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Narrative's Revelatory Power: toward an Understanding of Narrative Theology

Annette Thornburg

From classical novels to magical fantasies and folk tales, the roles stories play in society are as varied as the stories themselves. They make us laugh and cry, scratch our heads and change our ways. We are surrounded by stories, telling them as surely as we live in and through them. Lies mingle with memories as daydreams filter through reality forming a matrix of fact and fiction in which meaning can be found and the self defined. Throughout our lives, we are surrounded by narratives that inform our perception of the world and influence our behavior. It is necessary then to understand how stories work in order that we might know ourselves the world in which we live. Just as the realm of narratives around us is constantly changing, our identities are dynamic as well. Take for example the stories of Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy which evoked certain behaviors from us as children. As we grow older, however, we stop believing in the stories and thus stop enacting them. But as more time passes, we reconfigure the old stories and take on a new role in them. Rather than the believing and acting child, we become the story tellers creating the reality for others.

The purpose of this exploration is to analyze the role stories play in our lives and the power they have to both reflect as well as re-create our perception of reality. I will draw heavily from work by a group who at the beginning of the past century began forging a new theological perspective at the intersection of theology, biblical studies, linguistics and literary theory. The beginning of narrative theology, as this movement was aptly titled, was marked by a resurgence of focus on the biblical narratives as narratives rather than as tools for understanding the world that produced them. Edward Oakes offers the best summary of what he calls the "basic operating assumptions" of narrative theology:

- (1) narrative is the ideal genre for theology to establish contact with literary and humanistic studies in general, helping to pull it out of its academic ghetto;
- (2) narrative relates much more directly to pastoral needs than traditional academic theology because of its easy transition to each believer's autobiography;
- (3) narrative highlights aspects of the Bible that are much more central to its identity than traditional theology made room for; and, perhaps most important, (4) narrative

no longer makes revelation seem like a surprising, heteronomous "deposit" that landed on the human scene more or less literally out of the blue: when revelation is interpreted as a form of narrative, it is then more easily seen as simply a more intense and clarifying narrative, one that structures and gives meaning to all the other narrative lines that make up a human life.¹

These assumptions articulate the attractiveness of narrative theology as a means of guarding against the creation of an exclusive theology that is confined by academic rhetoric. Considering the simple complexity of the scriptures that lends them equally capable of constituting a Sunday school lesson for little children as it does a multi-volume ontological thesis, it is worth asking how the biblical narratives can be both appealing and attainable to such a vast and timeless audience and what does it mean to create a living narrative through interpreting the narratives of scripture.

Addressing the importance of biblical narratives produces a location and a context in which the material is already established by those who live by and through the stories. Narrative theology neither diminishes the sacredness of the text by reducing it to an object of study nor does it dismiss the historicity and past of which the narrative is a product. Narrative theology recognizes the meaning people find in the stories and, rather than questioning the legitimacy of that meaning, narrative theology asks how stories can continue to convey meaning throughout the ages. But while the creation of narrative theology is crucial for a community which identifies with the biblical story, a debate continues between two schools of scholars both operating under the basic assumptions defined by Oakes. Gary Comstock's work distinguishes the two sides according to how far they are willing to take the claim of a story's meaningfulness. "Does casting the Christian tradition in narrative terms merely make it more meaningful to people who already believe, or does it actually give access to a form of truth that has previously eluded theology and that it could offer to the scrutiny of free inquiry?" While this remains an important question within the field of narrative theology, it would take a direct application of each side to a particular narrative to adequately analyze the merits of each perspective. It is the point of this analysis to only examine the making and meaning of stories and their unique form.

In the beginning a story began because that is how we tell it. Time and consciousness began when we began to tell about their beginnings. Throughout the ages all cultures have used stories as a space to explain the unknown and make sense of the partially known. Like ancient cultures devised creation and origin stories in an effort to make sense of their existence in a complex natural

world, both lawyers and scientists construct comprehensive narratives to connect otherwise inconclusive pieces of evidence.

On a personal level, narratives are the way in which we organize the events of our lives and make sense of the reality in which we live. It is within the framework of narratives that we find a method to "make sense of the disparate parts of one's experience."³ Just as a lawyer forms a case and the scientist a hypothesis, we use narratives to find meaningfulness in order that we might create our own personal story through living. There is a constant dialogue occurring between interpreting old stories and through interpreting them, creating something new. In a talk with his disciples, Jesus articulated the role of one who "has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven" and interprets what he has learned. Such a one "is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."⁴

Stories which have the ability to constantly produce "new treasures" are what Stephan Crites defines as sacred stories within his essay entitled "The Narrative Quality of Experience."⁵ These stories defy common perceptions of stories that are shared verbally or in written form. According to Crites

None of our individualized conceptions of authorship are appropriate to them, and while rich powers of imagination may be expressed in them they are certainly not perceived as conscious fictions. Such stories, and the symbolic worlds they project, are not like monuments that men behold, but like dwelling-places. People live in them. They...inform people's sense of the story of which their own lives are a part, of the moving course of their own action and experience.⁶

These stories form the transcendent spaces in which we experience life and find meaningfulness. But as Paul Ricoeur observes, experiencing the essence of a sacred story "does not pass over completely into articulation since it is the experience of efficacy par excellence... [and because] we cannot directly describe the numinous element as such," a vehicle or hierophant is needed to articulate the manifestation of sacred stories which "have a form, a structure, an articulation."⁷

Returning to Crites differentiation of story types, what he defines as mundane⁸ stories serve as the needed vehicle that attempt to express the meaning of the sacred into language. In general, mundane stories "are among the most important means by which people articulate and clarify their sense of [the] world"⁹ essentially serving more as vehicles of information rather than providing a process of constructing identity or defining self. While sacred stories have the potential of constantly producing new insights and possibilities, mundane stories can only resonate with their association to their sacred counterparts and attempt

to articulate those new insights and possibilities. Any physical story, whether verbal or written, which is dependent on language must be understood as only a translation of an inexplicable encounter with the sacred. It thus follows that even when we talk about religious writings we are talking about mundane stories. But it is the relationship between mundane religious stories and sacred stories, or their "distinction without separation,"¹⁰ as Crites defines it, that has caused religious writings to survive throughout time as a source of meaning for countless individuals and communities. The resonance of the sacred within religious writings keeps the spirit of the story alive and dynamic despite their seemingly static forms and the attempts of oppressive socio/political agendas to claim legitimacy through them.

Having established the general role of sacred stories in the formation of our identity, it is important to examine the biblical text to understand it as an attempt to articulate the sacred. The biblical narrative is more than just a continuous story, though many read it in such a way, under the unifying theme of soteriology. Paul Ricoeur allows for a universal "confession of faith" but contends that "the confession of faith that is expressed in the biblical documents is inseparable from the *forms* of discourse... Not only does each form of discourse give rise to a style of confession of faith, but also the confrontation of these forms of discourse gives rise to tensions and contrasts, within the confession of faith itself, that are theologically significant."¹¹ Ricoeur recognizes the Bible as a collection of stories and a compilation of genres. A hymn is much different from a law just as the stories of the patriarchs are different from those of the prophets. The differences between the various discourses and their uniquely styled "confessions of faith" produce an internal tension within the text. Each confession of faith works to elucidate an aspect of the sacred, in this case, God's nature.

Throughout these discourses, God appears differently each time: sometimes as the hero of the saving act, sometimes as wrathful and compassionate, sometimes as the one to whom one can speak in a relation of an I-Thou type, or sometime as the one whom I meet only in a cosmic order that ignores me.¹²

Considering Crites definition of sacred stories that elude articulation, the combination of many discourses comes closer to capturing the nature of the sacred than a single story could. The power of the most powerful revelation is born in the contrast and the convergence of all the forms of discourses taken together."¹³

These many discourses are organized and unified through the narrative form and general construction of the Bible. The larger scope of the biblical narrative and its unity fills the gaps between the different stories and even the different genres

creating cohesion. While each story and genre retains its own unique confession of faith, they logically fit together. Genealogies summarize the progression of time and plots; the hymns of King David praise the victories and protection of God; the Decalogue and other laws were divinely given guidelines narrated to Moses; the prophets proclaimed the word of God as they interacted with the people and leaders of their time. The various stories and genres of the Old Testament tell the all-encompassing story of God's chosen people as they developed their identity.

At any given point in our lives, we participate in many stories simultaneously. We work. We play. We are members of a family as well as a community. And we all carry on an internal dialogue which constitutes a large portion of our personal autobiographies. As a unified collection of stories, the Bible "helps us see the many stories of our lives as part of larger stories which integrate our life story into stories of ultimate meaning."¹⁴ Just as we see the Israelites' struggles and triumphs mixed with moments of despair and great joy, we recognize a pattern similar to our own lives.

The Old Testament's lack of uniformity also reflects the tensions incurred through our own experiences. We can relate to the biblical narratives because they do not show an idealized reality. The stories "reflect all the ambiguities and complexities of human experience and the struggle to find and live out faith relationships to God in the midst of life."¹⁵ Only a narrative that accurately reflects reality possesses the power to change reality. Though the context of the narrative has changed greatly from the times of Abraham to the present, the biblical narratives still reflect the reality of oppressive situations, moral dilemmas, moments of despair, and the power of solid faith. And they do so through concrete representations rather than abstract and philosophical rhetoric which create the "academic ghetto" mentioned in the first basic assumption of narrative theology.

The mechanics of storytelling are the fundamental tools that build these concrete representations. Setting, plot, and characters all give shape and life to the abstract qualities of what is sacred and make them more accessible to the general populace more than the philosophical work of academia could ever do.

As in all good storytelling, we recognize ourselves in the depiction. Not the concept of liberation but the journey out of Egyptian bondage, not an essay on the teleological suspension of the ethical but Isaac and Abraham on Mount Moriah, not the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement but the blood of Jesus on Golgotha, not an exposition of the motif of Agape but the open arms of the running father.¹⁶

Even if the work in academia is done in the spirit and faith of the believing community, which is becoming more and more questionable as emphasis is placed more on objectivity and rationality and matters of faith are confined to sermons, "no amount of appeal to abstract principles of Christian ethics and no calls to Christian decision making and action based on those principles will be of much use if the shaping influence of our biblical faith stories is not a formative part of our identity."¹⁷ In *Miracles*, C. S. Lewis tells a humorous story about a girl who was taught to understand God through abstractions. Taught by her parents that God was the purest substance, the girl grew up to discover that God resembled tapioca pudding. This small story illustrates our need for metaphors to contextualize abstract ideas.¹⁸

The role of stories is twofold. First, as defined above, stories assist us in ordering reality chronologically as well as thematically and symbolically. But, with the power of reflecting reality comes the power to recreate reality. According to Bruce Birch, "if the Old Testament narrative discloses reality, it can also have the power to transform us in that disclosure. If narratives can create worlds, they can also overturn them."¹⁹ We read or hear the stories of the past, recognize patterns in them, then translate those patterns into lessons which call for certain behaviors in the present. The process of interpretation is complex in and of itself, but I am more concerned with the role that interpretation plays in our lives. One form of interpretation is seen as "a matter of fitting the biblical story into another world with another story rather than incorporating that world into the biblical story."²⁰ For many people interpreting the story means directly imposing the character's actions and decisions into a modern context. Their belief in the story and its universality, allows for such a direct translation of the biblical stories into their own life narratives. But even this form of interpretation is not simple. It requires a complex network of correlations, justifications, and confirmations. Herein lies the division between the two schools of narrative theologians mentioned before.

This direct means of interpretation is acceptable to those who live within a community which interprets the text similarly. The text produces meaning for a certain community not making the search for truth a viable endeavor. These practitioners of narrative theology were termed purist narrativists because of their insistence on nothing existing outside the text. They live the text because to do anything else would weaken and profane the sacredness of the text. They appear to follow Jesus' equation that "if you make my word your home you will indeed be by my disciples; you will come to know the truth, and the truth will set you free."²¹

Those who identify with the other school of narrative theologians, however, feel quite differently about the purpose of interpretation and the infinite world of possibilities the power to interpret creates. These schools of narrative theologians

accept the referentiality and historicity of the text. While many are "tempted again and again to drop the history and to hold fast to the faith," Richard Niebuhr notes "it remains true that Christian faith cannot escape from partnership with history, however many other partners it may choose. With this it has been mated and to this its loyalty belongs²²" because sacred stories are lived and therefore influence how people act which in turn impacts the succession of history.

Dedicated to creating discourse, Paul Ricoeur has written about many polarities. In one essay entitled "The Bible and the Imagination," Ricoeur questions the seeming disparity between the dynamic and immeasurable realm of the imagination with the closed system of the biblical text. As in all his work, however, Ricoeur does not intend to declare arbitrary or innate relationships just for the sake of breaking down boundaries. His goal is rather to engage in a dialogue that questions the presuppositions of both poles. When discussing polar relationships, Ricoeur clarifies that he wishes "neither to see [it] disappear into a simple identity, nor allow [it] to harden into a sterile antinomy."²³ He thus begins his discussion of the imagination and the Bible by identifying the presuppositions that promote polarity, but works, through the course of the essay, to advance the notion of structured imagination and the freedom of interpretation.

Rather than defining the imagination as "a faculty of free invention therefore not governed by rules, something wild and untamed...condemned to wandering about the internal spaces of... the mental kingdom... therefore lack[ing] any referential import, being entirely disconnected from what is really real,"²⁴ Ricoeur "wants to plead for a concept of the imagination" that resembles Crites' definition of the role sacred stories play in ordering the randomness of existence. Addressing the notion that imagination is "not governed by rules," Ricoeur's first part of his new description of imagination defines it as "a rule-governed form of invention or, in other terms, as a norm-governed productivity."²⁵ The second part defines imagination as "the power of giving form to human experience or ... as the power of redescribing reality."²⁶ The imagination must have material with which to work; it cannot function without drawing from a source, the most ready of which is our life experiences. Considering the similar nature between sacred stories that give our experiences meaning and the imagination's role of interpreting that meaning, religious writings such as the Bible are not closed systems and cannot be confined to the dusty corners of antiquity. Though they were written long ago, they carry the resonance of the sacred and have the power to stimulate our imaginations today.

Drawing from the work of Paul Ricoeur, Gerard Loughlin observes that it is "through story that we learn about the possibilities of human action, fulfillment and happiness."²⁷ First we establish our identities within a narrative framework; then from

that base we can begin to imagine the possibilities creating what Ricoeur calls the "horizon of possible experience."²⁸ "The world of the text has its own 'horizon', and a reader who enters the text, merges its horizon with that of his or her own world. In the reader's imagination the two horizons become one... In the fusing of horizons, the configured world of the text refigures the world of the reader."²⁹ The existence of this infinite realm of possibilities makes theology possible and dynamic.

Just as the mechanics of narrative make them accessible to the common man, they are also the tools that best reflect our reality and therefore are ideal means for creating a new reality. Storytellers can play with all the components of narrative to hypothesize solutions for social problems, teach moral lessons, draw attention to overlooked or unseen difficulties and provide a few moments of escape from which we can draw the strength needed to face reality. Endless possibilities are waiting to be discovered.

The matrix of fact and fiction supports our identity and defines because it fills the gaps between contentious elements in our lives. As creatures of history, rationality, creativity, and practicality dealing with moments of irrationality, confusion, despair and hope, stories provide us with the form and space which can reveal meaningfulness even if it does not always produce solutions or answers. But stories must be articulated through language. As we struggle to better articulate the meaning of the sacred found in the biblical stories, we recognize our stories within the context of larger stories, some which are part of the past and others that point to a future of possibilities. It is this twofold role of stories that allows them to retain the spirit in which they were written and refrain from falling victim to the passing dominant order of the time.

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(Footnotes)

¹ Edward Oakes, "Apologetics and the Pathos of Narrative Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 72.1 (1992): 37-38.

² *ibid* 38

³ Mark Wallace, Introduction to *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer. ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 13.

⁴ Matthew 13:52 New International Version

⁵ The term "sacred" is used to denote the significant role the story plays in men's lives and does not necessarily mean the stories contain references to deities, though they commonly do (70).

⁶ Stephan Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience" " in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*. ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 70.

⁷ *ibid* Paul Ricoeur, "Manifestation and Proclamation" *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer. ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 49.

⁸ Just as he was hesitant to use "sacred," Crites wishes to emphasize that mundane "is not meant to be in the least depreciatory" but rather "implies a theory about the objectified images that fully articulated stories must employ" (70)

⁹ Crites 71.

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language" *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer. ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 39.

¹² *ibid* 41

¹³ *ibid* 44

¹⁴ *ibid* 54

¹⁵ Bruce Birth, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 53.

¹⁶ From Gabriel Fackre, "Narrative Theology" qtd in Bruce Birth, *Let Justice Roll*

Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life 55

¹⁷Birch, 55.

¹⁸C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*.

¹⁹ibid 58

²⁰Hans Frei, "Apologetics, Criticism, and the Loss of Narrative Interpretation," *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*. ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 50.

²¹John 8:31-32 New International Version

²²Niebuhr, 28-29.

²³Ricoeur, "Manifestation" 48.

²⁴Paul Ricoeur, "The Bible and the Imagination," *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer. ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 144.

²⁵ibid

²⁶ibid

²⁷Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story : Bible, Church, and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 145.

²⁸Paul Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative" qtd in Gerard Loughlin *Telling God's Story* p. 145

²⁹Loughlin, 146.