

CHAPTER 1

More than a Fortune Cookie

The Testimonies of Two Communities

How do you read the Bible? Many people read it as a source of strength in times of personal crises or more broadly as a resource for personal devotions. These are legitimate practices with which I have no quarrel. Sometimes, however, the search for help with personal problems leads people to treat the Bible as nothing more than a reservoir of personal advice: “Can you show me a passage in the Bible to convince my nephew to treat his mother better?” “Is there something in the Bible I could point out to my sister to make her stop treating me like a child?” I doubt that there are many pastors who have not been frustrated by

questions like these. We can certainly appreciate the distress that gives rise to them. But the expectation that the Bible will provide specific remedies to all personal problems rests on a misunderstanding of the nature of most of the biblical writings and a lack of awareness of the grand themes that tie these writings together. Although I do not classify this “fortune cookie” approach to the Bible as a form of “Bible abuse” parallel to the approaches I will consider in chapters 3 through 5, I find it inadequate and limiting. I therefore devote this initial chapter to the nature of the biblical writings and those grand themes of biblical faith.

The Bible as Community Product

The biblical writings were collected to serve two historical communities of people. The books of the Hebrew Bible (or, as Christians name it, the Old Testament) are the products of the Jewish community, which preserved them for the community’s use. The Christian church adopted the Hebrew Bible as its own and added to it a list of Christian writings that came to be known as the New Testament. Current usage of the English word *testament*, however, obscures what the word meant when first applied to the Bible. The intended meaning was “covenant,” and it des-

ignated the books of the Hebrew Bible as pertaining to God’s covenant with the

Hebrew people and the books of the New Testament as pertaining to God’s new covenant made through Christ. From a Jewish perspective, the Hebrew Bible is the book of the Jewish community,



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and from a Christian perspective, the two testaments together constitute the church's book.

When Christians read the Bible, they therefore do so as members of a community that has continued from the first century to the present. As such, the Bible tells a story that the church feels called to tell to all humankind, the story of God's redemptive actions in human history. When any readers ignore that larger story and reduce the Bible to a personal guidebook, they miss what is most important about it.

The Story the Bible Tells

What is this story of God's redemptive actions in human history? The first five books of the Hebrew Bible, known to Jews as the Torah, recount the formation of the Israelite people set against the background of God's dealings with humankind as a whole. The plot begins, in Genesis 1–2, with God's creation of the world but quickly turns to the theme of human disobedience, or sin. It continues with a pattern of human disobedience, followed by God's attempts to repair the damage, until chapter 12, which signals God's change in strategy. Here God calls Abraham and Sarah to leave their homeland and form a new people, through whom all humankind will receive blessing. The story then proceeds through many generations of this couple's descendants, following a pattern related to the themes of covenant and promise. God has made a promise, sealed with a covenant, to make their descendants into a great people, and the plot now revolves around various crises, which threaten that promise, and God's interventions. This part of the story reaches a climax in the exodus from Egypt when Moses leads the people out of slavery and into the desert, bound for the land that God has promised them. And the Torah concludes with the people poised to enter that land.

The story continues in the books of Joshua through 2 Kings (excepting the book of Ruth). The people enter the land and conquer it, but their life there is a cycle of ups and downs. When they are faithful to God, things go well; when they are unfaithful, things go poorly. In the midst of all this, God is at work, sending messengers and intervening in various ways. And the pattern continues as the Israelites split into two nations, Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

This telling of the story ends on an ambiguous note. The sins of the kings and the people have brought disaster. The Assyrian empire has long ago destroyed northern Israel, and the Babylonian empire has now conquered Judah and taken many of the people into exile. But the final word is one of hope: the young king Jehoiachin, though in exile, is released from prison in Babylon and dines with the Babylonian monarch.

The books of Chronicles give an alternative version of the story down to the beginning of the restoration of Judah after the exile, and Ezra and Nehemiah continue the story of that restoration. The books of the prophets and other writings fill in elements of the story, and chapters 7–12 of Daniel portray in symbolic terms the history from the Babylonian exile to the second century B.C.E. But the Bible contains no further systematic telling of the Israelites' journey with God. In various ways, however, it points to a future in which God will bring final deliverance to the Israelites and redemption to the world at large.

The New Testament continues the story by proclaiming that in Jesus of Nazareth—his life, death, and resurrection—God has fulfilled the ancient promises and brought about divine-human reconciliation. It identifies Jesus with the various forms of a future deliverer envisioned in the Hebrew Bible. The Gospels tell the story of Jesus, and the book of Acts tells the story of the early church, concluding with the image of Paul imprisoned in Rome but still preaching the gospel message. The

symbolism is that this message, having reached the heart of the Roman empire, is poised to penetrate the world at large. And that message is none other than the story of God's redemption of the world, with the life-death-resurrection of Jesus at its center and his expected return in glory as its conclusion.

The Purpose of the Story

This, in broad outline, is the story the Bible tells. It is the story that Paul relates, in capsule fashion, in his letters and that has been the lifeblood of the church through the centuries. It is also the means through which the church instructs each new generation and makes its witness to the world. The ultimate purpose of the call of Abraham was to bring blessing to the whole world, and the Hebrew Bible is dotted with references to God's intention to embrace all humankind. Isaiah 49:6, for example, defines the mission of an unnamed figure, the "servant," as reaching beyond Israel to bring salvation to all the nations of the world:

[God] says,

"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant

to raise up the tribes of Jacob

and to restore the survivors of Israel;

I will give you as a light to the nations,

that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

In the New Testament, this sense of worldwide mission becomes more programmatic. The Great Commission in Matthew 28:19 is a classic text: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And 1 Peter 2:9 is even more explicit in defining the church's task as to tell the story of God's gracious actions in history: "But you are a chosen

race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of [the one] who called you out of darkness into [God’s] marvelous light.”



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In summary, the role of the church is to testify to God’s actions in the world, which means proclaiming what God has done to repair the broken world and restore the divine-human relationship. From a Christian perspective, the Bible is the church’s book because it contains the story the church is compelled to tell.

The Story and the Rule of God

If the purpose of the story is to bring about divine-human reconciliation, we must be clear about what that means. There is a tendency in many circles of the church today to think of this reconciliation in purely individualistic terms. That is, some people are prone to think it means only convincing individuals to accept the Christian message. But this narrow emphasis on individuals is quite unbiblical. Jesus’ own message focused on the coming of God’s kingdom—or, better translated, God’s rule or reign. The basic meaning behind the various uses of this phrase has to do with God’s sovereign activity in ruling the universe and, secondarily, with the sphere that such activity establishes. The concept of God’s rule is often present even when the specific term does not appear.

As we can see in Psalm 145:13, God’s rule is manifest in the past, present, and future: “Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and

your dominion endures throughout all generations.” Often, however, the fullness of God’s rule seems to lie in the future. But there is considerable ambiguity as to whether that future rule is on earth or in heaven. Isaiah 11:9 points to a time when the whole *earth* will acknowledge Israel’s God:

They will not destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters that cover the sea.

In Revelation 21:1, in contrast, God’s final rule is established only with the dissolution of the present world order: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.”

Even in cases such as this the new order is not completely disconnected from the old. As the next verses show, we have a kind of union between earth and heaven: “And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for husband, and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals’” (21:2-3b). A similar tension appears in the teachings of Jesus. The fact that he speaks of a final judgment (Matthew 25:31-46) and the resurrection of the dead (Matthew 22:23-28) might suggest that the rule of God he announces (Matthew 4:17) is a purely heavenly affair. But in the Lord’s Prayer, we find a petition for God’s rule to come on earth:

Your kingdom come,
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:10)

This verse employs a device used in Hebrew poetry known as synonymous parallelism: the second line repeats the thought of the first line in

different words. Thus, “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” means the same thing as “Your kingdom come.” In other words, God already rules in heaven; the prayer asks that God’s rule/kingdom now be made manifest on earth.



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Whether the fullness of God’s sovereign rule is conceived in earthly or heavenly

terms, it always involves righting the wrongs in the world. It repairs the damage human beings have created through their sin, and the divine-human

reconciliation God brings about also involves reconciliation among human beings. In short, the rule of God brings peace and justice—harmony among the various peoples of the world and a social order that ensures all share in God’s gracious gifts.

Isaiah therefore describes the coming golden age in terms of a harmony that recalls the perfection of Eden:

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. (11:6)

Similarly, Micah stresses the reconciliation among the nations of the world that allows all peoples to enjoy the bounty of the earth:

[God] shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,

neither shall they learn war any more;
 but they shall all sit under their own vines
 and under their own fig trees,
 and no one shall make them afraid;
 for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken. (4:3-4)

God's rule is characterized by peace, and that peace is intimately connected with justice, which is defined largely in terms of addressing the lot of the poor. The following passage describes the reign of an ideal future king. The phrase "judge the poor" means to do right by them, that is, to grant them their rightful share in the blessings of God's creation.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
 or decide by what his ears hear;
 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
 and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. (Isaiah 11:3b-4b)

The Individual and the Community

Not only is the Bible a product of communities, but the story it tells is one of community. It is the story of God's creation of Israel and the church, but in a larger sense of God's working through these two communities to create community solidarity among the peoples of the world. We should read it in awareness that its primary focus is on human collectivities—Israel, the church, and finally all humankind as God's own family.

This does not mean that the Bible has no concern for individuals. The emphasis on justice in the rule of God is a recognition that all individuals have a place in that community. Paul constantly counsels concern for the good of the community, but he knows that the good of the whole is inseparable from that of individual members. One of his

main criteria for assessing whether an action is good or bad is whether it strengthens Christ's body, the church. In 1 Corinthians 14:4-5, for example, he contrasts the gift of prophecy with speaking in tongues and judges the former superior, because it serves the community: "Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church. Now I would like all of you to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. One who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up."

Building up the church, however, means concern for every member of it, as we see in Paul's discussion of eating food offered to idols.



Paul judged actions according to what strengthened the church.

He knows that food dedicated to a pagan deity cannot harm a person, since such

deities are not real: "Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that 'no idol in the world really exists,' and that 'there is no God but one'"

(1 Corinthians 8:4). In principle, there is no reason a Christian cannot eat such food. But Paul makes an important qualification to this principle, because not all community members will have thought the issue through so clearly: "It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they must still think of the food they eat as offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled" (1 Corinthians 8:7). May a Christian eat food offered to an idol? Yes, Paul says, *unless* doing so would undermine the faith of a fellow member of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 8:9-13; 10:23-30).

The biblical ideal is therefore neither individualism nor collectivism but individuality within community. The Bible is concerned about individuals, but it understands individuals as parts of a larger whole. It is concerned about the community, but it understands the community as made up of individuals, each of whom is precious in God's sight.

Invitation to an Adventure

Immersion in the biblical story can be an exciting adventure. Every adventure involves some degree of danger, however, and in this chapter I have tried to show how limiting the Bible to a source of personal guidance can interfere with grasping the grand story of human redemption. Eventually, I will examine some of the more troublesome ways in which we tend to misunderstand the nature of the biblical writings. But this will involve asking some difficult questions. The larger story the Bible tells is actually made up of smaller stories. What if the smaller stories conflict with one another? Also, the Bible comes to us from the ancient world and from cultures alien to our own. In what ways might anyone suppose its prescriptions for how to live faithfully before God apply to our own time? And what does it mean when people claim to “believe the Bible,” anyway? All these questions revolve around the larger questions of the ways we read the Bible, the expectations we bring to it, the nature of the biblical writings, and the kind of authority it might have for us.