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# Biblical Hermeneutics and the Power of Story

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Biblical Hermeneutics and the Power of Story

by

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## *Introduction*

In the midst of confusing and conflicting scriptural passages, or talk of the Logos, the Holy Trinity and the kerygma, or explanation of the parables, the meaning of Abraham's sacrifice, or the reason for Jesus' death, the faithful can point to scripture, cite dogma, and rehearse church sayings. They could try arguing historical facts, or align themselves with declarative moral lessons that have come from the canons and writings about God. But when all these references and explanatory techniques have failed, "when they have succeeded only in confusing their hearers," they must turn at last to the story of their life.<sup>1</sup> They must explain what they mean by reciting what happened among them, and what happened to them. Such was the advice of H. Richard Niebuhr, who in 1941 penned an essay that implored Christians to look to their own story, and the story of Christianity from the prophets, to the Jewish community, to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus, for meaning and revelation in the telling of this ongoing tale.

Niebuhr initiated a conversation about the Christian story that continues today. He focused on the "irreplaceable and untranslatable" narrative that is not quite history, not parable, not myth; it was not an argument for the existence of God, but a simple recital of

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<sup>1</sup> H.R. Niebuhr, "The Story of Our Lives," in *The Meaning of Revelation*. New York, NY: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1941; 43.

the events surrounding Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> History, he contends, is lived and seen by participants. How participants recount being part of a shared history is different than a detached scientific explanation; it is instead subjective, partisan and vested in meaning.<sup>3</sup> Niebuhr believed we are bound together as communities with internal histories, which become stories about a common center of value. The characters, events and patterns become integral to individual identities, and these stories in turn shape a community's understanding of the world. The writers of the New Testament told stories that connected to them to the common central figure of Jesus. This was an internal history that proceeded from faith in God, not from historical or scientific knowledge—not from the position of a detached observer.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1960s and 1970s, Hans Frei built on this idea of a common narrative, and is credited with developing the foundation for the growing movement known today as narrative theology.<sup>5</sup> According to Frei, the story of Christianity had been neglected too

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<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr, 45.

<sup>3</sup> Niebuhr, 31.

<sup>4</sup> Niebuhr, introduction by Douglas Ottati; xvi.

<sup>5</sup> Frei is associated with the Yale School of narrative theology, which is often understood to have a Barthian orientation. Frei eschewed any concept of relativism and any notion that understanding of God comes from human experience. This school includes H.R. Niebuhr, George Lindbeck, Brevard Childs, Stanley Hauerwas and Frei. Karl Barth viewed man in terms of being transcended by God, and believed that all knowledge about God comes from divine initiative. In regard to narrative, Yale theologians tend to view the Christian story as particular and final; it is the only story that matters. Paul Ricoeur, David Tracy, Sallie McFague and others are associated with the Chicago School of thought influenced by Paul Tillich, who moves more in the direction of divine immanence as a source of revelation. These theologians tend to focus on the narrative's ability to open windows and new worlds of possibility. Their thought tends to intersect and incorporate other aspects of human life, academic disciplines and interpretive systems. See Gary L. Comstock, "Two Types of Narrative Theology." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 55 no 4, Winter 1987; 687-717; see also Daniel K. Calloway, "An Analysis of the Doctrine of Revelation with Emphasis on the Perspectives of Karl Barth and Paul Tillich," *Brethren Life and Thought*, 37 no 4, fall 1992; 237-251.

long in favor of historical analysis and apologetic explanation.<sup>6</sup> His criticism was directed toward those who held that historical inquiry and scientific knowledge could point the way toward God. This resulted in detached hermeneutical systems, or the reduction of Christianity down to a set of generic moral lessons. In the wake of Frei's seminal works, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* and *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, many others continued the conversation about narrative, including Paul Ricoeur, George Lindbeck, Stephen Crites and Stanley Hauerwas. These scholars have investigated a number of issues that intersect with narrative theology, including morality, truth, revelation and church tradition.<sup>7</sup> Literary critics Frank Kermode and Erich Auerbach have also added to the dialogue, looking at the biblical stories with an intra-textual approach with both secular and religious conclusions.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hans Frei authored several essays on narrative and theology, which will be drawn upon throughout this thesis, along with his two books: *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974); and *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). Several of his essays were compiled in an anthology, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, eds. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

William Placher, a student of Frei's, writes that one of the reasons he did not publish more was his deliberative nature. He "tended to think his ideas all the way through before he wrote anything down, so that it is difficult to trace the development of his thinking through what he wrote." (*Theology and Narrative*, 5-6). The best insight to his thinking can be gleaned from his primary sources, according to Placher, which include Karl Barth, Erich Auerbach and Gilbert Ryle.

<sup>7</sup> See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984); Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), and *The Peaceable Kingdom: a primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *JAAR*, 1971; 290-307.

<sup>8</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: the representation of reality in Western literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press: 1953); Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: on the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), and *The Sense of an Ending: on the theory of fiction* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1967).

In this thesis, I will argue that the work of Frei and others served to open the biblical narrative to readers the way every classic story does, by challenging readers to respond by participating through reenactment, and importantly, through telling stories that illuminate how their experiences fit within it. Narrative is capable of this task because it is the only form of discourse that holds together the nuanced nature of human relationships; it gathers together fragments of experience into plot; it allows interpreters to see meaning in the rise and fall of conflict and resolution. Narrative invites readers to see themselves as part of a redemptive story, and thus ushers in redemption.<sup>9</sup>

Theologians including Paul Ricoeur and David Tracy—though at odds with Frei on key points—expanded on the work of Frei in important respects, including the idea of an interactive quality between reader and text.<sup>10</sup> Ricoeur and Tracy argue that the reaction

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<sup>9</sup> The word “redemption” has both secular and theological meanings, and has been subject to debate among Judaic and Christian scholars. For purposes of this thesis, I will consider redemption in terms used by Michal Beth Dinkler (“Telling Transformation: How We Redeem Narratives and Narratives Redeem Us,” *Word & World*, Vol 31 No. 3, Summer 2001, 287-296): A general sense of restoration to wholeness, healing and reconciliation—with God, with oneself, and with others—and undergoing the transformations necessary for such restoration to occur (288).

<sup>10</sup> Paul Ricoeur was an incredibly prolific author, penning dozens of books and articles on the subjects of phenomenology, metaphor, existentialism, hermeneutics and narrative. A sampling of his philosophical and religious works include *The Symbolism of Evil* (NY: Harper & Row, 1967), in which he takes up the subject of what it means to be human; *Freud and Philosophy*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970); *The Rule of Metaphor*, Robert Czerny, trans. (Toronto and Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press), 1977; *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, ed. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978); *Time and Narrative, Vols. 1-3*, Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, trans. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984); *Oneself As Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); *Figuring the Sacred*, trans. David Pallauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995). Tracy’s relevant works include *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1981), *Blessed Rage for Order* (NY: Seabury Press, 1975), and *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

the reader has to the text is what facilitates meaning through self-understanding.<sup>11</sup> Too often theology seals the story off with reductionist explanation or dogmatic certitude as to what meanings or lessons it must have.<sup>12</sup> Narrative is a hermeneutical method that allows some breathing room, opening the interpreter fully to meaning within a text because it allows one to become part the story—and the story to become part of one’s life.<sup>13</sup>

In Section 1, I will summarize the thought of Frei, who argued forcefully that the way we have approached in the Bible in the last 200 or so years is severely flawed, serving only to separate us from the story and ground meaning outside of it. He believed that the Bible ought to be read the way it was written, as a realistic, unified story that invites readers to participate by reenacting and retelling the story. It was a book, Frei believed, that called readers to see themselves as part of a lineage of simple, everyday

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<sup>11</sup> In his appropriation of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, Tracy in particular emphasizes the reception by the reader to a classic text, the “sheer event-like thatness” of discerning truth in the space between reader and text; *Analogical Imagination*, 119. Tracy and Ricoeur are also heavily influenced by Hans-Georg Gadamer, who writes extensively about the notion of play and the dialogic event that leads to truth: “Reaching an understanding in conversation is not at all playing one’s trump cards and forcing one’s own standpoint through, rather it is transformation into a community, in which one no longer remains what one was” (*Truth and Method*, New York: Seabury Press, 1975; 384).

<sup>12</sup> For an interesting counterpoint, see Carl F.H. Henry, “Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,” *Trinity Journal*, 8 no 1, Spring 1987; 3-19. In response to Frei and others’ contentions about “realistic narrative,” Henry argues: “Narrative theologians reduce biblical historicity and inerrancy to second order questions; historical reliability is not a basic exegetical premise, (neither) is biblical inerrancy. . . . Evangelical theology roots the authority of Scripture in its divine inspiration and holds that the Bible is inerrant because it is divinely inspired,” 14.

<sup>13</sup> I do not mean to suggest that meaning is inherent in the text, or even that meaning is inherent in one’s life. I argue meaning occurs in the space between reader and text, where one finds recognition in a truth that “upsets conventional opinions and expands the sense of the possible” (Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 108). This recognition is found in the biblical story for many; others find it secular classics or the texts of other religions. Meaning depends on the reader’s reaction to a given text, whether one finds recognition.



figures whose lives were swept up in an unfolding drama that continues today.<sup>14</sup> The Bible was read this way from the early church fathers, illustrated in Augustine's *Confessions*, and continued through the Reformation with the work and thought of Martin Luther and John Calvin. Frei agreed with Niebuhr that

The preaching of the early church was not an argument for the existence of God nor an admonition to follow the dictates of some common human conscience ... It was primarily a simple recital of the great events connected with the historical appearance of Jesus Christ and a confession of what had happened to the community of disciples.<sup>15</sup>

In the following section I will look at Frei's ambitious project showing that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Biblical interpretation changed. The conversation shifted to historical criticism, he contends. Scholars influenced by—and more often, reacting to—the likes of John Locke and Reimarus began trying to prove that the biblical narrative is factually true or false in a historical sense. Theologians began interpreting the Bible by asking first and foremost what could be proven to have happened: Did Jesus exist? Are the gospels a reliable record? What did the authors intend? This rationalist perspective, in search of objective, empirical certitude, became the norm, placing biblical investigation on par with other forms of scientific investigation. The burgeoning field of hermeneutics soon

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<sup>14</sup> Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. 34.

The individual reader is always part of a community of readers, and can never be completely isolated from this communal context. A reader reads alone, but only in the horizon of expectation that has been derived from, and shaped by, communities to which the reader belongs, such as the local church, family, school, mass media, etc. "While a reader's transactional relation with the text may operate at the level of individual response, the processes of reading and interpretation which make any such transaction possible, owe more to community-factors than to those which are peculiar to the individual," (Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992; 65).

<sup>15</sup> Niebuhr, 43.

became wedded with apologetics and historical criticism.<sup>16</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, a proponent of narrative theology along with Frei, agrees that eventually theology began to seek systems instead of stories. The result was a lost ability to change and be changed by narratives, to find recognition and redemption in the biblical story.

Stories about a garden become cosmological arguments; stories about Jesus become treatises on the two natures; stories about salvation become substitutionary doctrines of atonement; stories about the church become bylaws of male-dominated hierarchies. ... We must recover the story if we are to recover a faith for our day.<sup>17</sup>

Frei argued that the theological shift from story to fact-checking and historical criticism produced two outcomes, both of which diminished the status of the narrative. These approaches continue to dominate theological discourse today: Christian scholars either set out to prove scientifically the history-like claims of the Bible; or, when this endeavor inevitably fails, they boil the story down to palatable universal religious principles that should guide Christian thinking and action. Both of these strategies have the effect of placing the interpreter outside the story. Frei asserts that historical criticism, combined with Christian apologetics, closed the biblical story off to further narratives; the story therefore lost its power to envelop readers into its world.

In Sections 3 and 4, I will outline the thought of Paul Ricoeur and David Tracy, who share an affinity for the role of narrative in understanding, and put them in conversation with Frei and others. They all agree that stories are a critical and neglected genre in communicating religious truths.<sup>18</sup> Ricoeur and Tracy, however, take the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>17</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, "Starting Over: New Beginning Points for Theology," in *Christian Century*, 97 no 18, 1980; 547.

<sup>18</sup> See Comstock, "Two Types of Narrative Theology; 687-717.

foundation of Frei's work and move in a different direction. Where Frei and others from the Yale School argue that the story's revelation is divinely directed and comes only from God, Ricoeur and other Chicagoans argue that explicating meaning from narrative happens only in the context of an individual or communal reaction to it.<sup>19</sup> These classic stories activate questions that facilitate self-understanding by attaching meaning to experience.<sup>20</sup> While Frei opposed universal systems of interpretation that muddied the particularity of the Christian story, I believe Ricoeur and Tracy are correct in asserting that explanation is necessary for understanding to occur. Meaning cannot take place without an internal moment of recognition, when the world of a classic text causes a "disclosure of a reality we cannot but name truth."<sup>21</sup> I agree with Frei that the reader is not the primary subject of the biblical text; it is a story about a particular people, in a particular moment in history. But the biblical text is not capable of mastering or overcoming the hearer without recognition of a shared experience. The space between reader and text is where truth resides, disclosing what Tracy calls a "moment of recognition" that "surprises, provokes, challenges, shocks and eventually transforms us."<sup>22</sup> For Ricoeur and Tracy, meaning can only occur in the midst of dialogue between people, between disciplines, and between texts.

I argue that while Frei laid the groundwork for appreciation of narrative on its own—without being dissected by historical fact-checking or hermeneutical tricks—others

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<sup>19</sup> Comstock assigns the classifications of "narrative purists," or "pure narrative theologians," those who oppose excessive use of discursive prose and abstract reason, and "narrative impurists," or "impure narrative theologians," who argue biblical narrative is infected with historical, philosophical and psychological concerns; 688.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "The Language of Faith," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1980; 227.

<sup>21</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 108.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

such as Ricoeur added crucial elements to his thinking. The French philosopher believed we must know our stories in order to derive any meaning from the Christian story, or any other tradition's story. We must, as Frei suggested, pay attention to what the story says in its narrative form, which is the only form capable of holding the nuance of character, plot, climax and eventual redemption. The form is also necessary to see ourselves in the lineage of the story's characters and to relate our experiences to those of the past. And we must, as Ricoeur believes, take into account the existential moment where the truth of a story is made real. Ricoeur believes that "to write a life, or tell a life, is to wager that an exegesis of the self's untold story will pay rich dividends in one's quest for authenticity and integrity."<sup>23</sup>

In Section 5 I will look at two examples of the power of an internalized, integrated narrative hermeneutic, one at the individual level, and the other at the communal: Augustine's *Confessions*, and the story of 20<sup>th</sup> Century black theology. In both of these examples, interpreters took the biblical story and made it their own through the telling of their life experiences. In his story of conversion, Augustine was forced to come to terms with himself. He was forced to answer questions about meaning, which came about through the prism of his own failing. In his autobiographical story, the fourth century saint spares no detail, from the "hot imagination of puberty" to his time as a Manichean, when "I let myself be taken in by fools."<sup>24</sup> After angst and despair had taken root in his soul, he finds himself in the famous garden, "frantic in mind, in a frenzy of

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<sup>23</sup> Mark I. Wallace, "Introduction," *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*, 13.

<sup>24</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F.J. Sheed. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006; 44.

indignation,” alone on a bench, forced to choose between his warring wills.<sup>25</sup> He takes up, he reads; in the climactic moment of the story he at last ceases to weep, letting go to the God of Christianity.<sup>26</sup> It is only in this moment that the Christian story, understood in the light of grace and redemption, becomes meaningful in the story of Augustine’s own personal, inner redemption. After searching, investigating, dialoguing with proponents and texts of various belief systems, Augustine experiences a profound moment of transformation where he finds, in the words of Tracy, that “something else might be the case.”<sup>27</sup>

James Cone and other black liberation theologians believed strongly that the language of the Bible must reflect the experiences of the people who are listening.<sup>28</sup> Though God is eternal, theology or speech about God is limited by history and time, always reflecting the values and aspects of a particular people in a particular time and place.<sup>29</sup> Black theology, therefore, is the very palpable story of the black community’s struggle for liberation in the extreme situation in which they found themselves. Only through the form of story, particularly the Exodus story, were slaves able to internalize the Christian message, which had been originally forced on them, and somehow make it their own. Stories heard from the pulpits of black churches communicate God uniquely by “showing us who we are ourselves, by opening up to us the possibilities and the problems of being human in God’s world.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 154-155.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>27</sup> Tracy quotes Dorothy Van Ghent’s phrase (*Analogical Imagination*, 102).

<sup>28</sup> James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*. New York, NY: Orbis Books, 1972; 11.

<sup>29</sup> James Cone, “The Story Context of Black Theology.” *Theology Today*, 32 no 2, 1975; 144.

<sup>30</sup> Cone, *Spirituals*, 54.

What I ultimately hope to do is explore the nature of narrative, and how narratives redeem, open and free us to meaning and possibility. In his essay “The Story of Our Lives,” Niebuhr reminds us that despite all efforts to describe the Christian faith in metaphysical, ethical, historical and scientific terms, the only creed that has survived with any sense of universality consists, for the most part, “of statements about events.”<sup>31</sup> The scriptural text among others points to God, and through story, God points to men and women, wherever they are in their experience. It is our responsibility to tell that story, whatever its plot, whatever its outcome, and discover whatever meaning it may have.<sup>32</sup> We must “travel the road” which has been taken by the predecessors of Christianity and continue to enlarge and enliven the story.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Niebuhr, 24.

<sup>32</sup> Several narrative theologians have explored the criteria for judging whether a particular story will have normative power over our personal stories and lives. David Tracy believes only “radical and enduring personal transformation” can assure us of the presence of truth in any praxis-oriented theology (*The Analogical Imagination*, 71). I also like criteria set forth by Stanley Hauerwas, who believes any story we adopt, or allow to adopt us, must display: power to release us from destructive alternatives; ways of seeing through current distortions; room to keep us from having to resort to violence; a sense for the tragic, or a way of seeing how meaning transcends power (Hauerwas and David Burrell, “From System to Story,” in *Why Narrative?* Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989; 185).

<sup>33</sup> Niebuhr, 25.

## **SECTION 1: Hans Frei's 'realistic narrative'**

The biblical story is not a one-dimensional tale meant to entertain; it is not an allegory that can be boiled down to a set of moral lessons; it is not a history textbook that can or should be proven factually. It is rather a realistic story—history-like, but not history; mysterious and secretive; urgent and demanding.<sup>34</sup> Such was the belief of Hans Frei, who argued the Bible ought to be read the way it was written, as a realistic, unified story that invited readers to participate.<sup>35</sup> It was a book, Frei believed, that called readers to see themselves as part of a lineage of simple, everyday figures whose lives were made meaningful by a continually unfolding divine drama.

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<sup>34</sup> Critics note that the Bible contains other genres in addition to narrative, such as prophetic, wisdom and hymnic. Frei concedes that Psalms, Proverbs, Job and the Pauline letters are not realistic narratives (*Eclipse*, 15-16). However, all the parts of the Bible, a “cumulative” narrative, is characteristic of the Bible as a whole. In his critique of Frei, Carl Henry writes that narrative theologians tend oversimplify their description of the content of Scripture, reading over the commentary on authority and human behavior and declaratives it contains for right and wrong action (“Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,” 10).

<sup>35</sup> The Bible indeed shares qualities of both unity and diversity. There is unity, for example, in the presentation of Jesus in similar terms among the Synoptic gospels; yet the qualities of Jesus, the telling of his life, are nevertheless very different. James Dunn argues that the “gospel of Jesus is multiform as it addresses different situations,” and “to insist on a single ‘authentic’ testimony to Jesus is to work against the gospel’s very capacity to speak differently to different people, and so to muzzle its voice” (*Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*. London: SCM Press, 2006; xv). I agree with Dunn’s conclusion that the unifying factor remains Jesus, but the impact he made was diverse, and that diversity is evident in the Synoptic tradition (xxix).

Frei was greatly influenced by the work of Erich Auerbach, who published his fascinating survey of Western literature, *Mimesis*, in 1946. Auerbach is helpful in elucidating what exactly Frei means by the concept of “realism,” a term Frei uses often in describing the biblical text. In Auerbach’s comparison of the Homeric and biblical texts, for example, he writes that the plot of the *Odyssey* is not based on historical reality, yet that fact takes nothing away from its effectiveness as a narrative. On the contrary it “ensnares us, weaving its web around us ... And this ‘real’ world into which we are lured, exists for itself, contains nothing but itself.”<sup>36</sup> The meaning of a realistic narrative is the story itself; its realism is located in the way the story and its characters are presented.<sup>37</sup> Frei believed there is indeed an analogy to be drawn from the novel writer who says: I mean what I say whether or not something took place.

I mean what I say. It’s as simple as that: the text means what it says. Now that doesn’t mean that there aren’t metaphors in there. It doesn’t mean that I take every account literally. But it does mean that I cannot take the biblical story, the gospel story especially, in separation from its being the identification, the literal identification of someone identified as Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>38</sup>

Of course it is always up to the interpreter to decide whether the author of any text has succeeded in convincing the audience of this realism.<sup>39</sup>

The Bible is different in key respects from other narratives such as the tales of Homer—namely, that the *Odyssey* is not presented as historical fact, a point to which I

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<sup>36</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965; 13.

<sup>37</sup> Hans Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, 6.

<sup>38</sup> Hans Frei, “Response to ‘Narrative Theology,’” in *Theology and Narrative*, 208.

<sup>39</sup> According to Paul Ricoeur: “The question of reliability is to the fictional narrative what documentary proof is to historiography. It is precisely because novelists have no material proof that they ask readers to grant them not only the right to know what they are recounting or showing but to allow them to suggest an assessment, an evaluation of the main characters” (*Time and Narrative, Vol. 3*, 162).



will return. They do, however, share the quality of realism. Frei notes that even the miracles contained in the Bible are not presented as mythical or symbolic of something else; they are realistic in the sense that they *could* have happened.<sup>40</sup> These events make sense in the frame of the story. The characters of scripture share the same quality. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Abraham, the prophets, the disciples and others did certain things, underwent various experiences, learned and were changed by certain consequences, all situated in the backdrop of a Judeo-Christian cultural setting at a certain point in history. These characters experience the supernatural; they all undergo deep humiliation, and—due to the simple fact of being part of God’s creation—they are all worthy of God’s personal intervention, inspiration and redemption.<sup>41</sup> The events that transpire and the characters that act are real and fitting in the context of a narrative that mingles the sublime and casual, the ordinary with the divine.

In the midst of this realism, the reader is invited to participate. Auerbach cites an example of this in the story of Peter’s denial of Christ in the gospels. The disciple promises that even though some will desert Christ, “I will not” (Mark 14:29). Yet he falls asleep in Jesus’ darkest hour (Mark 14:32-42), and denies him three times (Mark 14:66-72). When the cock crows twice, fulfilling Jesus’ prophecy, Peter “broke down and wept.” The reader relates to the story through Peter’s fearful actions by recognizing the same qualities in themselves, that we too “thus are subject to fate and passion;” we have pity for him, and ourselves, in the midst of his circumstance.<sup>42</sup> For Auerbach, it is no accident that like Peter and the disciples, most of the characters in the Bible are random

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<sup>40</sup> Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*; 14.

<sup>41</sup> Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 18.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

people. It is “not possible to bring to life such historical forces in their surging action except by reference to numerous random persons” of all classes, occupations, walks of life, “people, that is who owe their place in the account exclusively to the fact that the historical movement engulfs them as it were accidentally, so that they are obliged to react to it one way or another.”<sup>43</sup> This realism enters into the everyday depths of life—particularly its painful experiences—forcing us to take the events and characters it describes seriously. The reason, Auerbach argues, is that the story is about us, too.

In the biblical stories, the actions of individuals are at stake, and these actions demand our attention. Sallie McFague writes that the stories stress action over teaching (the kerygmatic tradition) and religious experience (the mystical tradition). One of the interesting things about the characters in the Bible is “they appear to be caught in *characteristic* action, at that moment in their lives when they are most themselves, when they reveal themselves most precisely and definitively.”<sup>44</sup> They are real individuals, with histories that are ambiguous, complex and rich. They are indeed ripe with potential; we find them in moments of ultimate decision: Abraham agreeing to sacrifice his son, the disciples leaving their families to follow a prophet. The story finds them precisely in their own moments of intensification.<sup>45</sup>

Frei also uses the term “figural” to describe a storyline that connects individual episodes from Genesis to Revelation and beyond. The story gathers together a collection

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>44</sup> Sallie McFague, “The Story: Coming to Belief,” in *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975; accessed online March 13, 2013:

<http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=452&C=368/>.

Emphasis is McFague’s.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

of singular narratives spread over time into one cohesive whole. Figural interpretation is a “grasp of a common pattern of occurrence and meaning together,” the pattern dependent on the reality of a temporal sequence which allows all the single narrations within it to become parts of a larger, single narration.<sup>46</sup> Auerbach describes figural interpretation as establishing a connection between two events or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself, but the second, while the second involves fulfillment of the first. These two figures are separated in time, both within temporality, both contained in the “flowing stream which is historical life.”<sup>47</sup> Each individual narrative, literally and realistically descriptive, retains its self-contained status. But the whole sequence and its coherence in theme and chronological time form one realistic narrative by means of earlier and later stories becoming figures of one another.<sup>48</sup>

Episodes and stories in the Old Testament are often reinterpreted in light of the events of the New Testament. For many Christian interpreters, the Christ event is hermeneutically related to Judaic Scripture in the sense that it fulfills the ancient Scripture and abolishes the old law. According to Ricoeur, the New Testament changes the Old Testament “letter into spirit like water into wine.”<sup>49</sup> Two examples cited by Auerbach are the relation between the dramatic occurrence of God creating Eve, the primordial mother of mankind, from a rib in Adam’s side when Adam falls into a “deep sleep” (Gen 2:21-22), and the piercing of Christ’s side as he hung on the cross, so that water and blood poured out (John 19:34). The stories are separated in time and stand

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>48</sup> Frei, *Eclipse*, 28.

<sup>49</sup> Ricoeur, “Preface to Bultmann,” in *Essays in Biblical Interpretation*, 50.

alone, but when read together, Adam's sleep becomes a figure of Christ's death, and from both wounds, life is created.<sup>50</sup>

H.R. Niebuhr speaks to the concept of figural interpretation in his description of a "social memory," or our communal past that lives in the stories of individual selves: "When we become members of such a community of selves we adopt its past as our own and thereby are changed in our present existence."<sup>51</sup> The events of the Bible are noteworthy in part in that they do not simply occur and then pass away; according to Paul Ricoeur, "they mark an epoch and engender a history."<sup>52</sup> The stories of the Bible surround a few "kernel events" from which meaning is spread out through the whole structure.<sup>53</sup> This statement could be construed as reductionistic, but Ricoeur believes firmly that all of the story's parts must be held together in order to render meaning; the narrative form is itself the meaning, a point I address in further detail in Section 3.

A similar concept of figural storytelling and reading can found in Stephen Crites' description of what he terms mundane and sacred stories. Mundane stories are the conscious narratives that are directly seen and heard; they are the stories we tell about everyday experience. They contain plot, scenes, roles and sequences of events. But in order to make sense, these stories must be situated within a "world of discourse" that contains limiting firmaments above and below, beyond which nothing can be conceived to happen.<sup>54</sup> Individuals do not create a sacred or figurative story; they awaken to find themselves in one. The mundane stories they tell are an attempt to articulate that world

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<sup>50</sup> See Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 48.

<sup>51</sup> Niebuhr, 37.

<sup>52</sup> Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic on the Idea of Revelation," *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, 78.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," 196.

(however impossible that may be, due to the fact that as part of the story, none of us are fully detached from it).<sup>55</sup> And if this larger story is false, or perhaps even harmful, one must set about the disorienting process of finding a new sacred story.

The biblical story was read realistically or literally, and its cohesive whole was seen as figural, from Augustine, through the High Middle Ages, to Calvin and Luther, until roughly 200 years ago. Luther declared that, “The Christian reader should make it his first task to seek out the literal sense . . . For it alone is the whole substance of faith and Christian theology.”<sup>56</sup> Calvin was even less tolerant of the idea that the Bible was an allegory, persuaded that the “grammatical sense was the genuine sense” of the biblical narrative.<sup>57</sup> The narrative itself, without imposition by the interpreter or reader, renders meaning. For example in the Genesis story when God speaks to the serpent after Eve’s temptation, God says he will put “enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed” (Gen 3:15). Calvin rejected an interpretation of this passage as being a veiled prophecy of Christ’s triumph over sin and evil, arguing this is simply not what the text says. He maintained that the seed refers only to the “posterity of the woman generally,” not to some distant prophecy.<sup>58</sup> He reaches the opposite conclusion, but on the same grounds, for another debated passage in Isaiah. The prophet refers to a virgin who would conceive a son Immanuel, which in Calvin’s reading points to none other than Christ. One could debate Calvin’s conclusions, but it is clear the reformer paid extreme attention to the text and exactly what it said in order to discern the meaning.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, Anthony Thiselton. *Luther’s Works*, Martin Luther, vol 9; 24.

<sup>57</sup> Frei, *Eclipse*, 25.

<sup>58</sup> Frei, *Eclipse*, 26.

For Frei and the early church fathers and theologians, the text was a particular story about a man named Jesus, whose identity—a savior who dies a humiliating death on a Roman cross—is shrouded in mystery and paradox.<sup>59</sup> It was not about the authors or their intent; it was not about the inner psychological workings of one’s soul or the outer world of one’s particular contemporary experience. It was most certainly not a history lesson. Extracting meaning did not require the tools of hermeneutics or the systems employed by psychology, anthropology, or historical criticism.<sup>60</sup> Frei called on Christians to simply tell the story and reenact it in their lives. This would fit into the category of a “first naivete” as termed by Paul Ricoeur, or the stage of apprehension in which everything is taken at face value and nothing is imposed on the text from outside of it.<sup>61</sup> For many of the Yale theologians, description of the Christian text is the same as explanation of the text.

So how would Frei describe the biblical text? It is a story about Jesus Christ, who became man at a particular point in history, and whose unsubstitutable identity is manifest in the resurrection. He is the risen one who now lives, who in spite of death is present among his people.<sup>62</sup> In the passion narratives, Jesus intends to do the will of the father, which characterizes his whole life. The story, for Frei, is about Jesus’ obedience to God; the person of Jesus is the locus of the activity of God. Jesus’ identity is revealed most clearly through the passion narrative, the climax of which reveals Jesus is still

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<sup>59</sup> This is the primary contention of Frei’s *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Basis of Dogmatic Theology*.

<sup>60</sup> William C. Placher writes that Frei became nervous about his association with the school of narrative theology, particularly as it began to diversify in the 1980s (“Introduction,” *Theology and Narrative*, 16). He was critical of even theology, which uses systems of thought to interpret and decipher meaning.

<sup>61</sup> Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 349.

<sup>62</sup> Frei, *Identity*, 49.

present.<sup>63</sup> Despite fictional qualities within the narrative, Jesus not being resurrected in a historical sense is inconceivable.<sup>64</sup> Frei ultimately concedes that the biblical narrative does make a very real, factual claim as to the presence and historicity of Jesus Christ, forcing us to “consent to the factuality of what we represent to ourselves imaginatively.”<sup>65</sup> This is in my view is an inconsistency in Frei’s thinking—he cannot get around the fact that the Gospel stories do make a historical claim, unlike the fictional stories of Homer. They may both be realistic narratives, but the Bible makes the claim that Jesus existed as a historical person, died and rose from the dead.<sup>66</sup>

Frei agrees with Auerbach that the Christian story is a very distinct narrative that requires a very stark choice. The Scriptures, as Auerbach aptly writes, do not “court us or flatter us—they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels.”<sup>67</sup> As opposed to the Homeric myths, the Bible did not seek to make us forget our own reality for a few hours; rather “it seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history.”<sup>68</sup> It demands that the reader or hearer become enveloped in the reality depicted in the text, and therefore must make a decision about it, either for or against.

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>64</sup> Frei points to the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane: “It is not even pertinent to the story to ask how this sequence can be historical, if Jesus was alone there and his disciples were sleeping some distance away. It is precisely the fiction-like quality of the whole narrative, from upper room to resurrection appearances, that serves to bring the identity of Jesus sharply before us and to make him accessible to us,” *Identity*, 145.

<sup>65</sup> Frei, *Identity*, 15.

<sup>66</sup> Comstock offers an interesting discussion of this problem in Frei’s thinking: “The New Testament narratives—even if they are considered fictions, models or paradigms—still make the point that Hans Frei makes: in the story of the man named Jesus, God was uniquely present. That certainly sounds like a full-blown, fact-asserting historical claim. As such, it would need historical justification,” 706.

<sup>67</sup> Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 15.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

Frei also points to Frank Kermode's descriptive analysis of the gospel of Mark, which Kermode finds to be unique among literary classics. The gospel of Mark, believed to be the oldest, is inherently secretive and mysterious; it conceals more than it reveals. Part of the point of Mark is to rid the reader of the "myth of transparency" that has guided modern exegesis.<sup>69</sup> Frei lauded Kermode's strict textual approach, which "rids you of the illusion of reference, of the truth, of 'what is written about rather than what is written.'" The text, according to Kermode, presents an unfollowable world that makes clear we are the outsiders. And Frei would add that therefore, the text does not engender a hermeneutically circular process of understanding in which the reader is a referent.<sup>70</sup> We must read the story for what it says, tell the story without developing systems of interpretation or pulling it apart with explanations, and reenact it in our lives. This assertion, however, reveals another unresolved issue in Frei's thinking—in order to reenact or retell a story, do we not need to first understand its meaning? I will return to this subject in Section 4.

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<sup>69</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy*, 118.

<sup>70</sup> Frei, "Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative," 107-108.



## **SECTION 2: 'Mediating Theologians' Take a Wrong Turn**

Somewhere around the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, new questions arose that caused people to read the Bible differently. The daily experiences of Christians began to define for them what was “real,” not the narrative of scripture. Under the influence of the Enlightenment, which prized reason and scientific knowledge, theologians began trying to discern meaning based on their own experience—what could be seen, known and proven. Modern biblical criticism remains in this muddled state, Frei contends, and both liberal and conservative theologians are to blame. The biblical world and the real historical world became separated in thought and sensibility, either by those who insisted that the two agree with each other, or by those who believed they were irreconcilably opposed to each other.<sup>71</sup> The direction of biblical interpretation reversed from the earlier days; apologists sought to make the biblical world “fit” into the reality of the modern world instead of the other way around.<sup>72</sup>

What came about was extensive inquiry into the factual truth, or the falsity, of the biblical story. The term “literal” came to mean factual, i.e. historical exactness, which led to the historical-critical method of interpretation, spawning movements such as the “quest

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<sup>71</sup> Frei, *Eclipse*, 5.

<sup>72</sup> Leslie Leyland Fields offers a lively take on the new trend in narrative, which Frei likely would agree places the self at the center of the gospel story, leading many to rewrite Scripture to suit one’s own narcissistic perspective. She cites examples that include the recent trend toward self-help in evangelical Christianity (such as Rick Warren’s “Purpose-Driven Life” series), and modern novels such as William P. Young’s “The Shack” that purport to be Christian but grossly distort the Christian story (“The Gospel is more than a Story,” *Christianity Today*, 56 no 7, July-August, 2012; 38-43).

for the historical Jesus.” Figural, in turn, came to mean the opposite of literal, something in the class of myth or allegory—a story that had a universal message with a generic hero, but was not factually true. The successor to figural interpretation was biblical theology, which assumed the responsibility of bringing unity to the Bible’s historical events and the modern experience.<sup>73</sup> Meaning was imposed on the biblical text, which had to fit around that imposed meaning in order to have any coherence. The connection between past and present, the chain of history from the apostles to modern-day readers, was broken.

The first to lay seeds of this shift was Benedict de Spinoza (1634-1677), who sternly admonished his readers that “we are at work not on the truth of passages, but solely on their meaning.”<sup>74</sup> The chief purpose of Scripture was to teach the right kind of lessons, and to move hearts, to “lay hold of the imagination.”<sup>75</sup> Meaning does not lie in the historical truth of scripture; the Bible is in fact unreliable as historical truth. Therefore, the meaning and historical reference must be separated. Knowledge of God should be derived instead from “general ideas” that are certain and known through reason, Spinoza believed.<sup>76</sup>

The full change in theological understanding of the Bible came in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, first in England, then in Germany. The narrative became separate from its subject matter, and the subject matter was now taken as its true meaning.<sup>77</sup> Revelation came to be seen as the central concept in theology (and has remained so, Frei believes).

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>74</sup> R.H.M. Elwes, trans., *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*. New York: Dover, 1951, vol. 1; 99-100.

<sup>75</sup> *Works*, 91.

<sup>76</sup> *Works*, 61 (quoted in *Eclipse*, 44).

<sup>77</sup> Frei, *Eclipse*, 51.

Partly in response to Deistic influences, questions were raised about the rationality and credibility of historical revelation, and secondly, about how likely it was that biblical events actually took place. Interpreters began breaking the gospel into bits and pieces, trying to prove its parts from a scientific standpoint. What are the grounds for believing the miracles happened? How authoritative is the Bible? These questions centered specifically on Jesus as the risen Messiah and the miracles he supposedly performed. Questions also arose about the reliability of the New Testament writers as reporters of fact.<sup>78</sup> People began examining the countryside for evidence of a sudden catastrophe, for example, searching for traces of events described in the Bible such as Noah's flood.

By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, critical inquiry into the facts of the Bible became synonymous with its meaning. "From now on, the harmony of historical fact, literal sense, and religious truth will at best have to be demonstrated; at worst, some explanation of the religious truth of the fact-like description will have to be given in the face of a negative verdict on its factual accuracy or veracity."<sup>79</sup> German scholars in particular wedded hermeneutics with historical criticism. As these fields developed, questions arose, such as whether the gospels be taken literally (which had come to mean factually). It became increasingly clear that one had to determine whether Christianity was a rational-moral, experiential or historical religion.<sup>80</sup>

Questions of fact rose to become "central, dramatic and conscious" in the following century,<sup>81</sup> beginning with whether the New Testament indeed fulfilled the Old Testament prophecy, which had implications for the claim that Jesus was the Messiah.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 66.

Anthony Collins (1676-1729), a Deist heavily influenced by John Locke, argued that as the text stands, the claims of the Old Testament cannot be related or applied to the New Testament. Collins' opponents were placed in the position of either having to demonstrate that the rules for interpreting in a literal sense were true, and therefore the interpretation of prophecy was false; or having to demonstrate that interpretation must be non-literal, which would render the interpretation meaningless.<sup>82</sup> The only way to link a connected series of passages separated in time was by demonstrating their commonality with empirical evidence.<sup>83</sup>

Collins was first to push clearly the connection between literal sense and historical reference, but many followed. "And the consequence of this new way of relating literal sense with historical reference was the complete separation of literal and figurative (or typical) senses. Figurative meaning, hitherto naturally congruent with literal meaning, now became its opposite."<sup>84</sup> As a result, an exegetical or hermeneutical argument about determining the meaning of certain narrative texts required an argument about the fact claims made in the text.<sup>85</sup> This in effect grounded meaning outside the narrative; the historian now got to decide biblical meaning, based on the intention of the individual author or the circumstances of the author's social setting, preparing the way for historical-critical interpreters. According to Frei, meaning was located *behind* the text, in the world of the historical authors, instead of within the story they told. The words in effect became mere clues to the mind of the author.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 77.

Why scan the heavens speculatively when from the written word, from knowledge of historical conditions and the way human beings think, one can ascertain with great probability what the immediate and human rather than remote divine author had in mind?<sup>86</sup>

Collins had no use for words except to demonstrate things we already know.<sup>87</sup>

For these rationalists, the meaning of scripture could not be conveyed except by ideas derived from those we already have; to understand is to be able to distinguish between what is true and what is false.<sup>88</sup> As a result, Christians began arguing the literal truth of the Bible, in a factual sense. This included the biblical reports of miracles and fulfillment of prophecy, the integrity of the evangelists, and the simplicity and life-likeness of the reports. The theory of meaning became equivalent to the theory of knowledge, where to understand is to be able to distinguish what is true and what is false.

As critics began asking questions, a range of Christian apologists began explaining and defending the biblical texts. Specifically the question of revelation came into focus—what does the text reveal about God?<sup>89</sup> Apologists explained this in numerous ways, solidifying the separation of meaning and the narrative text. Frei directs his most pointed criticism at liberals and theologians seeking to explain the text and prove its worth and truthfulness, writing that usually, the Bible became mere “raw material they shaped into a finished religious product.”<sup>90</sup>

Following the 18<sup>th</sup> century, hermeneutics became a systematic theory of the structures of human understanding, operating between historical criticism and religious

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 106.

interpretation. Understanding itself came to be thought of as methodical, internal and self-sufficient. Interpretation boiled down to the meaning of words and statements, the conventions governing the author's intention, the aim of the text, the common usage given words had at the time and the logical rules governing the meaningful use of language. This practice of interpretation was all deemed possible through training and practice.<sup>91</sup> Individual words appeared to be the basic units of meaning. "Meaning was thought of as a kind of unvarying subsistent medium in which words flourish, or as a conveyor belt onto which words are dropped for transportation to their proper reference of destiny."<sup>92</sup>

As these developments occurred, belief in the authority of the Bible declined, but confidence in its meaningfulness remained strong—though one could believe not all of it was meaningful. Johan Salomo Semler (1725-1791), the foremost historical-critical scholar in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, thought the application of scriptural interpretation should take place in accordance with universal moral and religious principles, and hence followed thinkers such as Locke.<sup>93</sup> He was the first to distinguish relative religious worth among books of the Bible, with his primary criteria being the spiritual edification of men in all ages.

D.F. Strauss (1808-1874), in his *Life of Jesus*, became one of the most zealous and radical critics of the credibility of the gospel story. In arguing that the Bible was nothing more than myth, he felt he had liberated the narratives from their primitive state

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 111.

and opened the way for new religious meaning of the gospels.<sup>94</sup> In spite of his criticism, he was an apologist like the others during this time. He defended the Bible's meaningfulness by arguing that meaning is not contained in its reference to a literal Messiah but only the "stage of historical consciousness" he represents. The result in part was a harmonization of the Christian message with other religions and deities.<sup>95</sup> The argument that the biblical claims were nothing more than myth carried over in generations of scholars and professors. This became the new "realism," according to Frei. "Frequently the realistic, i.e., critically reconstructive analysis of the gospels, was transcended for broader and more ultimate interpretive purposes and cast into a spiritualizing, idealist framework."<sup>96</sup>

Frei and one of his colleagues, Ronald Thiemann, also criticized the influential work of Frederick Schleiermacher, who in their view blurred the distinction between God and humanity. Schleiermacher, who is credited for the development of the modern concept of hermeneutics, believed understanding consists in: re-experiencing the mental process of the author of a text; grasping the meaning of the parts of a text through divining the whole, and grasping the whole through its parts; and perceiving the individuality of the author as a human user of a shared language. Schleiermacher also believed understanding is not limited to what a text explicitly says.<sup>97</sup> While Thiemann and Frei emphasize the divine initiative contingent on God's grace, Schleiermacher

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>97</sup> Thiselton, 216.

believed human consciousness is the source of revelation.<sup>98</sup> This leaves only two options, Thiemann believes: Schleiermacher must either insist that the “immediately self-conscious self is God ... or he must provide some identification procedures by which to distinguish God and the self and which warrant the mind’s movement from one to the other.”<sup>99</sup> Like Locke, Schleiermacher grounds the revelation of God in human experiences and beliefs. Thiemann and Frei level the same criticism at Paul Ricoeur and David Tracy, a point I will address in the following sections.

For these “mediating theologians,” as Frei terms them, the critical question became: Is the meaning of human salvation, “the realization of true human freedom,” necessarily connected with the occurrence of a specific and saving historical event in Jesus Christ?<sup>100</sup> Traditionalists answered yes. Mediating theologians also said yes, but in ambiguous and conditioned tones. For Deists and many rationalists, salvation through belief in the death and resurrection of Christ was not possible (though many saw the life of Jesus as exemplary).

The religious sensibility and philosophical outlook to which the mediating theologians appealed changed drastically in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the logic of their argument remained the same: Instead of external evidence and events, they made appeals to a leap of faith in the miracle of historical redemption, with or without the corroboration by scientific historical investigation of the actual life of the historical Jesus. The interpretive meaning of the gospel narratives became their demonstratable reference to

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<sup>98</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1990; 172.

<sup>99</sup> Ronald Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology*. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1985; 31.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.



Jesus the Messiah.<sup>101</sup> What counts is the religious truth content, not the narrative form.<sup>102</sup> Frei puts a number of theologians in this class, including Locke, Semler, Schleiermacher, Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Rahner, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jurgen Moltmann and Paul Ricoeur. He contends most of them have disavowed that they were out to “prove” the truth of Christianity or create systems of understanding truth—but they have all agreed that the religious meaningfulness of the Christian claim must be clearly presented through its relation to one’s own human experience. There is, after all, no such thing as revelation without someone to receive it, and receive it as a significant answer to general life questions. Frei accuses these theologians of “constantly building, tearing down, rebuilding and tearing down again the same edifice” by trying to prove the claims of Christianity and make them meaningful to the modern experience.<sup>103</sup> Interpretation became a matter of fitting the biblical story into another world with another story, rather than incorporating that world into the biblical story. These two options of apologetics—that the Bible is historical fact, or that it is written in mythological form that points to a way of life—eliminated some criticisms. But they also eliminated the narrative of a story about salvation.

Frei did admire some scholars who respected the narrative structure of the Bible and read it as a realistic story. In addition to Auerbach, he was greatly influenced by Karl Barth, who argued that the entry of the divine into the realm of the human is the necessary precondition for all theological discourse.<sup>104</sup> Barth’s Christological approach, Frei believed, stayed within the realm of the biblical narrative; Barth lets God, the object

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>102</sup> VanHoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*. 152.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>104</sup> Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 149.

of knowledge, dictate the manner in which truth is known and described. This intratextual approach describes the world of the text as it is written—not the world in front of it, above it, beneath it, or behind it.<sup>105</sup>

Likewise Frei believed Niebuhr retrieved the narrative language of the past in forming the basis for his writings on revelation. Interestingly, though, Niebuhr was wary of Barth's statements that denied the human dimension of religious knowledge and experience. The "Barthian" turn, Niebuhr writes, placed appeals to revelation largely beyond criticism by promising an unconditional knowledge of God, with no real way of discerning true revelation from false. This unconditional objectivism "tends to lead always to some doctrine of the infallible truth which is the supposed possession of those men who claim to have knowledge derived only from the object."<sup>106</sup> Niebuhr believed Barth's claim that our ability to know God is given only by God denied the possibility of our capacity to experience and know the divine.<sup>107</sup> This rift leads appropriately into the following section, in which I will discuss the narrative approach of Paul Ricoeur and his

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 162. This is also a key point for George Lindbeck, who differentiates between an intratextual approach and extratextual approach. The latter locates meaning outside the text or semiotic system "either in the objective realities to which it refers or in the experiences it symbolizes" (Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984; 114). With an intratextual approach, meaning is immanent; meaning is contained within the text. Lindbeck further explores whether it is our external world and experience that shapes meaning of the biblical text, or whether it is the biblical text that shapes our world and experience; he would side with Frei and others that our goal should be the latter.

<sup>106</sup> Richard Niebuhr, *Theology, History, and Culture*. 15.

<sup>107</sup> Douglas Ottati, *The Meaning of Revelation*, xxvi. See also Ronald Thiemann, who criticizes Barth's "radical disjunction between human speech and divine reality. . . . Surely there is no *natural* or *innate* connection between human language and God's reality, but Christian faith demands that once God has claimed a piece of creaturely reality as his own and bound himself to it, then we are warranted in accepting the God-forged link between the human and divine" (*Revelation and Theology*, 94-95); emphasis Thiemann's.

similarities and differences with Frei and others in the Yale School, one of which centers on the question of what the biblical text is ultimately about—us, God, or both?

### SECTION 3: Paul Ricoeur: Narrative Identity & Imagination

The structural windows of narrative, which allow us to organize and attach meaning to experience, were a subject of substantial analysis for Paul Ricoeur, who believed time becomes human only to the extent that it is organized in the manner of a narrative.<sup>108</sup> By remembering and looking ahead, narrative allows us to understand our deepest commitments and confessions of belonging by giving voice to the “opaque” effort to exist.<sup>109</sup> The narrative plot grasps together fragments of the past, illuminates memories through imagination, and fuses them into one “vast poetic sphere” of meaningful discourse.<sup>110</sup> It is only through this process of gathering small pieces into plot that we begin to decipher the larger meaning of our experience; through story, communities and individuals begin to find a voice that offers testimony of who they are how they wish to mark their existence in the world.<sup>111</sup> We chose these plots based on the experiences we undergo as individuals, the stories we tell about those experiences, the cultural influences that surround us, and the classic texts to which we are exposed.

In *The Rule of Metaphor* and *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur argues that metaphor and narrative have the power to raise discourse to a higher level, allowing meaning to become greater than the words or sentences alone. In the case of narrative, the means of

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<sup>108</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol 1*; 3

<sup>109</sup> Henry Isaac Venema, *Identifying Selfhood: Imagination, Narrative, and Hermeneutics in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur*. State University of New York Press: New York, 2000; 2.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

achieving this elevated discourse is through the formation of plot, that is, goals, action and chance brought together within the temporal unity of a whole.<sup>112</sup> Plot holds together scattered remnants of experience, giving them coherence by means of organization. Situated between the “tick” of humble genesis and “tock” of apocalypse, to use Frank Kermode’s metaphoric language of a clock, the significance of any plot is the crisis, the climax—the moment where decisions are made and characters are changed.<sup>113</sup> It is the point where mere successiveness in time opens to “the erotic consciousness which makes divinely satisfactory sense out of the commonplace person.”<sup>114</sup>

The form of story—its structure of beginning, middle and end—gives rise to meaning through the imaginative process of finding resemblances and analogies in our lives with nature, with the lives and stories of others, with concepts, with objects, etc. “To spot the similar in the dissimilar is the mark of poetic genius,” Aristotle declared.<sup>115</sup> Each of us understands each other through analogies to our own experience, or not all, David Tracy believes.<sup>116</sup> Through the formation of plot, we are able to work through conflicts, attach meaning to outcomes, and find a unique kind of identity that facilitates self-understanding and connection with the world around us. The poetic discourse of metaphor and narrative

bring to language aspects, qualities, and values of reality that lack access to language that is directly descriptive and that can be spoken only by means of the complex interplay between metaphorical utterance and the rule-governed transgression of the usual meanings of our words.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 1*; ix.

<sup>113</sup> Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*; 45-47.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>115</sup> Quoted in Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 410.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 451.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

Combined with his studies on metaphor, Ricoeur is concerned with semantic innovation and meaning. Narrative represents a “living metaphor,” drawing creative power from a plot that orders scattered sequential experiences and events into a coherent structure of human time. Narrative events serve to build a plot, and conversely plot is dependent on individual narrative events—similar to Hans Frei’s concept of the figural structure of a realistic narrative, or the interaction between mundane and sacred stories in Stephen Crites’ terminology. As individuals we can never fully articulate a sacred or figural story; it is unspoken, composed of many voices and stories over time.

Both individual and communal stories serve to construct a narrative world that presents new possibilities of living in the world, and invites the reader to participate in that world. One becomes a character in the story with an identity that forms plot and is formed by plot.<sup>118</sup> Stanley Hauerwas believes that the interaction between character and plot provides the means to test the truthfulness of the story, where significant narratives produce significant characters. “Just as scientific theories are partially judged by the fruitfulness of the activities they generate, so narratives can and should be judged by the richness of moral character and activity they generate.”<sup>119</sup> When the reader is seized by a particular text, when one can see oneself as a character in that world, when the reader is changed by the story, only then does the story become revelatory and redemptive.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, 143.

<sup>119</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, “The Church in a Divided World: The Interpretive Power of the Christian Story,” *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 8 no 1, Spring 1980; 61-62.

<sup>120</sup> Ronald Thiemann notes the term “character” is intentionally ambiguous, for it can describe both an actor in the narrative and certain traits of that actor which are “characteristically” human. In coming to know and relate to characters, we discover something human and real in them: “Narratives thus present patterns of characteristic action which depict personal identity” (*Revelation and Theology*, 88).

For Ricoeur, there is no difference between an experience of time within the fictive world of the text and one's experience of time within the factual world of the self. "It is as if to say one that one loses one's self in the process of reading literature and falls into the spell of well-crafted narrative, the imaginative experience of being caught up in into the plot of the fictive world is akin to the experience of narrative time, as experienced in the spatially located body."<sup>121</sup> Fiction has the power to remake reality by ordering otherwise scattered events into new configurations, facilitating transformation and revelation. The events most often stand in contrast to the reader's actual present experience; they force the reader to consider new possibilities of being in the world.<sup>122</sup>

Ricoeur and others believe stories in effect open doors to ontological possibility.<sup>123</sup> They reveal to people the kind of drama in which they are engaged, and perhaps its larger meaning. Stephen Crites notes that these tales are not random or innocent—we chose our own stories and the way they are told; we chose to place value and priority in some stories and not others.<sup>124</sup> There is freedom of choice and action in stories, and also the paradox of fateful destiny in the midst of this freedom.<sup>125</sup> When recalled, images of the past form a kind of lasting chronicle of the temporal course of experience. It is often a fragmented recollection, not necessarily accurate or thorough. Taking Ricoeur's concept of a "second naivete," Crites argues that as we tell and retell

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<sup>121</sup> Michael W. DeLashmutt, "Paul Ricoeur at the Foot of the Cross: Narrative Identity and the Resurrection of the Body," in *Modern Theology*, 25:4, October 2009; 593.

<sup>122</sup> Thiselton, 357.

<sup>123</sup> See Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, in his tenth study, 297-356. For Ricoeur, attestation, or speaking truth, is the only assurance of existing as a self (302).

<sup>124</sup> Crites, 306. As described by Auerbach, Frei and to some extent Ricoeur, stories such as the biblical narrative can also "choose" us, by capturing us, by overcoming our reality.

<sup>125</sup> Robert Paul Roth, "Theological Fantasy: An Experiment in Narrative Hermeneutics and Ontology." *Word and World*, volume V, No. 3; 264.

stories, we reinterpret them, infusing our experiences with new and more mature meanings as we gain new insight. Ricoeur believes our narratives are in fact incomplete without the return movement of language to life; stories must be actualized, appropriated and incorporated into selfhood. There is a cyclic connection between the stories we tell about ourselves, the experiences from which they arise and the changes that occur—the person we become—through them.<sup>126</sup>

In order to access this hermeneutic, it is necessary to engage the imagination, and to open oneself to the play of interpretive possibility.<sup>127</sup> For Ricoeur, imagination is the key to working through images, metaphors and narratives as a way of generating an alternative world that lies beyond, and in tension with, lived reality.<sup>128</sup> Imagination is the vehicle that moves us beyond one's self-definition, beyond the concrete, allowing us to entertain alternative definitions of self, world and God. It is the "dangerous work of all serious artistic effort, that is, to lead the participant beyond what is self-evident to what becomes available, and 'real' only in artistic articulation."<sup>129</sup> Creative imagination is a hermeneutical enterprise rooted in the most basic human activity: living. It "reaches the ontological depth of human existence. Through the creative work of imagination, life is both represented and understood."<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Venema, 95-97.

<sup>127</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer in particular stresses the "play" involved in understanding, the organic to and fro of dialogue that leads to new truth; Ricoeur also describes this as a "dance."

<sup>128</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*. Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1980; 144-166.

<sup>129</sup> Walter Brueggeman, *Cadences of Home*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997; 59.

<sup>130</sup> Ricoeur, paraphrased in Venema, 39.



For Walter Brueggemann, imagination is indeed the vehicle for all interpretation. It is the “capacity to entertain images of reality that are beyond the evident givens of observable experience.”<sup>131</sup> He notes also that without recognition of the subjectivity of imagination, narratives could unravel quickly in undeveloped directions and fantasy.<sup>132</sup> But faithful imagination implies risk and daring acts to push us forward in the narrative beyond what is conceivable. Through imagination, we transport ancient stories to contemporary situations all the time, in various cultural, political and social contexts:

Surely Isaiah was not thinking, in writing Isaiah 65, of Martin Luther King Jr. having a dream of a new earth. ... What a leap to imagine that the primal commission to ‘till’ and ‘keep’ the earth (Gen. 2:15) is really about environmental issues and the chemicals used by Iowa farmers. But we do it. ... What a huge leap to imagine that the ancient purity code in Leviticus 18 bears upon consenting gays and lesbians in the twenty-first century and is concerned with ordination. But we do it.<sup>133</sup>

Imagination allows us to hear echoes of our experience in the histories of others; it allows us to feel the cadence of a sacred story in the contemporary world. It also facilitates the capacity to hear our story in the stories of others. For Tracy, imagination

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<sup>131</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Book that Breathes New Life: Scriptural Authority and Biblical Theology*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005; 28.

<sup>132</sup> Any hermeneutical approach (reader-oriented or audience-oriented) that places the human subject at the center of the text or in the text is bound to be accused of relativism or subjectivism. Anthony Thiselton addresses this subject at length, arguing judgments should be made with care (*New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 63). “The logic of ‘gift’ and ‘givenness’ in the biblical traditions themselves invites deeper reflection. When God ‘gave’ the promised land to Joshua and to Israel, what this giving consisted in, or amounted to, became visible and evidential in the people’s capacity to enter it and to appropriate it” (63-64).

Soren Kierkegaard distinguished subjective and objective approaches to understanding truth this way: “The objective account falls on what is said; the subjective on how it is said ... Objectively the interest is focused on the thought-content; subjectively, on the inwardness ... This inward ‘how’ is the passion of the infinite (which) is precisely subjectivity, and thus subjectivity becomes the truth” (Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, Eng. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941; 181. Quoted in Thiselton, 277).

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

becomes a clearing wherein we are able to encounter another through the “brittleness of self-righteous ideologies” or an “all too easy pluralism.”<sup>134</sup> It is the juxtaposition of both the “not-yet” and “always-already” truth as it disclosed through engagement with classics and with others.<sup>135</sup> Creativity and imagination are instrumental in the formation of human selfhood and identity. One’s self-identity is always re-read and re-constituted in light of one’s reinterpretation of the past and re-orientation toward a future. One’s being is always dominated by and refigured through one’s sense of becoming.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 454. See also Tracy’s *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*, 47-66.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 455.

<sup>136</sup> DeLashmutt, 592.

## SECTION 4

### Ricoeur and Frei in Conversation

Paul Ricoeur is widely respected as a multidisciplinary philosopher, embodying the dictum that truth is a dialogic event. Truth, he believes, happens in the space between dialogue partners, whether they be individuals talking, or individuals interpreting literary texts, works of art or cultural artifacts.<sup>137</sup> He believes firmly in the potential for truth that lies beyond calculative reason that can transform the world of the reader. Ricoeur touches on many religious themes in his broad scope of study, and wrote several essays and one book-length project about the biblical text in particular.<sup>138</sup>

Ricoeur's theological hermeneutics, specifically his interpretation of the biblical texts, follows the same path as his thinking on secular narratives,<sup>139</sup> and this serves as the platform of disagreement between the Chicago and Yale schools of thought. Other disciplines, such as psychology, anthropology, philosophy, sociology, can inform our reading and experience of the biblical story, according to Ricoeur. For Frei and others, the Bible is a particular story that speaks to Christian belief; it cannot, and does not, fit well with other systems and theologies of thought. Frei and others say this leads to placing our worlds at the center of the biblical story, rather than allowing the biblical narrative to transcend our worlds.

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<sup>137</sup> See Mark I. Wallace in his introduction to *Figuring the Sacred*, 1-32.

<sup>138</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 4, 1975: 29-148. Several of his essays on biblical literature and theology can be found in *Figuring the Sacred*.

<sup>139</sup> Ricoeur is wary of assigning final priority to any one particular construal of reality because all forms of literary discourse – not only biblical discourse – can potentially refigure one's experience and offer possibilities for understanding (Wallace, *Figuring the Sacred*, 16).

The two theologians do, however, share some common beliefs about narrative. Christian witness or testimony is expressed in narrative fictions and histories, which form a narrative identity.<sup>140</sup> Like Frei, Ricoeur believes the narrative is essential to the message, from the Old Testament covenant to the New Testament establishment of the church. “Israel’s identity, her desire and effort to be, was thus interpreted in light of certain foundational events that functioned as traces of God’s acts and presence.”<sup>141</sup> Christians and Jews understand themselves through these events; they are, in fact, “absolutely dependent on certain founding events.”<sup>142</sup> These events endure throughout the lives of believers, and understanding comes through continual testimony to them.

And importantly, like Frei, Ricoeur disagrees with Rudolf Bultmann that the Christian message can be demythologized into some non-narrative form, arguing Bultmann fails to consider the language of faith, which is the story. The fundamental word of Christianity “comes to us in writings, through the Scriptures, and these must constantly be restored as the living word if the primitive word that witnessed to the fundamental and founding event is to remain contemporary.”<sup>143</sup> Meaning can only be found within the narrative structure of the text. “A theology that confronts the inevitability of the divine plan with the refractory nature of human actions and passions is

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<sup>140</sup> While Ricoeur recognizes the difference between history and fiction, he argues that both forms of writing are united by their common reference to the fundamentally historical and temporal character of human existence. He argues both history and fiction refer to the historicity of individual and social existence, and that both share a common narrative structure in their description of human action (*Figuring the Sacred*, 11).

<sup>141</sup> Vanhoozer, 133.

<sup>142</sup> Ricoeur, “Revelation,” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, 114.

<sup>143</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Preface to Bultmann,” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*; 49.

a theology that engenders narrative; better, it is a theology that calls for the narrative mode as its major hermeneutical mode.”<sup>144</sup>

Ricoeur holds together the descriptive nature of biblical stories, including the specificity of its subject matter, a point stressed by Frei. The tension, the plot, centers on the entrance of sin into the world, the “fall,” the struggle and the effects of sin, and humanity’s release from sin. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus brings about resolution to this crisis. Ricoeur regards the New Testament as powerful testimony of this redemptive resolution, which offers hope; for him, the subject of the text is undoubtedly a hope-filled description of the way the world could be in the Kingdom of God.<sup>145</sup>

Like Frei, he is also neither concerned with the intention of the authors, the circumstances of its writing nor its reference to history—the world behind the text. Writing “produces a form of discourse that is immediately autonomous with regard to its author’s intention.”<sup>146</sup> Though composed by an author, the text cannot be reduced to sentences and words. The final product eclipses both reader and author. It becomes “emancipated” from the situation and surroundings in which it was written.<sup>147</sup>

Ricoeur is most of all concerned with what he calls the world of the text—the world the text creates—which is the object of his hermeneutics. It is not so much about what is said, but what it says about its world. Much like Auerbach, Ricoeur believes written texts have the capacity to burst the world of the author and reader by overcoming it—by pointing to a world ahead of itself, in which the reader is invited to dwell. For

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<sup>144</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Interpretive Narrative,” in *Figuring the Sacred*; 182.

<sup>145</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, 103.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>147</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 148; quoted in Thiselton, 56.

Ricoeur, the world of the Bible opens up a new realm of the possible. To the extent that this possibility illumines the reader's existence, truth is "revealed."<sup>148</sup>

The biblical narrative exemplifies features common to other narratives—it identifies a community that tells and retells a story, giving it a narrative identity—yet it is also intensified in key respects. "The work of the Yahwist has often been described as the composition of the grand story starting from the creation to the settlement in the promised land."<sup>149</sup> The stories of the gospel writers, developed from the prophets of the old covenant, leading toward the *parousia*, place the church in the midst of a beginning and end. The encompassing story engenders a partnership by making our fragmentary stories converge with the larger story.<sup>150</sup> It is an unspeakable story, one that cannot be described or authored by any one person. Ricoeur borrows language from Steven Crites, calling it an example of a sacred story. "It forms the very consciousness that projects a total world horizon, and therefore informs the intentions by which actions are projected into that world."<sup>151</sup>

The biblical story is also different from other narratives in that it is authoritative, with a sacred function.<sup>152</sup> No other text opens up a new covenant and a new Kingdom of God. It has a normative function in the lives of believers, who re-read reality through the story. The issue or subject of the text is what sets it apart from other poetic writings. Anthony Thiselton notes the myriad directives contained in the biblical text, which

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<sup>148</sup> Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 155.

<sup>149</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Narrative Theology," in *Figuring the Sacred*, 241.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>151</sup> Crites, 298.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

appoints, commands, forgives, forbids, and invites readers to act.<sup>153</sup> Paul urges his audience to “be imitators of me” (I Cor. 4:18); Hezekiah implores that the “good Lord pardon every one who sets his heart to seek God” (2 Chron. 30:18-19); Jesus declares, “your sins are forgiven”(Matt. 9:2). These speech-acts “leave neither the speaker nor hearer uninvolved and unchanged.”<sup>154</sup>

Tracy notes the diversity of ways in which the gospels unfold the character of Jesus, from the secretive, humble “Son of Man” in the gospel of Mark, to the “sheer manifestation of the ‘lifting up’ of the cross of Jesus’ heroic stature in John.”<sup>155</sup> In Jesus’ actions we read of deeds directed toward the poor and lowly, we find authority turned upside down, and we learn that there is a special place in God’s plan for sinners and the outcast. Mark crafts an apocalyptic story set against the backdrop of the destruction of the Jewish temple; Matthew and Luke develop birth narratives, forming pictures of Jesus as either the coming king or a humble servant. The narrative form prevents John’s “profound theological meditations, his imagery and symbols, from escaping from their intrinsic connection to the person Jesus remembered and confessed as the Logos...”<sup>156</sup> Tracy describes the gospels as only a “relatively adequate” expression of the earliest community’s experience of Jesus. The gospel authors are but initiators of a dialogue that has continued to provoke and illicit new truths in the midst of modern experience.<sup>157</sup> Ricoeur’s approach to the narrative entails the unfolding of all the possible implications that the biblical world opens.

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<sup>153</sup> Thiselton, 299.

<sup>154</sup> Thiselton, 300.

<sup>155</sup> Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 278.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 250.

Here, however, Ricoeur's approach differs from that of Frei and others who wish to stop at describing what the text says, arguing that theologians should not involve themselves with explanatory endeavors. For Frei, the description is the explanation. Any explanation of the biblical text, and any truth derived from it that strays from what the text says, must be viewed with suspicion, according to Hans Frei. Christianity provides a "vast, yet simple narrative" that serves to integrate a coherent truth of human nature and destiny.<sup>158</sup> In a 1982 lecture, Frei compared the aims of philosophy and theology, arguing the broad systems and theories of either field were not applicable to Christianity—at least, not in the sense that these systems reduced the Christian story down to normative guidelines for interpretation or universal truth claims.<sup>159</sup> Theology is a "second-order" discipline dependent on the "first-order" language of Christianity that relies on independent rules and criteria for interpretation. The Christian message, however, does not fit into these categories and systems very well.<sup>160</sup>

Frei guarded against explanatory reductionism that becomes a normative hypothesis, as well as phenomenological views that agree religious truth is not reducible, but is dependent on a circular relationship between experience and meaning of the text. The latter, Frei believes, has the same result as the former: the creation of some universal system that ultimately demands universal consent, something we all must experience in a

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<sup>158</sup> Hans Frei, "Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative: Some Hermeneutical Considerations," in *Theology and Narrative*, George Hunsinger and William C. Placher, eds. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993; 95.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*



text. Christianity in effect becomes merely an example of a larger meta-theory or comprehensive system of understanding.<sup>161</sup>

The Christian message does not fit into this box in part because it is a particular, unique story, pointing to a specific people, employing its own language. The concept of God refers to something more than an abstract consciousness; the notion of “real presence,” for example, is not used in the same reference to the presence of ordinary objects. The linguistic account contained in the Bible renders its own reality narratively.

No further knowledge is needed, none is available. The narrated world is as such the real world and not a linguistic launching pad to language-transcending reality, whether ideal essence or self-contained empirical occurrence. Whatever may be true of other instances of linguistic or narrative worlds and what they refer to, in this case the depicted story renders reality in such a way that it obviates the translinguistic reference question as a separate question.<sup>162</sup>

Christianity is simply not like scientific inquiry, which moves from observations of the particular to increasing levels of generality, from evidence to theory.<sup>163</sup>

Ricoeur recognizes that by itself, explanation can be reductive, but that description alone remains vulnerable to uncritical individual or corporate illusion or self-deception—and even idolatry.<sup>164</sup> Explanation “entails the willingness to expose and to

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>162</sup> “Interpretation,” p. 104.

<sup>163</sup> Comstock, 692.

<sup>164</sup> William Carter Aikin also explores this notion of idolatry, “Narrative Icon and Linguistic Idol: Reexamining the Narrative Turn in Theological Ethics,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 28, 1 (2008): 87-108. He describes two tendencies in narrative theology: one that views the scriptural narrative *itself* as the core of the Christian community; the other speaks of scriptural narrative as that which renders God present to the Christian individual and community (88). For the first group, the narrative always points back toward itself as the revealed text by which Christians should mold their lives; for the second group, the text always points away from itself, pointing to the connection between God and the self through this particular moment of the text. The author notes that the Christian narrative itself is not the word of God; the Christian

abolish idols which are merely projections of the human will;” understanding “requires a willingness to listen with openness to symbols and to ‘indirect’ language.”<sup>165</sup> This is similar to the process of psychoanalysis—a patient overcomes behavior both by describing and explaining the problem, which lead to self-awareness in understanding. The diagnostic process involves both activities.<sup>166</sup>

The descriptive and explanatory aims of hermeneutics lead to deeper understanding through suspicion, which brings about reevaluations and post-critical retrieval that ushers in new possibilities that entail change and renewal. Faith requires criticism, Ricoeur believes—a “second naivete” or “post-critical naivete.” Ricoeur views the work of the “masters of suspicion”—Marx, Nietzsche and Freud—in positive terms as “clearing the horizon for a more authentic word, for a new reign of Truth, not only by means of a ‘destructive’ critique, but by the invention of an art of interpreting.”<sup>167</sup> For Ricoeur, a narrative such as the Bible has the capacity to overcome us, but he also would agree with Crites that we must make a choice, which is found in a second naivete. Exposing our own willful intentions is only accomplished by working through questions and criticisms posed by other disciplines and the experiences of our lives. Beyond this “desert of criticism” we are then called again to the text.<sup>168</sup>

While Frei’s reading focuses on the particularity and specificity of what the text says, Ricoeur holds that the gospels manifest a secondary world, a new way of being-in-the-world or in the divine presence. The biblical narrative is a poetic text in that it

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narrative is the context or sphere in which God’s word is heard in the midst of human words” (94).

<sup>165</sup> Thiselton, 344.

<sup>166</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 316-318.

<sup>167</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 33; quoted in Thiselton, 348.

<sup>168</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*; 349.

describes a world of being beyond the subjects and objects that it describes. It projects a world that describes every day reality, yet is poetically distant from it; through the language of poetry, new possibilities and new modes of being in the world are opened up.<sup>169</sup> It is through poetic language alone that we are restored and invited to participate in or belong to this particular order of things. The poetic function “incarnates a concept of truth that escapes the definition by adequation as well as the criteria of falsification and verification. Here truth no longer means verification, but manifestation, i.e., letting what shows itself be.”<sup>170</sup> The poem suspends a first-order meaning of the text, which is a blind experience that is “embedded in the matrix of emotion, fear, anguish.”<sup>171</sup> The poetic form also suspends a descriptive function of the text, which is necessary for the liberation of a second-order function of the text.

In Ricoeur’s analysis of the parables, he agrees with Frei that they are not mythological; they depict a real world, with realistic scenes and characters. A story counts as a parable to the extent that its conflict is brought to life by a metaphorical process that “transfers its meaning in the direction of existential situations that constitute the parables’ ultimate referent,” or meaning.<sup>172</sup> It uses an ordinary plot to redescribe a situation that abolishes a “first order” view and opens a “new dimension of reality that is signified by the plot.”<sup>173</sup> The paradoxical universe of the parable—the extraordinary contained within the ordinary—constitutes a “burst” or an “exploded” universe that

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<sup>169</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Philosophy and Religious Language,” in *Figuring the Sacred*, 45.

<sup>170</sup> Ricoeur, “Revelation,” 102.

<sup>171</sup> Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 7.

<sup>172</sup> Ricoeur, “Manifestation and Proclamation,” 57.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

creates a limit-experience.<sup>174</sup> An example can be found in the book of Job, where *ethos* and *cosmos*—the sphere of human action and the sphere of the world—are bound together at the point of their discordance.<sup>175</sup> It is at this intersection, the limiting point of unjust suffering, that meaning is manifested: “What is revealed is the possibility of hope in spite of...”<sup>176</sup>

Ricoeur argues that the parable—an expression that enables the imagination to go beyond the narrative frame—is at work everywhere in the New Testament.<sup>177</sup> It is a paradigm, not an exception, in the gospel story. He would even apply that paradigm to the resurrection, the linchpin of Christian faith. For Ricoeur, the meaning of the resurrection is more important than the event, whether it happened in history or not. The narratives of the resurrection contained in the Gospels are true, not because they correspond with historical fact, but because they illustrate something about the human condition.<sup>178</sup> The story of Jesus becomes a parable of how genuine human existence is attained. Vanhoozer writes:

It is difficult to see why the historical events actually having happened should matter to Ricoeur. After all, what does the story’s actually having happened add to its essential meaning? History continues to be an important factor in Ricoeur’s hermeneutic philosophy primarily because meanings must be concretely experienced and expressed. The actual life and death of Jesus does not inaugurate

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 60-61.

<sup>175</sup> Ricoeur believed the book of Job was the best example of the wisdom tradition, which “surpasses every literary genre” (“Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” *Essays in Biblical Interpretation*, 85). This tradition is pointed toward the people behind the covenant, offering lessons and stories about the few, to be applied to the many. In Job the interpreter finds a compelling case of unjust suffering, and how to endure in its midst (86). See also John Dominic Crossan, ed., *The Book of Job and Ricoeur’s Hermeneutics*. Society of Biblical Literature, 1981.

<sup>176</sup> Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, 87.

<sup>177</sup> Ricoeur, “The Bible and the Imagination,” in *Figuring the Sacred*, 147.

<sup>178</sup> Vanhoozer, 263.

something new in the human condition, but rather illustrates and expresses what is already there, namely, the possibility of joyfully assenting to the ultimate meaningfulness of human experience, or in short, the possibility of love.<sup>179</sup>

Situated against the framework of the Jewish theology of promise, the resurrection “is not an event which closes by fulfilling the promise, but an event which opens because it adds to the promise by confirming it.”<sup>180</sup> God is already here, experienced in the human condition. We must see the “passion for the possible” in the story—and without the form itself of story, we would be unable to see the possibility that “God’s love is ultimately greater than any evil.”<sup>181</sup>

Tracy similarly believes that the biblical narrative discloses what an authentic life *can* look like. The story does this by describing who Jesus was, the one crucified and risen, who “lived among us, preached God’s reign, and acted with the authority of one free from the usual compulsions and illusions,” a man who was “free to love the concrete neighbor in the hard, real sense of a judging, aggressive, compassionate, healing love.”<sup>182</sup> The Christian tradition turns to the symbols of the cross, resurrection and incarnation, which form a dialectical unit disclosing the full range of meaning in the text. The cross reveals the “power, pain, seriousness and meaning” of the crucifixion; the resurrection “vindicates, confirms and transforms” the crucifixion; and the incarnation “grounds our hope in a real future.”<sup>183</sup> These symbols indeed give rise to a deeper level of thought.

Though he respects the work of Ricoeur and Tracy, Frei accuses both of allegorizing the meaning of the Christ event. The story of Jesus’ resurrection does not

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<sup>179</sup> Vanhoozer, 263-264.

<sup>180</sup> Ricoeur, “Freedom in the Light of Hope,” *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, 159.

<sup>181</sup> Vanhoozer, 264.

<sup>182</sup> Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 281.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 281-282.

function like a myth in the gospel narrative. Jesus does not stand for something else; he is not symbolic or metaphorical. The story is also not about a human “spiritual event.”<sup>184</sup> In Frei’s thinking, there is no added layer of interpretation or explanation, no “second naivete.” The story means what it says. By virtue of the Bible’s exclusive and direct reference to Jesus Christ, the aim of the story is not to evoke some inner experience that cannot be described directly.<sup>185</sup> In the passion story we are “confronted with (Jesus) directly as the unsubstitutable individual who is what he does and undergoes and is manifested directly as who he is.”<sup>186</sup>

The accounts of the resurrection contained in the biblical narrative are at once truthful, and mysterious. They are true because they are part of Jesus’ character, developed realistically in the story—“He was and is what he did for us.”<sup>187</sup> If the story means what it says, then the event of the resurrection is a real event, however it is one that eludes human depiction and conception. The literal depiction contained in the text “is the best that can be offered, not to be supplanted or replaced by any other,” including a metaphorical depiction.<sup>188</sup> It is not an exact historical account; the text is merely to be taken as adequate testimony to the reality of this mysterious event.

Ricoeur sees the text as a dialogic event that continues to open new worlds of understanding; Frei views the narrative in more one-directional terms as a story that

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<sup>184</sup> Frei argues the views of theoreticians in the tradition of phenomenological hermeneutics such as Ricoeur and Tracy are strikingly similar to the “doctrine of revelation” of liberal and neoorthodox religious apologists, who held that revelation is a “spiritual event” rather than a historical or metaphysical propositional claim (“The ‘Literal Reading’ of Biblical Narrative,” in *Theology and Narrative*, 126).

<sup>185</sup> Frei, *Identity*, 140.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>187</sup> Frei, “Of the Resurrection of Christ,” in *Theology and Narrative*, 205.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

recounts events that occurred at a particular time, to a particular people. For Ricoeur, understanding through interpretation is our primary means of participating in the story and its possible world; for Frei, description of the story, reenacting it and retelling it, are the only valid means of participation. And, for Ricoeur, the story has the power to envelop us, but we must move beyond this, into and through stages of criticism and distance, in order to choose it; for Frei, revelation comes from God alone, and his story must choose us.

## SECTION 5: Conclusions

In his introduction to *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, Lewis S. Mudge writes that in Ricoeur's work we find clues to understanding how people today may be called again by the biblical texts. We are deaf to the world today—and the problem lies in the general loss of sensitivity to symbolic language in modern Western Civilization. We have made language an instrument of control over our lives. In this world, “artful equivocation, richness of meaning, or metaphysical range” is a “liability to be overcome rather than a gift to be treasured.”<sup>189</sup> We too easily dismiss realms of meaning beyond the literal, and thus it is hard to see Scriptural language as having anything to do with reality.<sup>190</sup>

Dorothee Soelle also writes persuasively about the inadequacy of language, and the need for the poetic, which comes closest to expressing God. And how can we, she wonders, make ourselves understand God in the midst of the objective reality that surrounds us?<sup>191</sup> “Our relationship to language is really not much better than those who love God the way they love a cow. Our language is part of our life in the world of purposes and intentions. I confront objects and make use of them.”<sup>192</sup> The space for unity with God is found in poetry, where language has “freedom to narrate rather than philosophize.”<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Mudge, “Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Interpretation,” in *Essays*, 4.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>191</sup> Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and the Art of Resistance*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001; 55.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.



The increasing interest in narrative theology over the last 50 years gives hope that we will regain an ability to speak of God. Narrative has the ability to disrupt the tendency to speak of God and religious experience in dualistic terms (“this is right, this is wrong”), and has the capacity to shatter ideological self-deception.<sup>194</sup> God is a God of stories. The opening line of Genesis reads, “In the beginning . . .;” John opens his gospel with the poetic summation: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” We become aware of God not through concepts, ideas, principles or dogmas, “but by means of the life we live, the experiences we go through, in a word, by means of the stories we weave, the stories we tell and share.”<sup>195</sup>

In Frei, we find a retrieval of the innate hermeneutic of narrative. He offers persuasive and thoughtful argument that the biblical story should be read as all classic literature is read—as a realistic story in which we can see ourselves as part of the continually unfolding plot. The work of Frei offers important insight into how the narrative of redemption can be too easily morphed into a theory of redemption, a system that detaches us from the creativity and nuance of the story. He also guards against a simplified reduction of the story to some generic moral principle, or vague ideas of a higher conscious. We understand meaning in the story by following the interaction of

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<sup>194</sup> Walter Brueggeman defines ideology as the “practice of taking a part for the whole, of taking ‘my truth’ for *the* truth, of running truth through a prism of the particular and palming off the particular as a universal.” He cites several examples of ideology at work in biblical interpretation: historical criticism intends to “fend off church authority and protect freedom for the autonomous interpreter;” canonical criticism intends to “maintain old coherences of truth against the perceived threat of more recent fragmentation;” high moralism comes from fear and serves as a strategy to fend off anxiety; communitarian inclusiveness reflects a reaction against exclusiveness and is “readily given to a kind of reactive carelessness.” (*The Book That Breathes New Life*, 30-31).

<sup>195</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *In the Beginning There Were Stories, Not Texts*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011; 7.

characters, and through the plot, through the story's tribulations and triumphs. It means something to us when we can place ourselves in that story, when it rings true to us—when we can say, in the words of Robert McAfee Brown, “That’s my story, too.”<sup>196</sup> Many also find meaning in the reenactment of religious stories, including the ritual of the Passover seder, and the taking of communion as the Last Supper. Amos Wilder writes that anytime the Christian in any time or place confesses his or her faith, that confession inevitably turns into a narrative. When the Christian observes Christmas or Easter, in either case it is with a reference to a story of things that happened.<sup>197</sup>

Frei, however, becomes far too narrow in his insistence on description of a text only. We cannot describe or retell or reenact a story if we do not understand or cannot explain what it means. Frei, in the latter part of his studies, even distances himself from the term realistic narrative, in part because he felt it was the same kind of categorization or generalizing he sought to avoid.<sup>198</sup> Whether he uses the term or not, Frei cannot get around the problem that the Bible, most agree, is not like the stories of Homer in a very important way: it makes a claim to historical truth. The Bible may be a realistic story, but ultimately, the question must be answered: Do you believe the Christ event occurred or not?<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Brown, “My Story and The Story,” 166.

<sup>197</sup> Amos Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel*. New York: Harper & Row, 1964; 67.

<sup>198</sup> Frei writes: “There may or may not be a class called ‘realistic narrative,’ but to take it as a general category of which the synoptic Gospel narratives and their partial second-order redescription in the doctrine of the Incarnation are a dependent instance is first to put the cart before the horse and then cut the lines and claim that the vehicle is self-propelled” (“Literal Reading,” *Theology and Narrative*, 142-143)

<sup>199</sup> See William C. Placher’s discussion of this in his introduction to *Theology and Narrative*, 13-14. Placher also notes that Frei became weary of being associated with the category of “narrative theology,” particularly as its diverse approaches came to light (16).

Ricoeur offers a way out, though it is a way not all Christians will accept.<sup>200</sup> He believes the Christ event is a parable of how genuine human existence is attained. It is a story that raises discourse to a higher level through metaphor. We may initially be overcome by the story, but we ease into the deeper meaning of this story through distance, through suspicion, by looking past the literal description. We must move to a second naivete to see beyond the words into understanding. Ricoeur's most significant contribution to the study of narrative is a retrieval of the imagination and the poetic world in front of that narrative. Ricoeur is a believer in the power of language to transform; for Ricoeur, symbols, metaphors and stories mediate the meaning our existence. Creative language gives rise to thought in a way that reason and scientific knowledge cannot. Ricoeur describes the stories of the Bible from the Exodus to the resurrection as "poems" addressed to our imagination.<sup>201</sup> This is perhaps his most radical conclusion, that the story is a poem with both the capacity to have an immediate impact, and the kind of impact that requires some distance and thoughtful reflection. The interpretive arc begins with a precritical moment of naïve understanding, and proceeds through investigation, finally landing in the moment of truth where we can see possibilities in the story beyond its mere words.

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<sup>200</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, an admirer and student of Ricoeur, writes that in spite of the philosopher's contributions to a doctrine of hope and grace, he nevertheless falls flat when it comes to core Christian doctrine: "Yet at one point—for confessing Christians, the crucial point—Ricoeur's approximation falls short, even flat. Easter, he thought, means that Jesus conquered death by serving others. . . . Here, as a witness to the resurrection, Ricoeur the philosopher can muster only a lisp rather than an exultant cry ("He is risen!") (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Joy of Yes: Ricoeur: Philosopher of Hope," *Christian Century*, 122 no 17, Aug. 23, 2005; 27-28).

<sup>201</sup> Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, 117.

For Ricoeur, the very purpose of hermeneutics, including biblical hermeneutics, is to “conquer a remoteness, a distance between the past cultural epoch to which the text belongs and the interpreter himself.”<sup>202</sup> In Ricoeur’s thinking, the world of the text and the world of the reader are the same.

By overcoming this distance, by making himself contemporary with the text, the exegete can appropriate its meaning to himself...It is thus the growth of his own understanding of himself that he pursues through his understanding of the other. Every hermeneutics is thus, explicitly or implicitly, self-understanding by means of understanding others.<sup>203</sup>

Mudge writes that as Ricoeur develops the importance of critical explanation of the text, it is not to destroy faith but to open the way for it: “Ricoeur seeks to free the Bible from culture-bound, subjectivizing interpretations as well as from fundamentalist, objectivizing interpretations by asking us to listen carefully to what biblical discourse testifies.”<sup>204</sup> In this day, when it is so hard to see how the biblical text, or any poetic text, matters in the modern world, Ricoeur’s approach ushers in a new possibility. The Bible can claim to say something unique only if its message, its world, is addressed to us.<sup>205</sup> Meaning occurs in the reception of the text by an audience: “It occurs at the intersection between the world of the text and the world of the readers.”<sup>206</sup>

Ricoeur’s greatest contribution to the study of narrative is one of his greatest points of departure from thinkers such as Frei. Ricoeur believes that we must come back to a text and look at it through the lens of suspicion, with distance, before we can retrieve

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<sup>202</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*. Don Ihde, ed. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974; 16-17.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Mudge, 23.

<sup>205</sup> Ricoeur, “Philosophy and Religious Language,” *Figuring the Sacred*, 46.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 240.

its fullest meaning. Ricoeur speaks of an “endless spiral” that carries a narrative “past the same point a number of times, but at different altitudes.”<sup>207</sup> This hermeneutical circle also applies to the telling of one’s life; the story of one’s life continues to be refigured by all the truthful and fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself, and the return movement to those stories.<sup>208</sup> “This refiguration makes this life a woven cloth of stories told.”<sup>209</sup> Author and literary critic Patricia Hampl likens this to a first draft that we come back to again and again. As we grow and mature, we reflect and rewrite the drafts of our lives: “Writing a first draft is a little like meeting someone for the first time. I come away with a wary acquaintanceship, but the real relationship (if any) is down the road.”<sup>210</sup> The identity we assume through the telling and retelling of narratives is for Ricoeur the poetic resolution of the hermeneutical circle, the return movement to multiple drafts, multiple readings of texts. It is not a seamless or stable identity; it is fluid, constantly changing in response to the culture in which we live and the experiences we undergo as individuals.

In the following section, I will revisit the ways that Ricoeur’s hermeneutical circle of narrative applies to the individual story of St. Augustine and the black community in the midst and aftermath of slavery and oppression. Both read the same biblical story, but they came away with very different stories of their own in response. In Augustine we find a self-searching, frantic story of conversion and continuing struggle with inner demons; in the black community, we find a communal story of hope in the midst of suffering. In both cases, the tellers of these tales had to go back to the biblical story and to the

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<sup>207</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 1*; 72.

<sup>208</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 3*; 246.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>210</sup> Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company; 1999; 28.

experiences of their own lives to find renewal and retrieval. And in both cases, those involved were profoundly changed through the meaning they discovered in the poetic language of narrative. In both cases, authentic “selves” were born in possession of refigured identities that have enlarged the sacred story of Christianity.

Both of these stories also embody the biblical theme of redemption, of moving from a place of sin and/or bondage toward a state of salvation and freedom.<sup>211</sup> Augustine goes inward to grapple with his shame, and finds release in the admission of his sinful past to God. The stories of black Christians focused on their real, lived bondage to slave masters, focusing on God’s promise of freedom in the Exodus story. Both are soteriological in nature—as is every good story, according to Michael Root. In soteriology, “narrative is not merely ornamental ... but constitutive.”<sup>212</sup> The moment of salvation cannot be explained or told without narrative, without a beginning, middle and end, without the conditions of two states and a transformative event that differentiates them. In any Christian soteriology, the task of the storyteller must be to show how this transformation occurs, and what role the story of Jesus plays in its unfolding.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Michal Beth Dinkler explores narrative’s function in bringing about redemption in a fascinating essay: “Telling Transformation: How We Redeem Narratives and Narratives Redeem Us,” *Word & World*, Vol 31 No. 3, Summer 2011; 287-296. Stories restore a sense of freedom and agency for people, they engage our imagination, offer alternatives and they restore us to a sense of shared humanity (291-292). She also agrees with Ricoeur that readers interact with texts; reading is a “dynamic and subjective process” (294) or an “interactive dialogue between text and reader” (295).

<sup>212</sup> Michael Root, “The Narrative Structure of Soteriology,” in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, 263.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

## SECTION 5

### Interpretive applications: St. Augustine's *Confessions*

If the task of Christian theology is to show how the Christian story is the story of human redemption, as Michael Root believes, Augustine makes a compelling case in the first nine chapters of his *Confessions*.<sup>214</sup> Augustine weaves together a wandering, searching story about his journey from a state of sin and deprivation to salvation and liberation. The climactic moment of the story—Augustine alone in the garden, crying, pleading for an end to his “uncleanness”<sup>215</sup>—is the moment of grace that divides being lost from being found. *Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in contention and envy, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ and make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscences.* After reading this passage (Rom 13:13-14), Augustine writes: “It was as though a light of utter confidence shone in all my heart, and all the darkness of uncertainty vanished away.”<sup>216</sup>

Augustine’s quest for knowledge of self and God could only be communicated in the narrative form, which holds together the beginning, middle and end of his journey. In the beginning, Augustine was an intelligent, though arrogant, rhetorician, philosopher and teacher. He was a loving son who saw the Christian beliefs of his mother as silly and simple. He was caught up in “stage plays” and entertaining games; he had a sacrilegious

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<sup>214</sup> Michael Root, “The Narrative Structure of Soteriology,” in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989; 265.

<sup>215</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, F.J. Sheed, trans., Michael P. Foley, ed. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006; 159.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

curiosity toward worldly pleasures; he was a man consumed with the “filth of concupiscence.”<sup>217</sup> Augustine knew about the teachings of Christianity, but did not at first feel anything toward them; they seemed to him unworthy of the intelligence and majesty of Cicero. “My conceit was repelled by their simplicity, and I had not the mind to penetrate their depths.”<sup>218</sup> By the fourth century, the attainment of wisdom and knowledge had come to be seen as a form of religious conversion, and studying Cicero had led Augustine to seek this rational intelligence.<sup>219</sup> Prayer was viewed as a vehicle for speculative inquiry. The ideology of pride in one’s own abilities and reverence for the divine attainment of knowledge kept Augustine from God, and he wandered further and further into sin.<sup>220</sup>

The plot thickened along this path. Unease settled in Augustine’s soul. He became restless and discontent. Augustine recalls hearing the Christian teaching of Ambrose, “a devout servant of God,” after coming to Milan for a teaching assignment. Augustine was greeted like a son, and felt love for Ambrose, not because of his faith, but because of his kindness. Little by little, Augustine was drawing closer: “And while I was opening my heart to learn how eloquently he spoke, I came to feel, though only gradually, how truly he spoke.”<sup>221</sup> Impressed, Augustine went to hear Ambrose speak, watched him read, listened to his rationale. He thought and debated whether to ask Ambrose questions of deeper meaning, but did not want to bother him.

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 37-38.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>219</sup> See Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. London: Faber and Faber.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 91.



Augustine also heard the story of Victorinus, a former professor of rhetoric in Rome, who had died a Christian.

Here was a man deeply learned, trained in all the liberal sciences, a man who had read and weighed so many of philosophers' writings, the teacher of so many distinguished senators, a man who on account of the brilliance of his teaching had earned and been granted a statue in the Roman forum—an honour the citizens of this world think so great.<sup>222</sup>

Yet, in spite of his worldly accomplishments, Victorinus found no shame in “bending his neck under the yoke of humility and his forehead to the ignominy of the cross.”<sup>223</sup>

Augustine is perplexed: This man investigated the Christian writings, and despite at first being ashamed to show his face in a Christian church, was eventually baptized a Christian. He decided to do it in public, in front of all who could see. Augustine considers these stories, but still held back: “I wanted to be as certain of things unseen as that seven and three make ten.”<sup>224</sup>

At the same time, his experience of suffering was worsening. He writes that he was “drawn out of myself by the voices of my error and went falling ever lower through the weight of my own pride.”<sup>225</sup> One day he and friend Alypius encountered a “fellow countryman” named Ponticianus, a devout Christian who insisted on telling the story of the Egyptian monk Antony; he told Augustine stories of “great groups in the monasteries, and their ways all redolent of You, and the fertile deserts of the wilderness, of all of which we knew nothing.”<sup>226</sup> He told of the conversion of his friends, how they had found new peace in God. Augustine listened, and as Ponticianus was speaking, God “turned me

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 150.

back towards myself . . . that I might see how vile I was, how twisted and spotted and ulcerous. . . . If I tried to turn my gaze from myself, there was Ponticianus telling what he was telling.”<sup>227</sup>

At his lowest point, and in spite of his own intentions and actions, grace intervened. In the climactic conclusion of his story, Augustine writes that the more “wretched” he became, the closer God came; “thy right hand was ready to pluck me from the mire and wash me clean, though I knew it not.”<sup>228</sup> Finally, around the age of 30, Augustine saw the unchangeable light of God with the “eye of my soul.”<sup>229</sup> A “mighty storm arose in me, bringing a mighty rain of tears.”<sup>230</sup> He left Alypius and went alone into the garden where he could weep in solitude. He flung himself down in front of a fig tree and allowed the torrent of tears to come. He heard the voice of a child and at last ceases to weep.

After his conversion, Augustine rejoices in his newfound freedom, offering praise and gratitude to God, yet continues to refigure the story of his life. In spite of this new way of living, Augustine finds and contends with the reality that all is not perfect. He goes through more grappling and more searching, and as a result, his reflections of the past become more mature and sophisticated as he progresses through stages of understanding. The reader witnesses this in Augustine’s telling of a painful episode in which a close childhood friend passes away.<sup>231</sup> “My heart grew somber with grief,” he writes initially, “and wherever I looked I saw only death. . . . My eyes searched

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 58-64.

everywhere for him, but he was not there to be seen.” In the first draft of this story, still raw with emotion, Augustine regrets having mocked this man’s conversion to Christianity; he feels shame for not grasping the severity of the man’s illness. Through the lens of retrospection, Augustine offers another reflection: “But now, O Lord, all this is past and time has healed the wound. . . . Can it be that though you are present everywhere, you have thrust aside our troubles. You are steadfast, constant in yourself.” In yet another interpretation of this same event, Augustine reframes the episode based on his present experience as a Christian: “In this world one thing passes away so that another may take its place and the whole be preserved in all its parts. . . . All that is withered in you will be made to thrive again.”

It becomes clear that Augustine is not only relaying the story of his past—he is creating it. In Ricoeur’s terminology, Augustine is forming a narrative identity as he tells and retells episodes from his past, infusing these memories with greater insight and meaning.<sup>232</sup> He is in fact creating meaning through the narrative process, and within the narrative form.

Augustine places an original emphasis upon the value of the storied self. For Augustine, life—and not inconsequently his own life—was something of value, something that was worth being retold, and retold not only for the benefit of his audience, but for the benefit of the one retelling as well.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> See Michael DeLashmutt, “Paul Ricoeur At the Foot of the Cross,” 601-602. According to Ricoeur: “We never cease to reinterpret the narrative identity that constitutes us, in the light of the narratives proposed to us by our culture. In this sense, our self-understanding presents the same features of traditionality as the understanding of a literary work. It is in this way that we learn to become the narrator and the hero of our own story, without actually becoming the author of our own life (Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative,” *On Paul Ricoeur. Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood. London and New York, 1991; 32).

<sup>233</sup> DeLashmutt, 599.

Patricia Hampl notes that the most striking aspect of Augustine's autobiography is not the admission of lust or any other scandalous sins; it is that in spite of being a Christian bishop, he still struggles with weakness. The story does not end with his conversion. The *Confessions*, written 10 years after Augustine's conversion, is not a testament of triumphal conversion, "but rather a solemn act of renewal."<sup>234</sup> The *Confessions* fit Ricoeur's description of a poetic text that evokes an excess of meaning; "they exceed the limits of one's own finite sense of self."<sup>235</sup> It is also a classic in Tracy's terms, a work rife with reinterpretation of past memories and parallels with the Gospel story, and a work that is still today a source of reflection and reinterpretation.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine draws directly from the Christian story of redemption and applies it to his own life. He in fact forms the story of his fallen state in light of his conversion experience. His "fall" is intensely personal, yet he describes it as the result of sin present in all men.<sup>236</sup> At times the connections he draws to the biblical story are overt and conscious. Augustine links his sin to that of Adam, "whereby we all die;"<sup>237</sup> he likens himself to the Apostle Paul, who was a noble, strong man with great influence before he came to Christ.<sup>238</sup> He recounts the life and death of Christ and humanity's relationship to God through Christ. As narrated in his own story, Christ calls us "by His death, life, descent, and ascension to return to Him."<sup>239</sup> As Augustine knows well, as told in the Old Testament stories of those fallen from grace, to the disciples' failure in the Garden of Gethsemane, one must first descend in order to ascend to God.

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<sup>234</sup> Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories*, 168.

<sup>235</sup> DeLashmutt, 603.

<sup>236</sup> Brown, 169.

<sup>237</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 85.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

His conversion does not give him a story to tell; it allows him to find the story that has already been told. In this paradoxical relationship with his own life, the story precedes him and tells him in order that he may, eventually, be able to write it.<sup>240</sup>

Hans Frei points to Augustine's theology as displaying the "plain sense" of Scripture—that which conduces faith, hope and love of God and neighbor.<sup>241</sup> He is an example of a Christian who communicated his life and conversion through narrative after having been radically changed by hearing the narratives of others who had similarly been changed by hearing stories of their own. All of these stories are testaments to the "sacred" story contained in the Gospel; it is no accident that Augustine's story takes on elements of the Gospel story itself. He is converted in a garden, recalling the Garden of Eden; he tells the story of stealing a pear, analogous to the taking of fruit from the forbidden tree (Gen 3:1-22). His faith is tested like Moses. Augustine writes that in order to understand the words of Moses, it is not important that he know Latin or Hebrew or Greek; he would only know the truth of the words of Moses "within me, in the inner retreat of my mind."<sup>242</sup> For Augustine, God is in the midst of all beginnings; God speaks to him through the story of Jesus and the prophets, and in the voices of his friends and contemporary acquaintances.

Without ceasing to be the story of Israel, the tales of the Bible present the story of God. Similarly, without ceasing to be autobiography, Augustine's *Confessions* offer an account of God's way with him. The language of will and of struggle is replaced by that of the heart.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Lawrence Byrne, "Writing God's Story: Self and Narrative Structure in Augustine's *Confessions*," *Christianity and Literature*, 38 no 3, Spring 1989; 17.

<sup>241</sup> Frei, "Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative," in *Theology and Narrative*, 105.

<sup>242</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 236.

<sup>243</sup> Hauerwas and Burrell, "From System to Story," in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*; 183.

Augustine also employs some of the same narrative techniques as the Gospel story, such as the use of parable. John Dominic Crossan defines parable as a story that uses everyday language and experience to shatter a hearer's world. The cross of Jesus becomes the ultimate parable in the Gospel story; it is intended to challenge and change us.<sup>244</sup> Familiar events become vehicles for shedding light on ideas and concepts, in this case the Kingdom of God and the mystery of God's presence in the world. In the Gospels, and in Augustine's story, parables become narratives within a narrative. They are extravagant stories that burst out of the mundane meaning of the story, and in so doing illustrate that something different, something challenging, is afoot.<sup>245</sup>

The self in autobiography is "incarnated in concrete events," according to Sallie McFague. "And this, of course, is but another way of saying that the events are parabolic or metaphorical—they have extensions beyond themselves, they are richly complex images embodying the secret of a person's life, as, for instance, the moment in the garden is a metaphor of Augustine's life."<sup>246</sup> Augustine's telling of his stealing the pear is another such example. Augustine and his friends stole not because they wanted or needed fruit; instead of eating the fruit, they threw it to the pigs. They stole because it was forbidden. The bulk of the story involves Augustine's self-rebuke—so much that it appears he grossly exaggerates the seriousness of his crime.<sup>247</sup> The episode, however, is a microcosm of his attitude prior to conversion—he wanted not for the sake of the object, but because it was forbidden. "The malice of the act was base and I loved it—that is to

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<sup>244</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Toward a Theology of Story*. Sonoma, CA: Eagle Books, 1988; 37-40.

<sup>245</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, "The Bible and the Imagination," in *Figuring the Sacred*. 149-160.

<sup>246</sup> Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975; 154-155.

<sup>247</sup> Donald Capps, "Parabolic Events in Augustine's Autobiography," 263.

say I loved my own undoing, I loved the evil in me.”<sup>248</sup> In admitting this crime, Augustine exposes himself to God. He is ashamed. And in the exaggerated telling of this story, he is acknowledging that he cannot hide from God in any aspect of his life, and neither can we.

The only way Augustine can communicate his conversion and redemption is through the literary devices of descriptive narrative. The *Confessions* is not an explanation of God or the cosmos or of evil, it is a story. It is not a proclamation or a declaration about what one must do in order to find God or live a Christian life, it is a narrative about one man’s experience along the unfolding path of salvation. Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell believe Augustine’s choice of narrative is a way of separating himself fully from the world of Manicheanism, which offers a system of explaining God’s relationship to the world. The Manichees postulate causes for behavior in the form of particles of light or darkness; in their dualistic world, God is innocent and good, and evil is the result of a separate “Kingdom of Darkness.”<sup>249</sup> Manichees were uncompromising rationalists who sought explanation for evil in the world. Augustine realized that any such explanatory scheme could not explain the diverse kinds of human behavior, and that such a scheme “would undermine a person’s ability to repent because it would remove whatever capacity we might have for assuming responsibility for our actions.”<sup>250</sup>

By contrast, Augustine’s life narrative was framed by right and wrong actions—often inexplicable actions by rational standards, such as the stealing of the pear. In a

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<sup>248</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 29.

<sup>249</sup> Brown, 47-48.

<sup>250</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell, “From System to Story,” in *Why Narrative?*; 182.

complete reversal from his earlier state of skepticism toward Christianity, Augustine eschews any rationalist explanations, instead drawing on the story of the fall of creation, the original sin that dwells within all men and women. He tells us, in a poetic prayer to God, his version of that same story. “The narrative Augustine tells shows us how he was moved to accept the gospel story by allowing it to shape his own.”<sup>251</sup> In the narrative form, the mystery of human will and God’s providence and grace is allowed space. No clear answers are given—there is only a story with characters who interact, a nuanced plot, and a climactic event that describes something about the nature of the relationship between God and humanity.

The construction of a life story such as the *Confessions* is necessary, according to Ricoeur, to “give shape and meaning to one’s existence.”<sup>252</sup> As we see in this story, the telling of his life allows Augustine to give shape to the disparate parts of his experience. His life becomes intelligible, and meaningful, in the narrative form; a narrative self is constructed in the midst of an identity refigured by his Christian conversion. We will see this notion of a narrative identity also applies to groups and communities, as in the case of the stories of black slaves and their descendants. Both individual and communal stories are given shape and meaning in the backdrop of historical events and stories. This was a powerful hermeneutic in the context of black liberation, a movement that allowed one community to situate itself in the ongoing story of Christianity and find redemption in its midst.

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<sup>251</sup> Hauerwas and Burrell, 184.

<sup>252</sup> Mark I. Wallace, “Introduction,” *Figuring the Sacred*, 13.



## The Story of Black Theology

His masters, knowing Rev. Allen to be a “praying boy,” asked the slave to pray to God to hold the Northern armies back.<sup>253</sup> It was 1865, in the midst of the Civil War, and the South “was about whipped.”

Of course I didn’t have any love for any Yankees—and haven’t now, for that matter—but I told my white folks straight from the shoulder that I could not pray along those lines . . . I could not pray against my conscience; that I not only wanted to be free but I wanted to see all the Negroes freed! I then told them that God was using the Yankees to scourge the slave-holders, just as he had, centuries before, “used” heathens and outcasts to chastise his chosen people—the Children of Israel.<sup>254</sup>

Allen bravely appropriates the Hebrew Scriptures to counter the request of his white masters. In this short anecdote, he looks through his current circumstance and sees the God revealed in the story of Exodus. God, he believed, is leading the charge of African American liberation in the Civil War, just as God led the charge of Moses through the land of Egypt. Allen is compelled to pray with his conscience, asking that God’s plan again unfold in righteousness as it did for the Children of Israel. His language is “clearly rhetorical. He skillfully shifts the focus of the discourse from human agency to God’s intervention in human affairs.”<sup>255</sup> Most often slaves associated their story with those of Hebrews in the biblical narrative. And through their songs, the spirituals, they

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<sup>253</sup> Reverend Allen, age 87, Columbus, GA, May 10, 1937, prepared by J.R. Jones; reprinted in *Tribal Talk* by Will Coleman. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000; 108-109.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>255</sup> Coleman, *Tribal Talk*, 110.

would transform the canonized narrative into one suited for their present situation of bondage.<sup>256</sup>

Slaves did not have copies of the Bible—and most could not read them even if they did. They did not have recognized churches, at least not until after the Civil War. They instead gathered in the galleries of the churches separated from their white masters and mistresses, where they would often be lectured on the biblical imperative of obedience and the necessity to follow orders. They were also known to gather in informal prayer groups at night where they would be free to sing, dance and listen to pastors who could tell a story. While educated white theologians build systems of thought, James Cone writes, black folks told tales grounded in their lived experience.

Whites debated the validity of infant baptism or the issue of predestination and free will; blacks recited biblical stories about God leading the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, Joshua and the battle of Jericho, and the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace. . . . White thought on the Christian view of salvation was largely ‘spiritual’ and sometimes ‘rational,’ but usually separated from the concrete struggle of freedom in this world.<sup>257</sup>

Blacks did not study the thinkers of the day; their theology was instead rooted in the physical realities of slavery. They often worked from sunrise to sundown, enduring violent physical abuse, brutal work, death and despair. The primary theological question they asked was: Was God with them in their struggle for liberation?<sup>258</sup>

It is so striking that slaves and their descendants did not reject the Bible and Christianity; slave owners used the Christian text to justify their actions.<sup>259</sup> The realities

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>257</sup> James Cone, “The Story Context of Black Theology,” 145.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> From 1772 to 1850 the Bible was the primary source of authority and legitimization for the enslavement of Africans. One of the biblical passages most often used was

white masters taught included the belief there were two kingdoms: God ruled in heaven the way the master ruled on the plantation.<sup>260</sup> The paradox of the Euro-American slave master was keeping their slaves in place, keeping them mindful and subdued, while also seeming to care for and advance their moral and religious development. “In order to ensure a properly constructed catechism (that is, a Protestant doctrinal orthodoxy), Euro-American preachers were the primary interpreters-expositors of the biblical narrative.”<sup>261</sup>

Yet, “neither the slavers’ whip nor the lynchers’ rope nor the bayonet could kill our black belief,” wrote Margaret Walker, an African American poet.<sup>262</sup> Instead, slaves re-appropriated the biblical stories in their own cultural setting, in a language that made sense in the context of their historical situation. They told stories.<sup>263</sup> They used the historical images of God’s people breaking free from bondage, and applied these tales to their situation. They connected past and present to form a hopeful future. God was the God who set his people free in Exodus; Jesus was the son of man who had come to make the first last and the last first.<sup>264</sup> They sang songs like “We Shall Overcome” and that

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Genesis 9:25: “Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be to his brethren. Blessed be the Lord God of Shem, and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem and Canaan will be his servant.” (James H. Evans, *We Have Been Believers*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012; 39-40; see also Larry R. Morrison, “The Religious Defense of American Slavery Before 1830,” *Journal of Religious Thought*, Vol. 37, Fall-Winter 1980-1981, 16-29.)

<sup>260</sup> Coleman, 92.

<sup>261</sup> Coleman, 91.

<sup>262</sup> Margaret Walker, “We Have Been Believers,” in *We Have Been Believers*; p. vii. Born in Mississippi, Walker lived from 1915 to 1998, and published many works about the black experience, particularly in the Jim Crow era.

<sup>263</sup> Cone writes: “The one who preaches the Word is primarily a story-teller.” When a preacher is invited to pastor a church, the first question the congregation asks, “Can the Reverend tell the story?” Black churches usually do not require academic degrees as criterion for preaching, because it has nothing to do with story-telling. (“The Story Context of Black Theology,” 147.)

<sup>264</sup> Cone, 146.

“Old Ship of Zion.” The spirituals contained a unique authenticity that affirmed and embraced pain through the prism of lived experience. These songs and stories often mimicked the cries of pain in Psalms and Lamentations, along with the sorrowful and doubtful words of Christ on the eve of his death, replaying the power of truth in Christian tradition. Cone writes that the salvation story was described as “the gospel train,” which was coming for them. This was an eschatological train, the train of salvation, “and it will carry the oppressed to glory.”<sup>265</sup> We see clearly in black theology the juxtaposition of the cross as both a symbol of suffering and death, and hope and liberation.

The Bible in particular was an important source of theology in the black religious experience. Even though most slaves could not read, they heard the stories and told them orally, harkening back to the ancient Christian tradition.<sup>266</sup> In spite of the contradictory nature of their introduction to Christianity, the stories in the Bible affirmed the joy and freedom they intermittently experienced.<sup>267</sup> Key motifs were found in Exodus 1:12, that the more the Israelites were oppressed the more they multiplied; Exodus 2:1-3:22, the story of Moses’ upbringing and his decision to align himself with the suffering of his sisters and brothers; God’s message to “let my people go” (Exodus 5:1); and the Israelites’ attainment of freedom (15:1). The book of Exodus “became the archetypal myth that, while drawn from Scripture, became the lens through which the Bible was read.”<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Cone, “Story,” 146-147.

<sup>266</sup> See Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History-History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History*. Boston: Brill Academic, 2002; and William Shiell, *Delivering from Memory: The Effect of Performance on the Early Christian Audience*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011.

<sup>267</sup> Evans, 32.

<sup>268</sup> Evans, 45.

We see this motif continue with contemporary blacks, the sons and daughters of slaves who fought for civil rights in the midst of Jim Crow laws and beyond. Martin Luther King, Jr., made numerous connections with the Bible in his famous speeches, invoking the Sermon on the Mount, the Exodus liberation, and in his “I Have A Dream” speech, echoing the book of Isaiah. He said he came from a long line of extremists, situating himself in the historical lineage of Amos, Jesus, the apostle Paul and reformer Martin Luther. In what was to be his last speech, King drew from the story of Moses:

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life ... But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain, and I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land.<sup>269</sup>

Then-Senator Barack Obama picked up on this theme in a speech on March 4, 2007, speaking of being part of the “Joshua generation,” which had been led to the doorstep of the promised land.<sup>270</sup> He weaves in a parallel with the book of Exodus to make a political point by telling the story of black liberation and connecting his generation to this lineage.

I'm here because somebody else marched. I'm here because you all sacrificed for me. I stand on the shoulders of giants. I thank the Moses generation; but we've got to remember, now, that Joshua had a job to do. ... The previous generation, the Moses generation, pointed the way. They took us 90% of the way there. We still got that 10% in order to cross to the other side. So the question, I guess, that I have today is what's called of us in this Joshua generation?

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<sup>269</sup> King delivered this speech, which mostly concerned the Memphis sanitation strike, on April 3, 1968, at the Mason Temple church in Memphis, TN. He was assassinated the following day. For a full text and video of the speech, see <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>. (Accessed on Feb. 11, 2013).

<sup>270</sup> The speech was delivered at Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church in Selma, Alabama, as part of a commemoration on the march on Washington. For a full text of the speech, see [http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2007/03/obamas\\_selma\\_speech\\_text\\_as\\_de.html](http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2007/03/obamas_selma_speech_text_as_de.html) (Accessed on Feb. 10, 2013); see also Jeffrey Siker, “President Obama, the Bible, and Political Rhetoric,” *Political Theology*, 13.5, 2012; 596-598.

African American Christians placed themselves in the midst of the story, seeing themselves as figures in an ongoing narrative.

African American interpreters remain skeptical about historical-critical methods, or attempts to parse the text into provable facts. They believed, like Hans Frei and others, that the Bible must be read as a unified whole, a story with a beginning and an end. It begins with time, with the creation of the world; it ends with the Apocalypse. In between is the story of still-evolving human history and action.<sup>271</sup> For African American slaves, the central unifying arc of the Bible is the liberation of the oppressed. The theme of liberation expressed in story form is indeed the essence of black religion, according to Cone.

Like the theme of liberation, the *form* of black religion in story was chosen for similar sociological reasons. The easiest way for the oppressed to defy conceptual definitions that justify their existence in servitude is to tell stories about another reality where they are accepted as human beings.<sup>272</sup>

Like Augustine's *Confessions*, black stories also draw on literary devices such as allegory and metaphor to communicate their place in the biblical narrative. Cone and others have taken criticism for their depiction of a black Jesus, for example, but this depiction was not meant literally. It was intended as a way of allowing blacks to identify with Jesus as a savior who was not white; Jesus could not be associated with the slave masters and oppressors who brutalized blacks. "If Jesus is not black in the context of black theology, then the resurrection has little significance for our times."<sup>273</sup> Black liberation theology rejects the notion that mainstream biblical interpretation has

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<sup>271</sup> Evans, 50-51.

<sup>272</sup> Cone, "Story," 150. Emphasis is Cone's.

<sup>273</sup> James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. New York and Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970; 218.

historically been neutral or objective.<sup>274</sup> The Bible must come alive in the lived experience of Christians themselves; it is both a broad and particular story rooted in the history of Christian story. The theologian is “before all else an exegete simultaneously of Scripture and of existence,” Cone writes.<sup>275</sup> It is not an abstract word, but rather a word addressed to those who are oppressed and humiliated.

The theological emphasis of liberation theologies falls not on individual sin, but on the sin embedded in social structures and systems. All liberation theologies offer reinterpretations of biblical texts from the standpoint of a particular context of experience and action.<sup>276</sup> The story of black theology is the “history of individuals coming together in the struggle to shape life according to commonly held values.”<sup>277</sup> The stories of oppression that emerge are part of the “journey into particularity” that Tracy insists is necessary to retrieve the liberating memories within the larger Christian framework, including the classic prophetic tradition, the preaching of Jesus to the poor and outcast, the conflicts and contradictions of the cross.<sup>278</sup>

Christian freedom remains an existence in the praxis of faith that trusts in and is loyal to God and God’s promises and commands for history. Above all, Christian freedom is a loyalty to God’s own privileged ones—the ones whose voice has not been heard save in prophetic and apocalyptic movements, the ones privileged to Jesus of Nazareth, the ones whose voice is still not heard by the dominant theologies of the West.<sup>279</sup>

Through the telling of their stories, black slaves and their descendants gained a powerful voice. Kathleen O’Connor writes that in order to come into the truth of one’s

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<sup>274</sup> See Athony Thiselton’s exploration of the hermeneutics of liberation in *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 410-470.

<sup>275</sup> James Cone, *God of the Oppressed*. New York, Seabury, 1975; 7.

<sup>276</sup> Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 410-470.

<sup>277</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 102.

<sup>278</sup> Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 391.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 392.

history, and to acquire moral agency, one must gain a voice—one must be willing to speak the truth, and speak the truth to power.<sup>280</sup> For Cone, this expression translates into worth—the worth of black humanity.<sup>281</sup> In their lyrics and stories, the black community was able to reclaim its story, an important element in recovery from oppression.<sup>282</sup> The act of storytelling “enables all of us to make sense of our lives and to feel integrated as members of society.”<sup>283</sup> These stories help relocate a victim in time and space; they tell a history that is under attack. Importantly, they restore dignity and worth. Expressing pain with words or description is often impossible—the closest we can get is drawing on metaphor, and eventually pain may grow so acute that even comparisons become hollow.<sup>284</sup> It is no surprise that one of the first things oppressors take from victims is their voice.<sup>285</sup> Personal narratives are systematically destroyed; communal histories are recast.

We have seen this phenomenon with many other oppressed groups, including Jews during and after the Holocaust, and the plight of the developing world today. These stories not only help communities regain their voice and agency, but also have stretched and pulled modern Christians in their beliefs, often to uncomfortable places. Robert McAffree Brown writes of being personally transformed by Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, which tells the story of a 15-year-old boy whose family was killed in Auschwitz. Wiesel also recasts the story of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob wandering the earth during the Holocaust in a later work, *Ani Maamin*. “The tale ... becomes a testament of faith—faith that *in*

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<sup>280</sup> Kathleen O’Connor, “Comforting the Afflicted,” in *The Living Pulpit*, 11 no 4, 2002; 7.

<sup>281</sup> James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*. NY: Orbis Books, 1972; p.126.

<sup>282</sup> See Teresa Godwin Phelps, *Shattered Voices*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

<sup>283</sup> Phelps, 55.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*



*spite of all*, God does not remain aloof but engages, in however veiled form, in the sufferings of creation.”<sup>286</sup> A re-reading of scripture is going on today in poor and oppressed countries, reinforcing the need for change and action, Brown believes. The Bible, he writes, used to revolutionary: “We tamed it. Now our sisters and brothers in the Third World are freeing it up once again to communicate its liberating message.”<sup>287</sup>

This is in part what David Tracy meant by the “analogical imagination,” which allows real similarities and differences to emerge.”<sup>288</sup> William F. Lynch also insisted on analogical imagination, which finds in stories of limitation the path to the infinite. It is found in the mundane, ordinary details of our lives.

This path is both narrow and direct; it leads, I believe, straight through our human realities, through our labor, our disappointments, our friends, our game legs, our harvests, our subjection to time. There are no shortcuts to beauty and truth. We must go *through* the finite, the limited, the definite, omitting none of it lest we omit some of the potencies of being-in-the-flesh.<sup>289</sup>

The story told by black Christians is steeped in the harsh realities of physical labor, bondage and suffering. Yet somehow, through story, these realities are able to embody hope. This hope derives from a history in which ordinary men and women fail and are redeemed—a world in which the oppressed are set free. In order to see that hope in ancient texts, black interpreters had to be able to hear the echoes of their struggle, their experience, in the stories of the Israelites and in the words and promises of Jesus. They had to reinterpret what had been given to them—a book taught to them through the prism

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<sup>286</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, “My Story and The Story,” 169.

<sup>287</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, “Starting Over: New Beginning Points for Theology,” 547.

<sup>288</sup> Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 447.

<sup>289</sup> William F. Lynch, S.J., *Christ and Apollo: The Dimensions of the Literary Imagination*. New York: New American Library, 1963; 23. Emphasis is Lynch’s.

of white supremacy—and find a new way to tell the same story. In the words of H.R. Niebuhr, a mysterious truth was found in the midst of the stories of their lives.

### *Afterward*

A classic story draws us back again and again for reinterpretation. It challenges, provokes and upends assumptions about our world and our place in that world. It evokes an excess of meaning. The biblical narrative certainly fits that category. From the gospel writers to the Apostle Paul to the *Confessions* of St. Augustine to modern-day stories such as that of black theology, we see the story continue to inspire new meaning and interpretation. We see this in the lives of individuals and in communities that shape individual stories. We see mundane stories that are formed by, and in turn form, this ancient sacred story.

We all have a part in a paradoxical and mysterious story. The sacred stories we connect with, and the mundane stories we tell as part of that world, are the makings of a shared history. As individuals and as members of a community, they are “made of the stuff of a life lived in a place and in a history.”<sup>290</sup> We tell tales and suddenly are able to hear our experiences rhyme; in the words of Sallie McFague, we see patterns emerge in the tapestry of our lives wherein we are empowered to become our emerging selves.<sup>291</sup> Hearing stories of others helps to inform our personal stories. We see resemblances to our lives in sacred stories such as the Gospel narrative; these bigger stories, classics, contain clues, analogies, which point to a mysterious truth. Ultimately, like Augustine, what we seek in these stories is self-knowledge. In every act of interpretation, we seek an

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<sup>290</sup> Hampl, 32.

<sup>291</sup> Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology*, 3.

authentic encounter with a text or with a God that “conquers a remoteness,” where we meet the “other” in a new idea or new realization.<sup>292</sup> Through our limitations as finite beings, and through the concrete experiences of a history recalled, we are reminded of our dependence on—and are involvement in—something larger. We suddenly become part of a narrative world that transforms our own personal narrative.

Patricia Hampl aptly warns of the danger of failing to craft a story that anchors us to that divine “something”: “If we refuse to do the work of creating this personal version of the past, someone else will do it for us.”<sup>293</sup> A community, our families, our socioeconomic standing and other factors always shape our stories; we are all certainly born into a narrative that we must make a decision about, either to affirm, reshape or deny. We also see throughout history examples of those in power shaping stories for the purpose of control: in Nazi Germany, and in the tactics of North American slave masters. Collective histories of Jews and blacks were destroyed and rewritten. I am in awe of the people who fought to take back their own histories, their own selves, by testifying to these horrific trials. It is a testament to the human spirit, and most of all, to the hope in spite-of embodied in stories as old as the book of Job.<sup>294</sup>

The black community in particular found freedom and agency in choosing a story for itself; it refused to be defined by an imposed narrative made subversive. It was through a second naivete, through the process of suspicion and questioning, that this

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<sup>292</sup> Ricoeur, *Conflict of Interpretations*, 17.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Teresa Godwin Phelps examines the underside of history in her book, *Shattered Voices*, which looks at the role of truth commissions in bringing redress to those whose voices have been oppressed. She maintains that allowing people to tell their stories, the stories that history books do not contain and have been suppressed by those in power, is the only way to bring about resolution without revenge (*Shattered Voices*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

more authentic scriptural story—one of hope and redemption—came to be told. The community participated in redemption by telling its story, from the soaring speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., to the quiet stand of Rosa Parks, to the poetry of Maya Angelou, the community made a public confession of faith by testifying to the lived experience of oppression and redemption. According to David Tracy, it is incumbent on every theologian, every believer, to engage in public discourse, to make their truth explicit.<sup>295</sup> The black community began telling its story in private, often secretive, church gatherings or in fearful corners of church galleries, in coded words of prayer, or in nighttime worship circles. Eventually these narratives seeped into speeches and public statements; they now fill books and continue to inspire movies, stage plays and other forms of public expression. It is clear these stories continue to unfold. Black believers became participants in theology simply by telling their stories, by making known the power of faith in their lives.

Augustine, too, came to adopt the Christian story as his own only through the act of constant and painful questioning. He began to doubt the theories of the Neoplatonists, the astrologers, the Manichees. He ultimately found truth in the hard, lived reality of his life, and he found his truth, and his redemption, in the midst of a beginning, middle and end—between the tick and tock of his own Genesis and Revelation. In *City of God*, Augustine also speaks of the participatory role of God’s community, the church, in history.<sup>296</sup> In Augustine’s view, every event in linear history has a participatory dimension; human words and deeds cannot be understood solely in terms of temporal

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<sup>295</sup> Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 28-31.

<sup>296</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson. New York: Penguin, 1984.

causality and progression.<sup>297</sup> On an individual and communal level, God's plan requires participation. He shows in the *Confessions* one of the most powerful ways of participating is through the formation and telling of one's own life narrative.

What initially drew me to the topic of narrative theology was curiosity as to why it is that some relate so strongly to the Christian story, others are repelled by it, and still others are apathetic to it. The basic story is the same, yet it has inspired many different responses—often opposing responses. While white slave owners cited verses that supported slavery, Martin Luther King, Jr., and other Civil Rights activists pointed to a God who delivers his people from slavery. Some Christians point to passages that seem to justify the use of violence and war, to justify putting those who do not worship the Christian God “to the sword” (Dt. 13:15); others cite passages that imply a peaceful approach to outside threats, that implore Christians to “turn the other cheek” (Mt. 5:39).

Hans Frei and Paul Ricoeur, along with H.R. Niebuhr, address part of this paradox in their insistence that truth and meaning in Christianity cannot be found in scientific or historical inquiry. It cannot be found in declaratives or proclamations—it is simply not a “yes” or “no” question to be answered. It must be told in the form it was written, as a story with a subjective, personal and often incongruent path. Frei best of all describes what becomes of our theology and belief when we rely on history or science for answers. When we forget the poetry of the divine, theology eventually becomes deadened and unable to speak to the realities of existing as fallible humans in an imperfect world. Faith becomes a one-dimensional enterprise; it becomes propositional instead of experiential.

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<sup>297</sup> See Matthew Levering, “Linear and Participatory History: Augustine’s City of God,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation*. 5 No 2, Fall 2011; 177.

Ricoeur opens the door further to ontological possibility when he speaks of the power of the language of poetry, the qualities of story that allow us to organize and relate our experiences to those of others and the necessity to wrestle and struggle with a story. A narrative may overcome us initially, as Frei, Auerbach and others believe the Christian story does—but ultimately it is a story we must choose. Stories we read and stories we tell have an interactive quality, influenced by myriad cultural, socioeconomic and situational factors. Stories do choose us—but we must choose stories, too. We do this by telling it, retelling it, reenacting it, refiguring it in light of the stories of others and living it through our actions. The story is about us—individuals and communities—and God; it is found in the space, the clearing, between us. David Tracy is certainly right when he says this involves risk, it involves letting go “of the distancing stance of the every day” and daring to enter into the questions of theology—and into its story.<sup>298</sup>

I come to this curiosity about the power of story as a journalist, through telling stories of those who have been painfully harmed by the Christian story, such as victims of the Catholic sex abuse scandal, as well as those who found inspiration and deep meaning in the Christian story—meaning reflected in their work and actions. This curiosity about the “grand story” of Christianity, how it can enrapture some and alienate others, also stems from personal experience. It stems from a story that was told numerous times by both my parents, behind podiums at churches and Christian convention. There were magazine articles, and recently, a book. I sat in the audience detached, not remembering a single detail of this story, yet playing my part. I had memorized the cadences in my mom’s voice, the pacing of her words, the pained looks of consternation that swept across

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<sup>298</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 126.

her face; I watched the reaction of the audience, the intriguing altar call that ensued when every head was bowed, every eye closed....

She had made the perfect dumplings for dinner that autumn night, Nov. 19, 1980.<sup>299</sup> She arranged plates and silverware, and called for the family. I was nowhere to be found. They walked to the bottom of the hill where I had gone to fetch the newspaper. They searched and agonized, soon fighting fear, trying not to imagine the worst.

“It was dusk on a quiet country road—where could a 5-year-old be?” My mom would ask the audience. My parents huddled in the garage and prayed. A few minutes later, the ringing of a phone pierced the silence. My dad reached the receiver first, while my mom wondered in fear: what would the ransom be? How much did they want? Did we have enough to pay? She mentally tallied their assets, deciding then that she would give up everything. She would sell it all. She would go into debt for the rest of her life.

But it was not a ransom call. It was the police. Hours later, she and my dad pieced together what they called my “testimony”: The man had grabbed me at the bottom of the hill near the mailboxes. An hour later, a patrolman spotted a beat-up station wagon with a busted taillight on a local highway. Sensing something strange, he decided to make a traffic stop. In the driver’s seat he saw a disheveled young man and a neat little girl beside him. The driver told the officer he was a photographer, and that the girl was going to model for him. When she shook her head no, the man said he was actually babysitting

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<sup>299</sup> Paraphrased from a speech (titled, “God Gave His Only Son”) delivered by my mom, Bonnie Evans, on June 13, 1983, to a conference of Aglow, an evangelical women’s organization.

for a friend. Once again, she shook her head. The officer handcuffed the man and placed the girl in his car.

In her speeches, my mom's voice would lower, gearing up for the big finale: "In the beginning, God made everything perfect...he made a man and woman, and he gave them paradise. But one awful day, Satan came and kidnapped God's children. When God went to look for them that fateful day, they had been removed from their rightful place in his family."

In this story of our Genesis, there was a ransom—a very high ransom. Weak and willful, we had been kidnapped by sin, by our own selfish wants and desires. Without hesitation, God paid the price. He gave his son, his Only Begotten Son, so we wouldn't have to make that kind of sacrifice. He paid the price because he loves us; he risked his most valuable possession because he wants us to be free. "I never had any trouble believing that God loved the world," she would say, "but I always had a little trouble believing he could love me that much ..."

Heads around the room would nod. She would take another long, reflective pause. I would fidget, reaching deep for emotional stamina: "In a moment I am going to give what we in the church call an altar call," she would say. "It is an opportunity for each of you to respond to what God has already done for you. Let today be the first day of your salvation."

Murmurs, chants, the faint words of Bible hymns being sung and verses being recited would eventually melt into a single indecipherable hum. And then, one by one, men and women, some toting children, would trickle to the front, silent at first, soon whimpering. A few delegates would come forward, Bibles in hand, surrounding these



new believers who gradually became one body, swaying in harmony with the spirit. Some would wander off alone and kneel or sit cross-legged on the floor, heads in hands, crying and rocking; others whirled around the room in an anxious frenzy, yelling, waving, singing praises. I would be still, watching and dissecting each moment, each person, trying to understand, trying desperately—always disappointedly—to be swept up in the story.

I could feel the weight of it all, this narrative that anchored our faith—the narrative that in part led my parents to answer the call to be “born again.” I witnessed the telling of this story from the stands, in the audience, far away from any real connection. Years later my mother and I argued over the facts; we fought over whether she had a right to tell the story, particularly in my adulthood. We clashed over the theological conclusions she and others drew from the story, and the motives behind its theatrical telling. The story wasn’t mine—it didn’t ring true. I spent many years rebelling in destructive ways. The warning of Patricia Hampl stings: “We carry our wounds and perhaps even worse, our capacity to wound, forward with us.”<sup>300</sup>

I believe my parents do have a story to tell that speaks to their spiritual experience. It is different than mine. What gives me hope is the diversity of stories, and approaches to story, this grand narrative is able to contain. There are stories of Jesus as a humble “Son of Man,” a king who came to fulfill Old Testament prophecy, a peace-loving servant who turns the other cheek, a divine being who came to save the world. The early Christian martyrs participated in the story of Christ by reenacting it in their own deaths; Augustine saw in the story a description of his sinful inclinations and a path to

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<sup>300</sup> Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories*, 33.

redemption. The story has inspired liberation movements, including Latino, black and feminist struggles for social and economic equality. It has served to justify war—and peace. It has drawn believers to the altar, and just as dramatically, it has pushed them away.

There are as many approaches to the narrative, including Hauerwas, who sees it as a model for ethical living; Tracy who finds analogies that can lead to greater pluralism; Robert McAfee Brown, who views the stories of others as a basis for inner expansion and growth; Kermode, who sees the Christian story as one of secrets and mystery. Frei reads a realistic narrative that describes the identity of Jesus Christ and the community he encountered. Through the lens of phenomenology and hermeneutical inquiry, Paul Ricoeur finds a parable for human existence. The language of poetry and metaphor, contained in the organization of narrative, serve to build our identities and worlds.

Ricoeur's approach embodies at least one element I believe is essential in the reception of a sacred narrative and the telling of our own pieces: It must be questioned. It must be scrutinized. It must pass through stages of criticism. It must undergo revision. It must change. As a little girl sitting in the audience, watching new believers file to the front of the room, I felt honored to be part of God's plan—and loved the attention it brought in our evangelical circles. But after a while I had to question it. I had to honor my confusion and emotional distance, and eventually, I had to shed a story that felt too small. In order to stay relevant, every story has to continue growing and changing. That is the point I believe Frei was most of all trying to make—the story must be allowed to unfold, to change, and to be retold, in order to remain true. It must walk the same weary steps as

the Prodigal Son, through a naïve place of comfort, through a wandering path of trial, and eventually toward a renewed place of truth.

What I hope we can ultimately achieve is what Hampl calls a “swirling, changing wholeness” that reflects the radiance of the past in spite of its ugly and dark episodes. In this journey, in the simple act of remembering, recounting and relaying events, I hope we come to deeper places of self and communal understanding, and I hope we never quite reach the end of the story. As Augustine believed, it is in knowing oneself that we come to know God. And it is in knowing God that we come to know ourselves.

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