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# Telling Stories: The Concept of Narrative and Biblical Authority

MARK HARGREAVES

## ABSTRACT

Mark Hargreaves invites us to adopt a narrative approach to our reading of scripture. Following Ricoeur in proposing the inescapability of narrative structuring our temporal existence he says that the authoritativeness of Scripture will be found as its master story, and the smaller narrative units that make up its plot, are read and reread in the context of our lives. The Bible's narrative is a narrative I am invited to enter, and to permit its authority to shape the story of my own life.

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THESE is something of a crisis brewing in evangelical circles regarding the authority of the Bible. The battle lines are being drawn. It is now common in America to equate upholding the Bible's authority with a belief in inerrancy. Yet there are many people who would consider themselves evangelical who would not be comfortable with words like inerrancy and infallibility. The key question has become 'Must the Bible be inerrant to be authoritative?' It seems to me that when the discussion reaches such a point, what is being discussed is not so much the authority of the Bible but the notion of authority itself. In the contemporary debate the model for an authoritative book is a text book, which is both definitive and exhaustive. If this is the only kind of authoritative book of which we can conceive we are in danger of regarding the Bible as some kind of heavenly text book. I want to break away from the idea that if the Bible is authoritative it must therefore be inerrant and develop an account of biblical authority which draws on the nature of the biblical text itself, rather than a preconceived notion of authority.

I wish to develop a new vocabulary for biblical authority, a vocabulary which can be used to speak of the Bible's authority in such a way that does justice to the nature of the text. It is widely acknowledged that the Bible is largely narrative in form, and inerrancy is not something that fits easily with narrative: we do not talk of narratives being either 'errant' or 'inerrant'. There are evangelical scholars, such as Tom Wright and Lesslie Newbigin,<sup>1</sup> who have put forward the teasing suggestion that the concept of narrative has the

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1 Tom Wright emphasises narrative in his article 'How can the Bible be Authoritative' which provides an excellent introduction to the subject of biblical authority, *Vox Evangelica*, vol. 21 (1991), pp 7-32. See also Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, SPCK, London 1989. Newbigin places much emphasis on the importance of story in the Bible.

potential to re-interpret the Bible's authority. But this has not been pursued in detail. So, I want to go further in this article and explore that potential. The new vocabulary I will be outlining for the discussion of biblical authority will be drawn from the language of narrative.

### What is Narrative?

It used to be so simple: narrative was the straightforward telling of a tale. But now we need a far more rigorous account. 'Narrative' is something of a cross-disciplinary buzz-word. Arguments about narrative can be found in journals of history, literature, science and philosophy. It is important because it raises issues which go to the heart of all knowledge. The word narrative has progressed from being a simple matter of story telling to being a technical, epistemological term.

A good illustration of this progression is to be found in the study of history. Narrative in history used to be thought of in a merely decorative sense. It was the form, the packaging, in which history was presented.<sup>2</sup> It was thought possible to strip history of narrative so revealing the 'bare historical facts'. Such was the extent to which narrative was thought to be superfluous to the real essence of history.

However, the potential and inescapability of narrative began to be explored more systematically by historians such as Danto and Gallie.<sup>3</sup> They realized that narrative was not simply the form in which their discipline was commonly presented but that which made it possible to speak of history at all.<sup>4</sup> They saw that an event only becomes historical as it is located within a narrative. We only understand the past as we see it in the context of a narrative. There is no such thing as a random, isolated historical event because for us to speak of an event we must see how it is related to other events, how it fits into the story. History is explained by 'emplotment'.

The temporal structure of narrative is therefore necessary to the organisation of the past. To present history as narrative is more than simply to list actual events in the order of their occurrence; as it is the organisation of events into coherent patterns. Historical events take on 'meaning' within some larger temporal structure. To ask about the significance of an event is to ask a question which can only be answered in the context of a narrative. Narrative constitutes the natural context in which events acquire historical significance.

Historians made the link between narrative and understanding by highlighting the potential of 'narrative understanding'. This is the way that things are understood by being located within the context of a narrative. It needs to be said here, however obvious that it may appear, that what defines narrative is the presence of a beginning, a middle and an end. This is the essential

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2 The classic definition of this scientific approach to history is to be found in C. G. Hempel's article 'The Function of General Laws in History', *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 39 (1942)

3 A. C. Danto, *The Analytic Philosophy of History*, CUP, Cambridge 1965 and W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and Historical Understanding*, Chatto & Windus, London 1964.

narrative structure. The pattern is common to all narratives, and the corollary of narrative understanding is the ability to follow a story, more precisely, to follow the progression of the narrative towards an end. If something is to be understood it must be possible to locate it within a narrative whole. To have understood something is to have been able to locate it within the schema of beginning, middle and end.

Many theologians have recently rediscovered that Christianity is something understood narratively. It arises out of a grasp of the story which the Church has been entrusted to tell. Conversion comes when people not only hear the message of the incarnation, the story of Jesus' life and death, but when they recognize these events as the pivotal middle of the Christian story. The person of Jesus can only be fully understood when he is seen coming after the beginning of the story, the account of creation and subsequent fall and before the end, the establishment of the kingdom of God. Jesus is both the means by which God reaches out and redeems humankind, thereby undoing the effects of the fall, and the one in whom the hope of a restored cosmos is founded.

### Anti-narrativism

The rise of narrative has not gone unopposed. There are many modern thinkers with a strong aversion to it, on the grounds that it propounds a misleading illusion of completeness, and they resist what they see as its illusion of meaning. R. Scholes has gone so far as to suggest that narrativity is an 'opiate' which must be renounced.<sup>5</sup> Narrative authorizes a way of understanding the world which does not fit with the anti-narrativists' experience of life as arbitrary, random and meaningless.

Some contemporary thinkers seek to deconstruct those narrative codes which give rise to a sense of wholeness in life. They seek to expose as artifice all clear beginnings, middles and ends as well as all meanings and themes. These, they claim, are artificially imposed on the arbitrary flux of experience.

The literary hero of such an approach is Camus. In his novel *L'Étranger* he warns of the danger of narrativizing. In the first part of the book, Mersault recounts the unconnected and random events of an absurd life: his murder of an Arab appears as an event completely without reason. In the second part of the book, and in order to inculcate him, a judge re-tells Mersault's life in the form of a narrative which culminates in the act of murder. The reader is left to ponder the question of whether justice is done to his experience by the way the judge arranges the events of his life into a plot. The 'meaning' imposed by the narrative comes only as a result of the desire to find meaning

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4 Ricoeur has developed these initial insights in his seminal work *Time and Narrative*, written in three volumes and published in English between 1984 and 1988, he suggests that it is only narrative which allows us to speak of temporality. Apart from narrative, he says, we have no means of making human being-in-time-intelligible; '... time becomes human time to the extent that it is articulated in a narrative way.' (*Time and Narrative*, University of Chicago Press, London vol. 1 1984, pp 149.)

5 R. Scholes 'Language, Narrative and Anti-Narrative', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7(1980), p 212.

by forcing quite random events into significant wholes. What society lacks, according to Camus, is the heart to let go of the comforting illusion of sequence engendered by narratives and the sense of meaning to which they give rise.

Such attacks on narrative are part of the contemporary desire to debunk the concepts of truth and authority. In this post-modern culture there are many 'truths' and no single source of authority. There is a resistance to narratives on a grand scale, which have been labelled 'master' (or 'meta') narratives. Such overarching narratives make a strong claim to be taken seriously as sources of truth and authority. Some contemporary thinkers are uncomfortable with such narratives, preferring instead to work with scaled down, 'mini' narratives. The influential French scholar Lyotard has suggested that our postmodern condition is fundamentally an incredulity towards 'meta' narratives.<sup>6</sup> His own opposition to such overarching stories is evident in his preference for 'little narratives', which claim no great authority. Thus, his objection to meta-narratives comes out of his rejection of authority and has drawn attention to the fact that authority often resides in master-narratives, which are able to introduce a sense of meaning.

A Lyotardian suspicion of master-narratives can also be found in modern biblical studies and the renewed interest in the narrative of the Bible is very different from much of what has gone before. In previous generations Christians have emphasised the biblical story, the grand narrative of Scripture running from Genesis to Revelation. In the past the strong sense of the beginning of the Christian story in the garden of Eden has been matched by a fervent anticipation of the end. This pre-critical reading of the biblical text is evident in the medieval mystery plays in which the whole drama of Scripture is presented. By contrast, the modern interest in biblical narrative is on a much smaller scale. For example, Don Cupitt prefers to live in a 'tissue of fictions' rather than submit himself to the 'constraint' of the biblical master-narrative. He too prefers mini-narratives with no claim to be authoritative. He argues strongly against the Bible being viewed as an 'absolute Book... the real World-Story.'<sup>7</sup>

### Master-narratives

The most vehement attacks of the anti-narrativists have been reserved for master-narratives. These can be described as being in some sense foundational narratives because they have a very strong influence on understanding. Master-narratives provide our terms of reference.

Perhaps the most sustained antipathy towards the idea of master-narratives is to be found in Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*.<sup>8</sup> Jameson understands narrative as being an all-

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6 J-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1986, p xxiv.

7 D. Cupitt, *What is Story?*, SCM London 1991.

8 F. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Methuen, London 1981.

informing process - a central function or instance of the human mind. *The Political Unconscious* is written to expose and refute all interpretation which understands texts in terms of a particular interpretative master-code (which is invariably narrative in form). What he wants to rebut is the influence of the uninterpreted, political unconscious, that buried reality of fundamental history through which everything is interpreted.

Jameson highlights the work and importance of master-narratives. He shows how they operate behind our backs, as it were, to endow events and ideas with significance. He describes the way that we so often understand things by interpreting them within the terms of an overarching master-narrative, not least the theological master-narrative of Christianity. To all such devices he is implacably opposed. A classic modern example is Marxism, with its strong sense of history as a great collective story. All the events of history are understood in the terms of this story as the struggle to wrest a realm of freedom from a realm of necessity. As history is thematized in this way so all the events of history are seen as episodes in a vast unfinished plot.

Jameson is antagonistic towards master-narratives because they represent for him the locus of centralised authority. He is right in that things are located within their bounds. In this way they control interpretation. Master-narratives determine how events are to be understood; reality is interpreted by 'fitting it into' an underlying narrative.

I am prepared to accept this analysis of the working of master-narratives, but I part company with Jameson and Lyotard when I entertain the possibility that authority may be concentrated in a single narrative. The anti-narrativists do not accept the suggestion that God may have invested a certain narrative with authority. Christian understanding is based on the ability to follow the grand narrative of Scripture and Christians come to understand life by interpreting it within the framework of the biblical narrative. When reality is thus interpreted 'through' the biblical narrative then the Bible is exerting its authority, the authority of a master-narrative.

### **Reading the Bible as master-narrative**

There is much to be said for reading Scripture as master-narrative. It does treat the biblical text with integrity as a complete work which it is denied by the historico-critical approach. It takes seriously the contention that the canon was not arbitrarily formed, but arose out of the recognition of the mutual fitness of the texts one for another. There is a logic in the arrangement of the books from Genesis to Revelation. To read the Bible as master-narrative is to continue a process which began within the canon itself. The narratives of the Yahwist in the Old Testament and Luke in the New, seek to 'out-narrate' the other stories. Both strive to be all-encompassing after the fashion of a master-narrative.

There are, however, some serious objections to this approach. For example, does not the reading of the Bible as master-narrative foist an artificial unity on the text? And is it to ignore the fact that much of the Bible is not

narrative in form? The first of these objections is perhaps the more difficult to answer. How can we speak of the biblical narrative when the Bible is a diverse text written over many centuries by a wide variety of authors writing in very different contexts? I have said that the minimum requirements of a narrative are beginning, middle and end, when a reader perceives these in a text then a narrative can be said to exist as the reader is able to 'follow' the story.

It is quite clear that the Bible satisfies these minimum requirements: it does provide the 'followable' structure on which Christian understanding is grounded. The story begins with creation and ends with the promise of the establishment of a new kingdom; the person of Jesus clearly occupies the middle of this narrative. The unity this requires of the Bible is a very heavily qualified unity and leaves plenty of scope for its diversity. It can cope with the fractures of the text. In short, we might say the Bible is united by its plot.

This contention would appear more convincing if the Bible contained only narrative; but it does not. There is also hymn, law, proverb and prophecy. Does talk of the Bible as master-narrative fail to do justice to this 'polyphonic' nature?<sup>9</sup> I think not. The dominance of the narrative structure does not eclipse the non-narrative genres. It simply supplies a framework within which they take on meaning. Take the example of the legislative texts of the Old Testament which are placed in the mouth of Moses, within the narrative framework of the sojourn at Sinai. Narrative provides the context in which the Covenant takes on meaning. For example, when just treatment is asked for the poor, the slave and the alien, it is recalled that Israel was also alien and enslaved in Egypt.<sup>10</sup> God's Law does not come in a vacuum, it is narrative which 'affords a grasp of the perspective in which the Covenant is situated.'<sup>11</sup>

### Narrative characteristics

The shift to narrative requires a new vocabulary of authority drawn from literary terminology, hence the importance of plot and theme.

*Plot* : We all have a highly-developed, innate ability to follow a plot. It is an ability which skilful advertisers have drawn on in constructing complex plot lines in the space of a thirty second commercial. Sanyo has recently produced a mechanism for videos which enables the viewer to fast-forward a film whilst catching enough of the dialogue to grasp the plot. It is thus not too outlandish to suggest that Christian readers of the Bible grasp its plot as a whole. The fact that a discernible plot can be detected in the pages of Scripture is also evidenced by the creeds. They rule out any reconstruction

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9 This is a phrase Ricoeur uses to describe the complexity of religious language in 'Naming God', *Union Seminary Quarterly*, vol. 4 (1979).

10 Cf. Deut. 24: 17-18 'You pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge; but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.'

11 G. Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, SCM, London 1983, p 9. Gutiérrez is here showing the importance which he, and the liberation theologians in general, attach to narrative.

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of the Bible's plot which has as the main characters Cain, Jezebel and Nebuchadnezzar.

The Creeds encapsulate what the Church has traditionally regarded as the essential components of the biblical master-narrative. They mark out the boundaries of a Christian reading of the text, though they do not claim to offer a definitive account of the Bible's content. There is room within this broad framework for many different re-tellings: there are, after all, four Gospels and not just one; there are two accounts of creation and there are many mini-narratives. The Bible tells its story through the narrating of many 'detail stories'. So whilst the master-narrative is ultimately inarticulable it is nevertheless graspable in its plot.

It is in this sense that we can say that the Bible is united by its plot. There is in the Bible a scarlet thread, a followable story, which encapsulates the whole. A Christian reading of Scripture is one which follows this lead and understands the Bible as a grand overarching narrative.

This plot provides a framework, an interpretative pattern, which bestows meaning on the life of the Christian reader. The biblical plot is an overarching whole which imbues my life with meaning as I can locate the story of my own life within it. The authority of the Bible is felt when it is read as a master-narrative, and acts as the bounds within which all other narratives (including the story of our lives) can be re-interpreted. To be a Christian is to have grasped, or better, to be grasped by, the Christian master-narrative as the framework by which to read history. The Bible demands that we read history according to this interpretation. It is to see that at the beginning, and at the end, there is God.

*Theme* : The Christian reading of Scripture as one narrative raises the possibility of finding themes running throughout the biblical narrative. John Barton has said:

'however difficult it may be in practice to establish what are the main themes of the Old Testament, once one begins... to treat it as, in effect, a single book there is no more difficulty in principle than in extracting the main theme of any other very long and diffuse work'.<sup>12</sup>

In recent years a new branch of literary criticism has emerged called 'Thematics', which entertains the possibility that texts say something about reality beyond the text. One of the representatives for this new movement is Seymour Chatman. He defines theme as 'a general idea or concept that the reader can absorb from the literary text and relate to the real world at large'.<sup>13</sup> Theme has been rediscovered as the feature in which a text's referential potential resides: it is theme which enables us to say what a work is 'about'. Readers often have a strong sense of what a work is about as it resonates with

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12 John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, DLT, London 1984, p 82.

13 Seymour Chatman 'On the Notion of Theme in Narrative', *Essays on Aesthetics: Perspectives on the Work of Monroe C. Beardsley*, ed. J. Fisher, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 1983, pp 161-179.



their own situation and experience. A link is thus made between the text and the present, and the bridge is theme.

All this is relevant to our discussion of authority as it would seem that any account of biblical authority must include a sense in which the Bible can refer to reality. The claim that something is an authority necessarily entails the claim that it speaks of truth. Its authority should not be collapsed into a purely functional term. The Bible is not simply an authority because it has an authoritative function in the lives of Christians - giving them an interpretative frame by which to make sense of life. It is; but it is also something more. Christians dare to claim that the Bible speaks of truth: it depicts the way things are.

This reality-depicting aspect of the biblical text emerges when a narrative reading allows themes to come to the fore. The Bible's referential potential lies in its themes. It is supported by the Holy Spirit who works in the area of thematic resonance. He brings about a recognition of the thematic relevance of Scripture. This is the common Christian experience of Scripture addressing a contemporary situation.

### **Implications for the notion of biblical authority**

This new vocabulary of biblical authority is suggestive of a particular way in which the Bible exercises its authority. I want to pursue that now, and begin to suggest how the theoretical work set out above works out in practice.

Let me begin with a negative statement. The authority of narrative is not the same as the authority of a text-book. It is not authoritative because it offers definitive statements. One cannot turn to the back of a narrative and look up the answer to a particular question. However, some evangelicals seem to understand it this way, not because the Bible deserves to be read this way, but because their view of authority means it has to be read this way. The Bible is not a text-book. It gives not so much timeless truths, in propositional form, as stories. The frustration of this generation of evangelicals is the same as the expert in the law who asked Jesus a perfectly straightforward question - 'Who is my neighbour?'. We do not know what he thought of his answer. My guess is that he did not think he got a straight answer; he got a story.

If all authority in heaven on earth has been given to Jesus then his answer to the lawyer can be said to have been, in some sense, an authoritative answer. And it took the form of a parabolic story. So let us begin to make a constructive case from the starting point of Jesus' own stories, in the hope that what we say of these mini-narratives may throw light on the nature of the authority of the overarching biblical story.

What then, is the authority of a parable and how does it work? The parables issue a challenge to see things from a different perspective; that is their appeal and why they continue to be so striking. They are great moments of disclosure. They reveal God's point of view, which is shown to be so different from the human view. Here lies the element of invitation in the parables. Are we, the hearers, to share in God's perspective? The parables are

not rules we choose either to ignore or to obey; they involve us. They continue to challenge us. We can read a rule in a text-book, and never need to look at it again - but the parables call us back. We never exhaust their meaning. They continue to inspire us to see things in a new way.

The parables 'work' as they involve us. That is why Jesus told them and why they are so powerful. The parable of the Good Samaritan does not give the most succinct, complete answer to the question 'Who is my neighbour?', but it does make readers radically question their attitude to others. We are not speaking of the authority, for example, of an encyclopaedia of dance which teaches everything there is to know about dance, it is the authority of an experienced partner who patiently, week by week, teaches me to dance. The authority of narrative being proposed is different, let us say, from the authority of a policeman who may arrest me whether I want to be arrested or not. In the face of his authority I can either succumb or run away. But the authority of the Bible is more complex than that. It is more like the authority of a spiritual director or therapist who tries not so much to do something to me as to work with me. She will go at my pace. She will lead me forward gently, one step at a time. She will not, like the policeman, have cause to rely on the arm of the Law. I may choose not to tell everything, or even not go at all - the exercise works well when my trust is won over in time and as I allow myself to be challenged and changed.

R. Schafer has drawn attention to the importance of narrative in psychoanalysis. This goes right back to Freud himself, who laid so much emphasis on the significance of myth. Schafer defines the object of psychoanalysis as helping the analysand to be a 'reliable narrator':<sup>14</sup> people often go to see a psychoanalyst when life is no longer making sense, when their narration has become unreliable. Their lives are out of control, everything seems random and meaningless. The job of the psychoanalyst is to make them part of the same story, the ability to give an account of one's life in the form of a coherent narrative is indicative of a healthy mind. The psychoanalyst listens to the elements of the story, and then suggests the outline of a plot. As the elements of the story are configured within the plot so meaning and purpose emerge.

Is this not something of how the master-narrative of Scripture operates? Life can often be experienced as random and meaningless; the Christian story, as found in the Bible, makes sense of it. Christians make sense of their life by seeing it in terms of the great overarching story. The biblical story 'enplots' my life.

### **Liberation theology and the Bible**

In liberation theology we find in Christian practice just the kind of reading of Scripture which I have been outlining in theory. In the Latin American setting we can see a narrative reading of Scripture which pays close attention to the Bible's all-embracing plot as well as showing a concern for its referential themes. The liberationists have much to teach us.

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14 R. Schafer 'Narration in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, (1980).

Western theologians have encountered some difficulty in categorizing the South American view of the Bible which hints at the way in which the liberation theologians are breaking out of traditional constraints. The liberationists themselves are convinced of the biblical orientation of their theology. That might be thought of as endearing liberation theology to evangelicals, but evangelicals are often wary of what Nuñez sees as 'their low view of biblical authority'.<sup>15</sup> Yet those Western theologians of a more liberal inclination, who would admit to holding a low view of biblical authority themselves, are sometimes just as keen to distance themselves from liberationist readings of Scripture, which are often thought of as being uncritically supernaturalist and neo-orthodox.

Gustavo Gutiérrez, perhaps the most famous and influential theologian of liberation, seeks to reflect in his theology a 'militant reading of the Bible' which restores the Bible to ordinary Christian people. One of the great characteristics of grass-root readers of the Bible is their reading of the Bible as a single text. This contrasts with the Western tendency to dissect the text. In South America the Bible is more likely to be read as a 'narrative totality'.<sup>16</sup> As Gutiérrez puts it: 'The Bible tells a story.' It is the story of God's liberation of the oppressed in its past, present and future aspects.

What is of most importance to Gutiérrez is the history of salvation presented in the text. He develops a 'unified approach to history' which has two characteristic elements, namely creation/salvation and the eschatological promise. He reads Scripture schematically with a beginning, middle and end. He picks out certain key events which make up a configuration and these are allowed to structure the understanding of the whole. This reading of the Bible as a unified narrative is fundamental to all interpretation.

One of the implications of this reading of the Bible as master-narrative is that it incorporates the contemporary reader into the story that is being told. If it is universal history that is being recounted then the contemporary situation must feature somewhere in the plot. This tendency is indeed apparent in much liberation theology which takes the biblical story to be 'our story'. Gutiérrez can interpret life in terms of the text, because the biblical narrative provides the 'framework' for interpreting the 'signs of the times'<sup>17</sup>. The South American situation is interpreted within the configuration of the Bible's plot.

This narrative reading of the Bible, which sees the biblical material as being embraced within one plot, is also concerned with the themes which are concomitant with that plot. When the text is not fragmented it is easier to recognise the great themes pervading and unifying the text. Accordingly,

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15 E. A. Nuñez, 'The Church in the Liberation Theology of Gutiérrez: Description and Hermeneutic Analysis', *Biblical Interpretation and the Church*, ed. D. A. Carson, Paternoster, Exeter 1984, p 174.

16 J. S. Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning*, Orbis, New York 1987, p 58.

17 G. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, SCM, London 1974, p35.

liberation theologians show a pronounced interest in themes. As a community of Christians read the Bible in a particular situation they act as the 'echo chamber' in which the text resonates.<sup>18</sup> It is this phenomenon which explains why it is Latin American theologians who are so sensitive to the theme of liberation in the Bible. They hear this theme resonating particularly loudly in their own oppression. It is a theme which 'connects' the Church to the Bible.

So the Bible's themes are let loose: Gutiérrez is convinced that the eschatological promise is not just an isolated theme. It appears throughout the whole Bible and consequently claims its place among the people of God today. This theme is a promise which is as relevant to the present generation of Latin Americans as it was to the ancient people of Israel.

The master-narrative of Scripture so dominates theological understanding in liberation theology that it would be unthinkable to attempt to identify God in non-narrative terms. The acts by which God has chosen to make himself known, would be meaningless unless they were featured as part of a plot. For instance, the Exodus is not an important element of Egyptian historiography, but, it is important in the history of God's people as it is featured in the story of salvation: it occupies an important place in God's plot.

What the Bible reveals, therefore, is not so much a recital of events, as a way of reading events as part of a configuration in which they appear as meaningful. The authority of the Bible lies in a pattern, a narrative within which the acts of God can be recognized and interpreted. Thus, the central claim of liberation theology that 'God is with us' is authorized by the Bible. Indeed, there are no other grounds, outside the biblical narrative, for claiming that God is active on the side of the poor. What authorizes such claims is a narrative history in which God is working with the poor towards the goal of liberation in the Kingdom.

### The Bible and preaching

The most important aspect of the Bible to bring out in our preaching is its plot. We should always be prepared to tell its story. This is not the same as telling stories in our sermons; it is the systematic presentation of the narrative logic of the biblical master-narrative. The lectionary can be of help here. It begins with a rehearsal of the Bible's plot, starting with the accounts of Creation on the ninth Sunday before Christmas and leading towards Advent and its theme of the End.

However, we should not be ignoring Scripture's grand narrative for the rest of the year. In all our preaching we should take care to offer our hearers the narrative context of the passage under consideration. And not just the

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18 cf. Carlos Mesters' comment: 'The community is the resonance chamber, the [biblical] text is the violin string. When the people pluck the string... it resonates in a community and out comes the music.' *The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Common People, The Bible and Literature: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, ed. N. Gottwald, Orbis, New York 1983, pp 119-134.

immediate context: we should be able to indicate where the passage fits into the overarching scheme of things. The aim of this is to give congregations a sense of the whole, so that each biblical part makes sense. Christian understanding comes with a grasping of the whole; similarly, misunderstanding comes when Christians get caught up in a sub-plot, or become experts in a minor theme. A thoughtful preacher can prevent congregations falling into these mistakes by being careful to tell the whole story. A thorough grasp of the Christian story gives the ability to see things in a proper perspective.

It is possible to grasp the essential components of either of the Testaments in one day: it is done, for example, by the 'Walk Thru' the Bible' seminar. In these very imaginative sessions congregations are taken through the story of each of the biblical books, seeing how they fit together. By achieving a sense of the thrust of the overarching whole, individual passages are put in their place. Hearers are then able to grasp how a passage 'follows' in the whole Christian story.

Preachers also need to pay attention to the theme of a passage. If, we take the time to ponder the question, 'What is this passage about?', and then to summarize that theme in a simple phrase, then hearers should have little trouble following our line of thought. Not only does this discipline keep a sermon direct and easy to follow; it also helps to keep it relevant. The preacher is aiming at thematic resonance: as the theme of a passage is expounded so it begins to resonate in the community of believers.

This narrative approach to Scripture would serve to open up the Bible so that preachers can feel comfortable with the whole text. Some churches are fed a very limited diet, consisting mainly of epistles. Many preachers are more comfortable with these because they fit most easily into the common understanding of what an authoritative book should be like. Much of the content of the epistles is heavily didactic, giving clear instructions on how things are to be done. Compared with these, the Old Testament can appear strangely allusive. It is sometimes difficult to see how an Old Testament story can be important, let alone authoritative. This brings us back to where we started with a view of authority determining our handling of Scripture. I hope to have challenged this assumption. The Bible should not be compared with other books in this way; preachers should learn to handle it as a uniquely authoritative narrative.

## **Conclusion**

The authority of the Bible involves a challenge to see the contingent happenings of this world, of my life, as part of some universal plot. It is a challenge, or better still an invitation, to see things from God's perspective. The Bible's authoritative talk of God is not propositional in form but rather takes the form of narrative which is constructed again with the activity of readers. Readers are issued with an invitation; they too may enter the master-narrative which structures the text. We are invited to locate ourselves within this plot and thematize our lives in accordance with this narrative. The events

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of my life make sense as they are placed within a configuration which features the events of God's self-revelation in Christ. Therefore the Bible does not so much impose a vision of reality as offer readers the chance to interpret reality through the narrative. This understanding of the Bible's authority takes seriously the fact that authority is a relational term; the Bible's authority is worked out as it is read and exerts an influence over the life of the reader in response to the reader's engagement with the narrative.

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