters in and of themselves; as symbols, however, they signify and point to other realities. In the case of Scripture, its words signify and point to the self-communication of the Trinity. For this reason, believers need God in order to understand the ways of God. One cannot wade into the deep waters of Scripture apart from the prompting and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Additionally, if reading Scripture is a worshipful act rendered in and to God, then it is best pursued in the company of others who are striving toward that same end. An apprenticeship with wise practitioners of the Christian faith can help yield faithful readings of this text. Christians need to learn humbly and attentively how to approach this holy book before moving too quickly to apply it to their lives. This kind of worshipful apprenticeship, in the company of mature believers and the Holy Spirit, can help even the new believer gain the necessary maturity to study Scripture as the Word of God for the people of God.

2

Reading the Bible as Story

David R. Nienhuis

This chapter seeks to provide the reader with a short version of the story the Bible tells, the biblical "metanarrative." A narrative is, of course, a story—and the prefix "meta-" means (in this instance at least) "beyond" or "transcending." A metanarrative, then, is a big, overarching story that takes a group of smaller, different stories and provides a framework for understanding how they all fit together. As we will see, the Bible is made up of lots of different stories, but when we consider it as a whole we find there is a discernible overarching "big story," a "metanarrative."

There are, of course, some risks associated with the construction of metanarratives: because human beings are the ones who create them, they are unavoidably *contextual* (since they are told from one person's perspective and do not give us a God's-eye view), *reductionistic* (because they are a summary version of a huge story, so some things have to be left out), and therefore *contestable* (because different people will narrate things in different ways; one

person's incidental bit, easily omitted, may be a central element in someone else's version of the story!). Worse, close attachment to one preferred version of the biblical metanarrative sometimes has the effect of *replacing* a desire to be intimate with the texts themselves. We must guard against this. A metanarrative is kind of like a map of the Bible; we *use* a metanarrative map to help us explore the biblical landscape, but we must never allow ourselves to think that possession of the map alone makes us familiar with the land itself.

Despite the risks, we cannot live without metanarratives. When we are unfamiliar with the biblical metanarrative, we lack a framework for understanding how the individual stories we read fit into the big story of God. What follows, then, is one version of that story.

The Beginning of the Story: Genesis–Deuteronomy

Before anything existed, the God of love and life was there. God's love burst forth in the form of a good and ordered creation, a world of life with which God might live in loving, trusting relationship—one where humans would truly know God and know what it is to live as blessed creatures in relationship with a loving and powerful Creator (the Bible uses the word **righteous** to describe this "right living" before God). Humans, however, turned away from God. Having refused the guiding hand of their life-giving Creator, the creation fell into disarray. As humanity multiplied and spread, God's good and ordered world became a place of *un*righteousness, characterized by alienation, disorder, violence, sickness, and domination. That is, creation became subject to the power of sin and death. But the God of love and life was still there, still bringing life into being and upholding the creation that was now damaged and in desperate need of repair (Gen. 1–11).

God launched a plan to conquer sin, repair creation, and make all things new. Because the God of love is essentially relational, God

created a particular people group as a means of reaching out to the world, so that the whole creation might one day be restored to right relationship with its Creator. The plan was this: God would restore creation from the inside out, coming down to be made known through a particular group of people, empowering them to show the world both what God is really like and how it is that God wants people to live with one another.

Much of the Bible is given over to telling the story of that people group—the people of Israel. The story begins with Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 12), and follows God's blessing of their line through their son Isaac, his son Jacob, and in turn Jacob's twelve sons who would come to form the twelve tribes that make up the people of Israel (Gen. 24–50). The story goes on to describe their enslavement in Egypt and the powerful deliverance that God accomplished through a man named Moses. God saved the people by grace in order to make a **covenant** with them, to form them into a distinctive sort of people in the world (Exod. 1–15). God blessed them with a land in which to flourish and a set of instructions on how to live righteously (Leviticus–Deuteronomy) so that they might learn God's ways, turn away from their sin, and, in so doing, fulfill the task of showing the world what God is like and how God wants people to live with one another.

The Story of Israel in (and out of) the Land: Joshua–Esther

Right from the start, the people of Israel struggled to live in faithful relationship with their God. They failed to follow directions and often succumbed to the desire to be less like the people of God and more like the nations that surrounded them. God had to rescue them again and again (Joshua–Judges). Eventually God gave in to the people's desire to be like other nations and allowed them to have a king to rule over them in God's place (1–2 Samuel).

This growth in "worldly" power, however, simply resulted in an increasing lack of reliance on God. In the end, instead of becoming

people who join with the Creator to help restore the world, they fell into the pattern of disorder and alienation that so plagues the created order. God sent a great number of messengers called "prophets" to remind the Israelites of their covenant with God, but the people continued their disobedient ways and were soon divided by conflicts. Indeed, the nation was torn in two to become a northern kingdom of ten tribes, called "Israel" (with **Samaria** as its capital), and a southern kingdom of two tribes, called "Judah" (with Jerusalem as its capital). While a few of these nations' kings were devoted to God, most weren't—and their collective unfaithfulness resulted in the ultimate destruction of both nations. Israel was taken by the Assyrians in the eighth century **BCE**, their people absorbed into that empire. Judah was taken by the Babylonians in the sixth century BCE, their people and wealth carried away into exile (1 Kings–2 Chronicles).

Ultimately the Persians, under the leadership of King **Cyrus**, conquered the Babylonians. Cyrus allowed the people of Judah (now known as "Jews") to return to their ancestral land. While they were allowed to rebuild God's temple and reestablish worship, they did not possess the land God promised to them, and they were not allowed to have their own king. The biblical story of Israel ends with God's people waiting and wondering how (or if) God would complete the plan to restore the creation through the people of Israel (Ezra–Nehemiah).

The Witness of Israel's Poets, Sages, and Prophets: Job–Malachi

Of course, it would be a great error to give the impression that all of the people in Israel's story failed to keep faith with God. During the "postexilic" period, God's people reflected on their story and reconsidered the witness of those of the past who had maintained faithfulness while the majority turned away. Soon the writings of Israel's great poets (Psalms, Song of Solomon), wise sages (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes), and faithful prophets (Isaiah–Malachi)

began to be preserved and cherished by the people. God blessed the reading of these writings, using them to inspire the people to greater faithfulness and hope, and over time the people began the process of gathering these writings together with the "beginning" books (Genesis–Deuteronomy) as the holy Scriptures of Israel.

Israel in Waiting: The Time between the Two Testaments

For more than four hundred years God's people waited and wondered. Eventually the Persians were conquered by Greeks, who spread their language and culture through the lands they possessed—a process called **Hellenization**. Jews of course kept writing about God in this period, but now they were reading and writing in Greek instead of Hebrew. **Scribes** therefore produced a Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures (which we now call the "Septuagint," a Latin word referring to the tradition about the "seventy" translators who took up the task). Others wrote down stories of Israel's struggle to remain faithful to God while living under the rule of foreigners (e.g., the books called Maccabees and the stories of Judith, Tobit, and Susanna). Still others produced wisdom writings in the tradition of Proverbs (Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach). While these later "Greek" writings were incorporated into the Septuagint (which served as the Bible for earliest Christians), Jews ultimately removed them from their collection of Hebrew Scriptures. Christians then and now have been divided on the precise role these texts should play in the life of God's people.

Israel also experienced a number of changes in its worship and beliefs during this period. For instance, since there was no longer a king, **priests** stepped up into leadership for God's people. Since priests were in control, the Jerusalem temple began to take on significance as the symbol of God's ruling presence in the world. Since many Jews now lived long distances away from Jerusalem, however, it became common to gather together in synagogues in

order to pray and to learn about God's Scripture from a rabbi (or "teacher"). It was into this world that Jesus of Nazareth was born.

The Story of Jesus: The Four Gospels

The faithful Creator's plan to restore creation could not be derailed simply because humans were unfaithful. But given the pervasive brokenness of humanity, what sort of action was required to restore our relationship with God? Who would show the world what God is really like, and who would be capable of showing the world how the Creator expects human creatures to live? There was only one thing to do: the Creator would have to enter into creation as a human creature; how else could one be capable of both revealing God's true nature *and* offering a demonstration of a human life lived rightly before God? So God came to earth in the person of Jesus, a Jewish male, an actual human formed of the same stuff as the rest of the broken creation and therefore susceptible to weakness and death just like the rest of us. Jesus proclaimed the "good news" about the God of love and life to his own people, and some began to follow him as their teacher and king. He gathered these "disciples" together as a kind of newly restored Israel who would be empowered to live according to his interpretation of Israel's Scriptures. In doing so, they would be enabled to take up the task that God laid on the people of Israel long ago.

The religious leaders of Israel, however, felt deeply threatened by Jesus's message—mostly because his teaching offended their religious sensibilities and endangered the power they held—so they decided that he must be destroyed. Rather than fight back or grab power for himself in order to save his own skin, Jesus gave himself up as a sacrifice, living his life righteously as a model of unwavering trust in God and devoted, loving service to others. He confronted the leadership in Jerusalem and was eventually arrested, tortured, and executed. He died and was buried in a tomb.

But this was no ordinary human being; this was the Creator in human flesh, the very Author of life itself, against whom even death itself has no power. Death, therefore, could not hold him; after he was dead for three days he broke forth triumphantly from the tomb, no longer as a creature subject to weakness and death, but as a "new creation," a human fully restored by God's life and love. After visiting with his disciples for a short time, Jesus returned to God, promising his friends that he would one day return but that in the interim they would be spiritually transformed to continue his work and model his pattern of human life in right, life-giving relationship with the Creator.

The Story of the Church: Acts and the Letters

The community of Jesus's disciples gathered together in Jerusalem after his death to pray and wait for God to act. A short while later God did indeed act by coming down yet again, not as a human being this time, but as a powerful indwelling Spirit who would live within and among God's new Israel, the church. Filled with the Spirit, this community became immersed in the power of life and love so that they too could do what Jesus did before them—that is, proclaim the truth about God and live together as newly restored creatures in accordance with the Creator's intentions for creaturely life (Acts 1–8).

The early leaders of the church took this good news about God's power of life and love out beyond the boundaries of Israel (Acts 9–28), starting new church communities in every region—inclusive churches made up of Jews and **gentiles** (non-Jews), slaves and free people, and males and females (Gal. 3:27–28). As they traveled about, they wrote letters of instruction and encouragement to the churches they formed, and these were eventually collected and distributed among the churches (the twenty-one letters of Romans through Jude). Though the churches were spread abroad and made up of many different types of people, all of them were unified

by the Spirit as a new human community, a community who by word and deed would provide people with a glimpse of the "new creation" God has planned for the whole earth.

The Story's Conclusion: The Revelation to John

Throughout the story, God periodically provided certain people with hope-filled glimpses of what the creation will be like when everything is finally fully restored. One ancient writer of Israel described it like this:

> The wolf shall live with the lamb,
> the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
> the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
> and a little child shall lead them.
> The cow and the bear shall graze,
> their young shall lie down together;
> and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
> The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
> and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
> They will not hurt or destroy
> on all my holy mountain;
> for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
> as the waters cover the sea. (Isa. 11:6–9 NRSV)

This, then, is the final act in the story of God's creation, and it has yet to take place. Indeed, the Bible ends with a mysterious, symbol-laden story-poem of God's ultimate restoration of creation when Jesus returns in glory and the Creator gains the final victory over all that keeps the creation in bondage to the power of death. It insists,

> See, the home of God is among mortals.
> He will dwell with them;
> they will be his peoples,
> and God himself will be with them;
> he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

> Death will be no more;
> mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
> for the first things have passed away. (Rev. 21:3–4 NRSV)

The biblical story concludes, then, with an emphatic promise that, in the end, the faithful God will conquer sin, destroy death, and make all things right. Until then, God's people "follow [Jesus] the Lamb wherever he goes" (Rev. 14:4 NRSV), knowing that the journey will end in a creation fully restored.

Reading the Bible as Story

Chapter, Canonical Unit, Biblical Books	Major Plot Points and Characters
The Beginning of the Story *(Pentateuch)* Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy	• Creation of the universe, humans, and their predicament (Genesis) • Ancestors: Noah (Gen. 6–10), Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar (Gen. 11–25), Isaac (Gen. 21–27), Jacob (Gen. 25–35), Joseph (Gen. 37–50) • Exodus: Slavery in Egypt, the call of Moses, and deliverance; journey through wilderness and receipt of the law at Mount Sinai; wilderness wandering (Exodus, Numbers) • The giving of the Mosaic law, transmitted in different ways across four texts: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy
The Story of Israel in (and out of) the Land *(History)* Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings, 1–2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther	• Conquest of the promised land (Joshua) • Life in the promised land (Judges, Ruth) • Rise of the monarchy: stories of Samuel, Saul, David, and Solomon (1–2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 1–2 Chronicles) • Divided kingdom, north/Israel and south/Judah (1–2 Kings, 2 Chronicles) • Destruction and exile (2 Kings, 2 Chronicles) • Life after the exile (Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther)
The Witness of Israel's Poets and Sages *(Writings)* Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs	• Job: this story/poem about a righteous man who suffers innocently is an investigation into the meaning of suffering and the possibility of disinterested righteousness • David: traditionally the author of Psalms, though it is clear that many were not written by him (e.g., Pss. 68, 90, 137) • Solomon: As the one most closely associated with wisdom (1 Kings 3:5–15; 4:29–34), Solomon is the traditional (though not entirely actual) author of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs (as well as the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon) • Qoheleth: the "Teacher" or "Preacher" who speaks as the writer of Ecclesiastes
The Witness of Israel's Prophets *(Prophets)* Isaiah, Jeremiah (+ Lamentations), Ezekiel, Daniel	• The "major" prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah (+ Lamentations), Ezekiel, and Daniel proclaim to the southern kingdom its approaching exile due to sin, God's sustaining presence while the people are in exile, and the future salvation God has planned for their return from exile.
The Book of the Twelve: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi	• Hosea, Joel, and Amos collectively address the failures and downfall of the northern kingdom; Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah prophesy the fate of the southern kingdom and surrounding nations; Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi prophesy the restoration of Jerusalem following the exile.

Chapter, Canonical Unit, Biblical Books	Major Plot Points and Characters
Israel in Waiting *(Apocrypha/Deuterocanon)* Tobit, Judith, Additions to the Book of Esther, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach (aka Ecclesiasticus), Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, Additions to Daniel (Prayer of Azariah and the Song of Three Jews, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon), 1–2 Maccabees, 1 Esdras, Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151, 3 Maccabees, 2 Esdras, 4 Maccabees (note: actual order, content, and even titles of these books vary in Protestant, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Slavonic Bibles)	
The Story of Jesus *(Gospel)* Matthew, Mark, Luke, John	• The preexistence of the Word (John 1:1–5) • Birth (Matt. 1–2; Luke 1–2) • Baptism and temptation (Matt. 3–4:11; Mark 1:2–13; Luke 3:1–4:13) • Gathering of disciples and public ministry (Matt. 4:12–25:46; Mark 1:14–13:37; Luke 4:14–21:38; John 1:19–17:26) • Passion and death (Matt. 26–27; Mark 14–15; Luke 22–23; John 18–19) • Resurrection (Matt. 28; Mark 16; Luke 24:1–49; John 20–21) • Ascension (Luke 24:50–53)
The Story of the Church *(Acts of the Apostles and Apostolic Letters)* Acts of the Apostles The Letters of Paul: Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon Hebrews (anonymous) The Catholic Epistles: James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude	• The story of the earliest Jewish-Christian church in Jerusalem (Acts 1–15) • The rise of the Christian mission to the gentiles out of the Jerusalem mission, under the eventual leadership of Paul (Acts 9–28) • Letters written by Paul to churches (Romans to 2 Thessalonians) and individuals (1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon) • An anonymous Christian letter included in the Pauline collection (Hebrews) • Letters written by leaders of the Jewish-Christian mission in Jerusalem (James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude, called the "Catholic Epistles")
The Story's Conclusion *(Apocalypse)* The Revelation to John	• John of Patmos (Rev. 1:1–9) • The Christian churches addressed (Rev. 2–3) • The Lamb that was slain (Rev. 5; see also, e.g., 7:13–17; 12:10–12) • The woman, the child, and Michael the archangel (Rev. 12) • The dragon and the two beasts (Rev. 12–13) • Heavenly worship (Rev. 4; 7:9–17; 8:1–5; 11:15–19; 14:2–3; 15:2–8; 19:1–10; 21:1–4)