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Stories

‘It’s all about the story’

(advertisement on the side of a bus for
a television company)

On Saturday 20 February 2010, the public reading of the whole Bible in Durham Cathedral came to an end. Pat Francis, the co-ordinator of the ‘Big Read’, said:

On this final day of the Read we heard read these words from 1 Timothy 4.13 – ‘*pay attention to the public reading of Scripture.*’ This has been fulfilled by 506 readers from an ecumenical list of denominations . . . and represents 106 individual readers, 30 teams, and 7 schools. 928 people spent time listening during the Read, and the children from the 7 schools, along with all who shared in this event, will have brought back to family, friends, neighbours and work colleagues their scripts and the news of what they had read, of what they had heard. The proclaiming of Scripture grows beyond the Cathedral.¹

Stories, or more particularly the proclamation of stories, are a vital part of many cultures in our world, but perhaps less so in many Western contexts. Stories can have immense power, and the ability for our imagination to be captured by ‘a good yarn’ is a very real one. The reappearance of the *Doctor Who* franchise on UK television (and exported to other countries) brought back the adventures of this most famous of time travellers to the highly valued prime-time Saturday evening family

viewing slot. The season finale of series three, ‘The Last of the Time Lords’, depicted the Doctor’s assistant, Martha Jones, travelling across Earth for a year. For most of the episode we were led to believe that she was collecting parts for a particular weapon that would destroy the arch-enemy known as The Master. As the episode reached a critical point, Martha Jones revealed that she was not travelling on Earth to locate parts for a gun, but instead to tell people stories about the Doctor so that at a particular moment everyone would think about the Doctor, and the collective energy of their thoughts would in fact overcome The Master. It was the power of stories rather than technology that won the day. When this episode was first broadcast, on 30 June 2007, it produced a viewing figure of 8.61 million.² While the *Doctor Who* franchise undoubtedly has a life of its own, a large part of the story of its success lies in the skill of the writers who put the story together.

Aside from the world of film and television, the telling of stories can play an important role in shaping and affirming national identity. Following any major event or disaster, it is commonplace for people to want to share the story of where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news. The telling of stories can also have a redemptive quality, as the process in South Africa following the end of apartheid, known as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, has demonstrated, along with other similar processes of restorative justice.

When it comes to the Bible, encountering its variety of stories is rather like making your way through an art gallery. Which route do you take? An orderly one (as suggested by the official guide book), or do you go with your own sense of direction, heading straight for the *Mona Lisa* bypassing countless other paintings? The point of encounter, of looking at stories, is the

point at which we start, before the process of interpretation begins (although it is sometimes hard to separate the two). In his article ‘The Literal Sense of Scripture’, Rowan Williams advocates an approach to reading the stories of the Bible in a ‘literal sense’. By ‘literal’ he means reading with attention and patience, story by story, allowing for plurality of genres, for occasions of conflict where texts appear to work against each other, and moments when the text just doesn’t seem to make sense. The word ‘literal’ does not equate in meaning with more fundamentalist readings which ultimately shrink the meaning of the texts.³ Much like the ‘Big Read’ mentioned above, perhaps we need to spend more time simply *reading* the texts as stories, rather than taking elements from different stories in order to work out where an overall sense of ‘unity’ lies. This latter approach is more naturally predisposed to be agenda-driven (whether consciously or not), stemming from a desire to uphold one version of events over all others.⁴ This attention to ‘taking time’ in story-by-story reading is unsettling to a Western culture dominated by speed.⁵

Individual story-units in the Bible are sometimes called ‘pericopes’, a word that is not understood by modern word-processing programs, with spell-checkers set to change ‘pericope’ to ‘periscope’. Yet there may well be meaning to this, for when read carefully stories alert us to deeper ‘movements or rhythms’ within a text, meanings that are located above and beyond

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where the boundaries of the text appear to lie.⁶ Sometimes we need to look up and around in order to comprehend what it is we are looking at (as my encounter with the art installation referred to

in the Introduction taught me).⁷ A story-driven reading isn’t as naive as it might sound, and it certainly allows for a more

honest approach that invites contributions from all sides of the interpretative spectrum.⁸ Moreover, it permits the boundaries of meaning to change depending on whether we read a story on its own, or within a particular book, or indeed within a particular section of the Bible. It does not advocate the elevation of one interpretation over another, but rather gives permission for a great variety of readings – of even just one story (pericope) – to be in conversation with one another. In this way, reading the Bible creates a proper sense of unity that does not come from everyone thinking the same thing,

but from the obligation to bear with one another, to testify to the truth as we have received it, and to continue to show forbearance and patience in the shared hope that when all things are revealed, the Revealer will also display the manner in which our diverse interpretations form a comprehensive concord in ways that now elude our comprehension.⁹

But what is it exactly that we are reading? A colleague of mine once began a session on how Anglicans read the Bible by asking the assembled group what title they might give to the Bible. At first, the reaction was, ‘It’s already got a title: *The Bible*,’ but following an initial sense of puzzlement, the group pondered this question and offered a variety of suggestions:

The Word is out

God’s story

The meaning of everything

42 (from Douglas Adams’ *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, the number that apparently answers everything that can be asked in life about life)

God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit

The story of salvation

People get it wrong, God puts it right

The Good Book

It was, as it turned out, a considerably more difficult exercise than it first appeared. It brought about a realization that ‘the Bible’ is indeed a whole series of stories. Brought together as ‘canon’ they stand alone, each constituent part offering an angle on what might best be described as a ‘God-shaped’ story. But the question remains, ‘What is it that we are reading?’ The saying goes that every picture tells a story, but pictures are not always titled. To make matters more confusing, sometimes the title a painting is given is simply *Untitled*. Placed next to such a painting by the artist Richard Serra the helpful comment to the pondering viewer reads:

Perhaps art is a visual experience. Rather than offering external explanations, they [the artist] want us to engage with what is physically there – the contrasts of dark and light, relations between shapes and the impressions of harmony or tensions that result . . . visual art is special because it says something that is difficult to capture in words, and that includes words on a wall label.¹⁰

This provides a helpful insight into what a ‘literal’ approach to reading the Bible might involve. An analogous model was in fact proposed by Brooke Foss Westcott in the late nineteenth century. Westcott held that the details of the biblical narratives mattered intensely. Although it was important to view the texts as a whole, from a distance, there was ultimately more to be gained from paying close attention to detail. To put it succinctly:

Interpretation for the believer is thus a shuttling between the closest possible reading of the text, with all the resources available, and the repeated attempt to find words to articulate the complex unity that is being uncovered.¹¹

I once led a Bible study with a group of women on the Magnificat, which is found in the first chapter of Luke’s Gospel. Surprisingly,

it was the verse immediately after the words of the Magnificat that attracted the most discussion. In 1.56 we read: ‘And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.’ A brief glance at academic commentaries on Luke’s Gospel reveals that this sentence does not attract much comment, if any, yet it was this verse that invited further exploration precisely because it involved imaginative reflection upon events ‘off the page’. We will look more at the importance of imaginative reflection later on in this book, but it makes the important point here that time spent with stories can often enable specific details to be noticed that we might otherwise pass over.

Genre

The Bible, as we have already asserted, is a collection of books, within which we find collections of stories. The use of the word ‘book’, however, needs some qualification at this point, since at the time of composition there were only scrolls, and copies of scrolls. Moreover, each ‘book’ was likely produced by multiple authors, often in different locations, over different periods of time and crucially, writing in the languages of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, using different genres.¹² The book of Revelation, for example, can only be fully understood if we take into account its apocalyptic genre. This helps us understand the fantastical imagery in this book, which makes little sense to us, but makes every sense with regard to the genre that provides the framework through which we encounter this text. Attention to the variety of genres is also helpful because not every pericope in the Bible may neatly be defined as a ‘story’, at least in our own understandings of what stories are; it depends on the genre of what we are reading. So we use ‘story’ lightly in the sense that each narrative unit is ultimately telling us something about the story of God (this is how we choose to view it from the

perspective of faith). This is useful to bear in mind when we encounter what to all intents and purposes *looks* like a book (pages of writing between two covers). At the same time, although we encounter the Bible first and foremost as a work of literature, the stories themselves emerged from oral tradition and were rooted in a belief in God who created the world, sustained it and redeemed it through Jesus Christ. So we are dealing with multiple layers: the Bible is a pluralistic text, and the translations that we have are themselves interpretations. This should give us some encouragement when we try to make sense of the Bible as a whole; it reminds us of the need for patience when it comes to this process of searching for meaning, and awareness that language is often a barrier to that meaning.

Why those stories?

What are the stories that are contained in the Bible, and why *those* stories and not others? Both these questions can, on one level, be answered quite simply: the ‘what’ and ‘why’ are because of a relationship, or rather, many relationships. There is not a single story in the Bible that does not have its origin in a relationship: with God, with other people, or with communities. Paul’s letter to Philemon is a good example of this. Being such a short letter, it is easy to understand why it might not have made it into the New Testament canon. But the importance and authority of its author Paul secured its place. The relationship that Paul had with his communities made them value his writings highly. Part of the dynamics of that relationship, as the stories themselves reveal, are the many ways in which people *respond*. Of course, when it comes to the letters of the New Testament, we don’t have direct access to the response of the communities to which the letters were sent, and this is

why the ‘stories’ of Paul’s letters need to be interpreted dramatically, taking into account their genre as letters.¹³ One almost has to imagine a conversation happening; these are not ‘flat’ documents. This sense of conversation (direct and indirect) is the meaning and importance of the covenantal theme that is sustained throughout the Bible, and is more of an active state of being rather than a story told and that alone. The covenantal theme works beyond the boundaries of the texts, as the stories are received, valued and discerned in communities, in multiple contexts and places. In this way, the insight of N. T. Wright may be helpful here: that the Bible is like a five-act Shakespearean play. The fifth act remains unwritten and it is up to ‘us’ to improvise its contents while remaining ‘in character’.¹⁴ Yet even with this a note of caution should be registered over who determines the meaning of ‘character’ and whether more than one expression of how that character behaves is permitted to join the conversation. The challenge inherent in this is hardly new. The twentieth-century French philosopher Michel de Certeau discussed at some length the challenge for Christianity to remain faithful to the inaugural event (the God-shaped story contained in the Bible), and yet the necessity to assert difference from those beginnings.¹⁵

Space here does not allow for a detailed examination of all of the stories in the Bible.¹⁶ The present aim is to engage with aspects of *how* the Bible tells its stories rather than simply to analyse their narrative content (which is what a more traditional commentary does in the process known as ‘exegesis’).¹⁷ This might be more boldly asserted as identification of the potential *effects* that the stories have, and although I acknowledge that this may be a risky endeavour, it does reinforce the point about relationships made earlier, that the fullest of meaning comes from appreciation of the relationships within the texts and the relationship that the readers have both with

God and with the texts. Any identification of story-types that I may choose is, of course, generated by me, and others may disagree with the category descriptions that follow. But the point is to try at least to be realistic with that 'literal' sense of what it might mean for individuals and communities to read the text 'as it is'.

I suggested above that interpretation follows a reading of text (in the way that, liturgically speaking, a sermon follows the readings), yet the distance between the acts of reading and interpretation is sometimes very small indeed. It is actually hard for our imagination not to engage straight away with what we are reading or hearing. One of my regular commitments is taking assemblies in our local primary school. Telling stories to the children often produces instant reactions because imaginations are engaged by what they hear and, crucially, by what they *see*. I recall telling the story of John the Baptist heralding the gospel message as reported in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel. To 'inhabit' the persona of John I put on a rather dubious-looking brown coat, tied a leather belt around my waist, and wore a fake beard and wig. I held aloft a jar of honey, and because (not surprisingly) I could not locate any locusts I found a large rubber spider and waved that in the air. I

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had not anticipated that the very youngest children were rather perturbed by the spider, and so a message of reassurance in the midst of John's strident proclamations had to be improvised! Children, by and large, are not inhibited from employing their imaginative gifts in response to a story in the way adults often are, and I still get comments about my telling of the 'John' story to this day. Walter Brueggemann comments, 'the need for imagination may also suggest that the handling of the text as an insider requires of us

energy and boldness if its new pertinence is to be perceived and received among us.¹⁸

All this points to the need to take seriously the performative nature of the stories. The advert mentioned at the beginning of this chapter depicted a man and a woman crouching near to the ground. The perspective of the picture was ‘from the ground up’, almost on a level with the two figures. The scene appeared to be rural, and it looked as though the woman was interviewing the man, who was perhaps a farmer talking about an issue related to his land. By asserting, ‘it’s all about the story’, the viewer is encouraged to delve deeper into what might lie behind the available (visual and performative) information. But the point here is to unfold the broad canvas of the story that lies open before us and invites us to react, perhaps even *demands* that we react in some way. Our canvas isn’t necessarily flat (to return to the covenantal arc image that is by no means neat and tidy); it may well fall and fold, depending on our perspective. The artist Philippa Blair’s paintings defy being hung neatly like more conventional artworks; on one occasion when she was painting, her canvas dropped inadvertently, which caused her to move away from traditional formats to focus on constructed surfaces. Thus the canvas of her art droops in different ways wherever it is hung on the wall, and no two displays of her work will ever look the same. In order to view her work, therefore, one has to study the textures and contours and observe the ways in which the colours reflect off one another in that particular context: the art is not flat, nor is our viewing of it!

Types of story

If we consider for a moment how the Bible presents us with stories, two points emerge: first, the need to get a sense of the variety of story-types (what they are in a ‘literal’ sense); and second,

the pulling together of all these types into a proposed narrative model, which I want to suggest is something along the lines of developing an actual ‘theology of reading’. What I offer here, therefore, is a suggestion of some ‘types’ of story along with accompanying textual references for the reader to examine. This is followed by illustration of a narrative model from Walter Brueggemann’s work on making sense of the Bible. None of this is exhaustive (I would not wish to claim that), but it might help our search for meaning. Indeed, time spent with any one of these stories, simply reading them as they are, may ultimately allow for some of the deeper rhythms of meaning to emerge.

Rowan Williams writes that ‘the setting out of an historical story becomes indispensable to the human quest for truth . . . the gospel isolates events rather like looking through the wrong end of a telescope to give distance and perspective to otherwise confused details’.¹⁹ These words helpfully shed light upon our reflecting on *how* the Bible tells its stories; not only that, but how it is possible for us to read them so that our own sense of (literal) distance is given the perspective that allows for meaning and sense to take shape. The process of presenting varieties of stories and the ways in which those stories can be held together and connected in different ways finds an analogy in the world of art. The New Zealand artist Richard Killeen is well known for his cut-outs in which he selects and manipulates images of his place and time. Every installation of his art is unique, resulting from ‘an open pictoral system, its elements variously drawn from their storage box like so many specimens of their kind. Including everything from the quotidian to the arcane, Killeen’s endlessly re-arrangeable pictograms capture our stories as they tell his.’²⁰

A major exhibition of Killeen’s paintings was held in Auckland in 1999. The title of the exhibition, ‘Stories We Tell Ourselves’, was taken from two of Killeen’s largest works: *Stories we tell*