

THE NATURE & NARRATIVE OF THE BIBLE

Paul Burkhardt

This material will be separated into two sections. I was asked to talk about a “narrative approach” to the Scriptures, but before we get into the actual contents of the Bible, there are some bigger questions and ideas we need to go over about just what this Bible is in the first place and how we should go about thinking about it. So, in the first part, we will go over those question of what the Bible is, how God uses it to speak to us and how we should look at it. Then we’ll go over the basic structure and layout of the Bible--how to navigate it, how it’s laid out and why it’s laid out that way. The hope in this is that this will help us get a better grasp on the Bible and make it a little more manageable and less intimidating. In the second part of our evening we’ll go through the actual contents and storyline of the Bible, followed by some final thoughts.

PART 1: The Nature & Structure of Scripture

What is the Bible?

Okay, first thing first: what *is* the Bible? Well, from a human-perspective (or “anthropologically”, if you will) it is simply the collected human writings of the people of God--first the Israelites, then the Christians. In it, we find nearly every type of written communication: poetry, fable, legislation, history, biography, letters, nature-writing, apocalyptic literature, ancient erotic love literature, philosophy, theology, songs, and perhaps even a children’s story and a play. From a “God-perspective” (or “theologically”) the Bible is the written “revelation” of God.

Revelation

Now, that word “revelation” merely means a “revealing.” So the Bible is God revealing himself through this book. And this act of God revealing himself is very important. Apart from it, we would be like ants trying to understand and figure out the nature and character of a human. Apart from humans figuring out a way to communicate themselves in an “ant-like” way, ants could never understand the nature, character, works, desires, and motivations of a human, no matter how well they mustered up all their greatest intellectual faculties.

And so, in a similar way, God must *reveal* himself to us; and he does this in the world we live in in four different ways--each one carrying with it a different level of clarity and authority in how it reveals God. The first, most authoritative, and clearest way God reveals himself is in **Jesus Christ**--his works, words, and his nature is most clearly expressed there. The second most authoritative source of knowledge about God is **the Bible**. We’ll discuss how this works in a bit. The third place God reveals himself in the world is through **his Church**--through their writings, preaching, gathering, sacraments and works of love for others. The last and least authoritative source of knowledge about God is **nature/creation** itself. In it, we see the beautiful, rhythmic, and orderly fingerprint of God all around us.

Looking at this, we see why the Bible is so important and why Christians make a big deal out of it: It’s our main source of knowledge about the life, teachings, and work of Jesus, and it’s the foundation

for the work, structure, intention, and teaching of the Church. And so we make a big deal out of the Bible *not* because of the Bible itself, but because we want to know God as he has revealed himself, and it plays a major role in showing us that God.

Theology

So how do we “know God” from this book? Well, “theology” is what we call the pursuit of an answer to that question. “Theology” is the study of God *as he has revealed himself*. And there are (generally speaking) two ways to “do” theology: Systematic Theology and Biblical Studies (this doesn’t mean systematic theology isn’t biblical and biblical studies isn’t systematic--it’s just what they’re called).

Systematic theology is topical. Someone gets a topic like “God”, looks for all the verses in the Bible having to do with “God” throws them all under that heading to come up with a “doctrine” of God.

Biblical Studies starts with the text itself and pulls out the topics that particular text talks about. It might focus on a specific genre of books in the Bible, a particular book, or a limited set of verses within the Bible. But either way, it attempts to look at individual texts on their own terms from within their own context and culture and time and tries to place these texts (along with their themes) in the greater context of the *progressive* story of the Bible.

The Wrong Kind of Bible

Okay, so why did I go through all that? Well, it’s my belief (and I think I have a lot of evidence to support this) that the modern, Western, American, scientifically-minded Christian Church has become *obsessed* with systematic theology. Because of the way our brains are wired, we tend to approach the Bible as a container of random, fragmented, wise truths that if we can just learn enough of them, or hear the right sermon about them, or even “apply” enough of them, we will be satisfied and fulfilled. We sometimes treat the Bible like some sort of combination lock where if we can just get the right combination of verses it will finally unlock this secret and mystical power and all of our addictions, darknesses, faults and insecurities will just fall away and we’ll have freedom. We tend to approach the Bible as if it’s just made up of a bunch of little bits--a devotional bit here, a theological bit there, an encouraging bit, a convicting bit, an insightful bit, so on and so forth.

It’s my belief that when we begin thinking this way, it actually makes the Bible seem more distanced, foreign, intimidating, and less beautiful to us. That’s because when we actually open up the Bible with that overly-systematic mindset, we’re surprised to see that it actually looks like God gave us the wrong kind of book than we needed. We don’t find that systematic catalogue of topics and answers to our questions and curiosities about God, life, ourselves, and our struggles that we thought we needed. Instead, when we look at the Bible and, in fact, the other sources of revelation we talked about earlier, what do we find?

A Story

We find a story--admittedly, it's a story told in many forms by many people from many perspectives, but nevertheless, when put together, it paints--in mosaic form--a dramatic, beautiful, all-encompassing, and sweeping narrative. We see it in the life of Jesus, the story of Scripture, the growth and maturing of the Church, and history unfolding within creation.

And God does this to meet us in both *where* we are and *who* we are. At our core and deepest essence, we are not merely reducible to our physical drives, our subconscious desires, our thoughts, or even our feelings: we are *walking narratives*. We as humans live on the basis of story: making sense of our own and losing ourselves in others'. In joy, we want to draw people into our story, in sorrow, we try and find hope and identification in the stories of others. And so God chooses to reveal himself and exercise his authority in this world by way of a *Narrative*. Or, more accurately, *the Story of the world*. Chris Wright in H

That the Old Testament tells a story needs no defense. My point is much greater however. The Old Testament tells its story as *the story* or, rather, as part of that ultimate and universal story that will ultimately embrace the whole of creation, time, and humanity within its scope. In other words, in reading these texts we are invited to embrace a metanarrative, a grand narrative. And on this overarching story is based a worldview that, like all worldviews and metanarratives, claims to explain the way things are, how they have come to be so, and what they will ultimately be. . . . It is a story that . . . [is] a *rendering of reality*—an account of the universe we inhabit and of the new creation we are destined for. We live in a storied universe.

Why is it so important to have a firm grasp on this Narrative?

It is of the utmost importance for Christians to reclaim this story as our fundamental filter through which we look at all thinks and speak about all things. Let me quickly offer four reasons why what we will spend the rest of our time talking about here is so important.

First, and most importantly, *narrative* is how *God Himself* has chosen to reveal himself and exercise authority over his people. This is the Bible we have. We cannot and should not try and turn it into something it is not, and so, to know God and how human life is meant to be lived, we must learn what this all-encompassing, God-chosen and God-spoken narrative is. Michael Goheen has this great line in his lecture *The Urgency of Reading the Bible as One Story* where he says, “Loss of narrative unity greatly truncates the Bible’s power and erodes its authority.”

Secondly, as we’ll touch on later, this Story is fundamentally the Story of a Missionary God bringing all his creatures and Creation under his gracious and loving rule as it’s King. And so, when we learn this Story and make it our own, it forms our identity as the missionary people of this God. It equips us with an identity and unique resources to securely go out into the world, enmesh ourselves within it, and serve it to bring peace, order, and salvation to it as God’s rule is recognized throughout it.

Thirdly, it gives us the ability, as we are motivated to go out into the world, to protect us from the false stories and idols offered to us by the world we are going into. Everything around us, and every era of human existence has had a grand “story” that provides it with the assumptions guiding all it does.

Many other people and writings have discussed what those over-arching “competing stories” are, but for our purposes, it is enough to say that the grand Story given to us by the Bible subverts the stories around us and gives us a secure good news that keeps us from believing the false or incomplete stories and “news” around us.

Lastly, embracing this narrative helps us fully engage in this Christian faith with our whole selves--in other words, it equips us with a full-bodied spirituality embracing sin, grace, process, being, emotion, and substance, rather than just conforming to a bunch of facts. The fact that God’s story and God’s rule is bigger than our own is not meant to be oppressive, but rather to be freeing and loving, offering us something far more over-reaching, deeply-impacting, and beautiful that we can then get lost in. This is how we form dynamic and emotionally-responsive spiritual lives. Eugene Peterson in his essay *Living Into God’s Truth* says this well:

[Spirituality], using Scripture as text, does not so much present us with a moral code and tell us, "Live up to this," nor does it set out a system of doctrine and say, "Think like this." The biblical way is to tell a story and invite us, "Live into this - this is what it looks like to be human in this God-made and God-ruled world; this is what is involved in becoming and maturing as a human being." We don't have to fit into prefabricated moral and mental or religious boxes before we are admitted into the company of God. We are taken seriously just as we are and given place in his story - for it is, after all, God's story. None of us is the leading character in the story of our lives. God is the larger context and plot in which all our stories find themselves.

The Structure of the Bible

- The Holy Bible. “Holy” just means “separated out from all others of its kind; sacred”. “Bible” comes from the Greek word for “book”. So, the “Holy Bible” is just our “Sacred Book”.
- The Bible as we have it is split into two parts: the Old Testament and New Testament. The word “Testament” comes from the Latin word for “Covenant”.
- The Old Testament is made up of 39 books. It’s split into 4 main sections:
 - The Torah/Pentateuch//”Teachings”//Law” (first 5 books of the Old Testament)
 - History books (chronicling Israelite history from Judges to return from Exile)
 - Wisdom books (the more poetic, artsy and philosophical books of the Bible)
 - Prophets (Major/Minor prophets: the only difference is size. Maj > Min.).
- The New Testament is made up of 27 books written from about 15 to 20 years after Jesus’ death all the way through the end of the first century. 4 sections similar to OT:
 - “New” Law/Teaching (Gospels: Mark written 1st, Matthew and Luke copy it)
 - History (Acts)
 - “Wisdom”/Writings (Epistles of Paul: organized from longest to shortest; timeline overlaps Acts, similar to OT Prophets overlap Samuel/Kings/Chronicles. “General” Epistles: by random other leaders in the early church)
 - Prophecy/Apocalypse (Revelation).

PART 2: The Story & Life of Scripture

The Story

To tell the story of the Bible I'm going to use a framework offered by several people of looking at the Bible as a play with six acts.

Act 1 / God establishes his Kingdom: Creation

In the beginning of our story, the curtains is raised and we saw this Kingly-God, standing above a watery chaos of nothingness. And he creates. He speaks things into existence things that were not there before, and as he does, we see in the Hebrew that there is all this architectural language that will later be used to talk about the building of God's tabernacle and temple, showing us that this world God is building, forming, founding, and arranging has the ultimate goal of God dwelling within it and among his people. We see that at each level/day/era of creation the things that God creates increase in complexity, beauty, and nearness to the heart of God until he creates his crown of creation: humanity. He has built his temple-world in which he will dwell and now he creates two priests to care for it with his authority: A'dam (Adam), meaning *humanity*, and Chavvah (Eve), meaning "source of life".

All is well as God walks in the cool of his newly founded garden, communing with his creation, creatures, and his humans. He gives the two primal humans instructions and commands for how to further the beauty of his world, so he might dwell in it all, with all of it enjoying the benefits of being subdued under his gracious and loving rule. His first command to them? It's not *refraining* from anything, but instead, he commands them to *enjoy* and *eat* all that's in the garden.

But (and we see the dramatic tension rising), there are *many* things that further God's intention for this to be a world he might inhabit and rule over with love and care, but there is one thing that God says will hinder his mission to subdue this world, and he instructs his people to stay away from this: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The Biblical OT idea of "knowledge" is that of intimacy and being joined to something to the point that it produces fruit and offspring of that union. God lovingly commands his people to not be joined in the most intimate of ways with *both* good and evil. Curtain falls. Act 1 is over.

Act 2 / Rebellion in the Kingdom: Fall

Scene 1: Rebellion and Curse

The curtain rises again and we see the two primal humans enjoying their fellowship with God, but another character is introduced to the story: the serpent--an embodiment of the spirit that works against that good mission of God to make this a world under his good and loving rule. The serpent tells lies and half-truths and the humans end up eating this fruit. The mission of God is rebelled against and these humans are made enemies to the intent and rule of God's creating act. The world is plunged into death, despair, and brokenness, and humans along with it. God curses the creation and humanity for their rebellion, but still shows grace by not destroying them entirely and even going so far as to shed blood to cover their shame and nakedness with animal skins.

Scene 2: Rising Tide of Sinfulness

The rest of this act is to show what humanity looks like when lived outside the loving rule of the God-King who created the world, and God's faithfulness to banish this wickedness from the world. Brother kills brother, people forget about God, and even end up having unnatural sexual relationships with angels and other supernatural beings. Eventually, God chooses one family, Noah, and saves them from destruction as he plunges the world back into watery chaos, out of which he raises--what you could call-- a "second" or "new" creation. He gives Noah the same command to fill the earth and subdue it under God's rightful reign, but even Noah and his subsequent generations falter into wickedness until they all gather and try to build a tower to the heavens saying "Let us make a name for ourselves." God confuses their language and scatters them across the world, just as the curtain falls on Acts 2.

Act 3 | The King Chooses Israel: Redemption Initiated

Scene 1: God Initiates His Redemption Plan

As Act 3 opens (a very long act), a thought exists in the mind of the audience that will be repeated throughout the story: it looks like the original intent of God has been so completely derailed, what's God going to do? So far in the story, it has *seemed* like God had been standing back and watching humanity, seeing if they would come back to him. They have not. And so God acts decisively in history to bring about his promised rule and reign that he might dwell with his people in his creation.

He comes to an old Babylonian named Abraham. When humanity has said to themselves "let's make a name for ourselves" it has always worked to hinder God's intent to bring the world under his rule, and so God looks at Abraham and says "I will make *your* name great. And you will be the father of many nations. And through you all the nations of the world will be blessed." God, instead of making a series of commands to Abraham, instead makes a series of promises and seals it with a blood-covenant, promising that he will accomplish through Abraham and his descendants his original plan and intent of creation.

Scene 2: God's People in Bondage and Freedom

Abraham's descendants ultimately end up in Egypt. The book of Genesis ends. In Exodus, the story opens and the Israelites threaten to outnumber the native Egyptians, and so the Pharaoh makes slaves of them. The people cry out and God calls on a man named Moses to be his representative in setting his people free from this slavery. Dramatic events unfold between Egypt and Israel's God and they are set free and taken towards the land they will inhabit as their own. On a mountain (Mount Sinai), Moses meets with God and God establishes the Israelites as a people that will be on display to show what life looks like under the rule and reign of the one true God. The book of Leviticus contains the rules and regulations set forth by God at this time for how his people should conduct themselves in politics, religion, and society. As the journey continues, the book of Exodus ends and the book of

Numbers picks up the story. The people doubt the faithfulness and ability of God to take them into the land and so God has them wander around the desert for 40 years until all those that doubted are dead. Numbers ends. Deuteronomy is a book of speeches Moses gives before the Israelites enter their land, and the book of Joshua tells the story of them conquering and settling this Promised Land.

Scene 3: The Faithfulness of God, the Faithlessness of Humanity

Here the story seems able to end. God's people have their land. They have clear instructions for how they are to be the people of God, on display for all to see how life is meant to be lived with God as their Ruler, King, and Lord.

But the book of Joshua ends with Joshua's pleas to the Israelites to stay faithful to the Lord, but even at this point, Joshua himself isn't even that optimistic. All is not well, then, as the book of Judges opens. The Israelites refuse to purge the Land of the wicked and idolatrous Canaanites, and so God judges them by saying they'll have to live among that wickedness and idolatry. And thus begins one of the most depressing books in the whole Bible. Judges chronicles the sad, but oh-so-true-to-human-experience story of God's people falling into the idolatries of the Canaanites, the people becoming enslaved to the Canaanites, the people crying out to God, God raising up various military leaders called Judges, the Israelites being set free, and then falling back into idolatry again. This cycle continues over and over and over again, with each time the Israelites' rebellion getting worse, until finally they reject God himself as their true King and begin demanding to have a human king, just like the other nations around them.

Scene 4: Kings & Prophets

The last judge that the Israelites have is Samuel, who also functions as a priest and prophet. The books bearing his name focus on his period as Israel's prophet. This ushers in a new period for the Israelites where God will begin speaking most authoritatively to them by the use of prophets. God uses Samuel to appoint Saul as Israel's first King. He fails as king, and so David is brought in as the next king. David leads as a faithful king. He defeats the Canaanites, driving them out of the country, he enforces God's laws, and is sure to not simply a king to the people, but to channel God's Kingship to the people.

David's son Solomon is the next king and he builds the temple in Jerusalem as a permanent dwelling place for God among his people. But, he begins to marry foreign women and worship their foreign gods. Solomon's idolatry and wickedness passes on to his son, Rehoboam, and after some intense political drama and hard-heartedness on Rehoboam's part, the nation of Israel is split in two. The majority of the twelve tribes of Israel gather in the north in what will keep being called Israel, and the last few tribes are left behind in the south, which will be referred to as Judah.

Scene 5: A House Divided

Now, from here on, the story gets crazy and confusing. I wish I was able to go into some more

specifics here, but there's simply not enough time. Simply put, we've moved into the books of 1 and 2 Kings, where the storyline now jumps back and forth between Israel and Judah and their subsequent kings and ongoing slide downhill further and further away from the intention of this God-King to showcase to the world the blessing available and what life looks like when submitted to the good and gracious rule with him dwelling in their midst. God uses prophets during this time (mainly Elijah and Elisha) to continually call the people to repentance and back to Him, but the Israelites don't listen.

Scene 6: Exile & Hope

And so, out of God's judgment and as the result of some *really* interesting political/historical drama, first the northern Kingdom and then (200 years later) the southern kingdom are captured as prisoners by the ruling empires of the time.

Once again, we're faced with this (if you'll excuse my french) "WTF" moment in the story. We're like what on *earth* going on? What is this God going to do? The tribes from the north are scattered around the known world of that day, the tribes of the southern kingdom are placed in exile in Babylon, the temple--the "dwelling place of God"--has been destroyed. They are without an identity and without a story that makes sense. (1 and 2 Chronicles are written during this time as a "re-telling" of their history from 1 Samuel to the exile in which this exile would make sense). Everyone's asking: now what?

Well, God continues to speak. As his people are in exile, the prophets come (this is where all those books at the end of the OT come from) and speak judgment over the nations oppressing God's people, but also speak judgment over God's people themselves over their sin, calling them to repentance and hearkening towards a day that God will decisively act again in history to set his people free.

After about 70 years in exile, some weird political stuff happens and the Israelites are allowed to return home. Some do, but the vast majority of Israelites do not. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of their return and their attempt at rebuilding the temple, but it's nothing like it was before.

The OT ends with Israel back in their land, but they're very small, with hardly a temple, hardly a population, and surrounded by some of the greatest super-powers history has ever known. The curtain begins to fall and it is obvious: the Israelites have failed in the task God had given to them back at Mount Sinai to bring his rule and reign to the world. And yet there's hope. Why? Well, God made a covenant. He had repeated his promises through the prophets all those years in exile. So, Israel failed in their response, but would God fail in his promise? Act 3 ends.

Interlude | The Intertestamental Period: WTF?

Between Acts 3 and 4, or rather, the OT and NT, a surprising number of things happen politically and even culturally with the Israelites. The tension and hope that Act 3 ended with has only increased over these 400 years or so. The Israelites continue to hold fast to their identity as God's people and even begin trying to find more ways to distinguish themselves from those around them. This is when the Israelite faith breaks up into several "denominations" each with their own beliefs about how God will bring about this redemption and what it will look like. These groups include Pharisees, Sadducees,

and a few other groups you can read about in the Gospels. Also, because the Israelites are so scattered still, and there is a need for teaching to maintain their identity even far from the temple, this when we see Rabbis and Synagogues being used. As time has gone on, various different empires take ownership of the province of Israel, and Israel's hope to throw off the yoke of oppressive foreign nations only increases this expectation, tension, and hope that God will act, and soon, for his people.

Act 4 | The Coming of the King: Redemption Accomplished

It is in this setting that the curtain rises on Act 4. A 30-something Galilean man steps onto the scene claiming not only that this long awaited Kingdom of God has come, but that it has come *in him!* In Jesus, God Himself has come to accomplish the salvation and redemption of the world. The Gospels tell this story. They are not biographies, but rather narratives structured purposefully to accomplish specific tasks to specific audiences.

Jesus gathers twelve men to follow him as he begins his ministry and preaching about his Kingdom. But this Kingdom is not what they were expecting: he does not come to violently cast off the oppression of the Romans. Nothing seems to happen as he teaches. Rather, he shows how life is meant to be lived under the rightful rule of the God-King in his Kingdom. It is a life marked by bringing wisdom, healing, forgiveness, love, and service to all that is broken in the world. He welcomes all those that society refused. He forgives the worst of sins.

As he teaches, he gathers more opposition to what he is saying. His teaching eventually places him on a collision course with Jerusalem and the religious and political leaders of the day. Knowing this, Jesus has a last supper with his disciples where he tells them he is initiating a new covenant with his people, finally fulfilling the promises made to Abraham all those years ago--a covenant that will not be based in *any* way upon the actions of humans, but based *solely* on the grace and sacrifice of God.

After this meal, he and some of his closest disciples go to pray in a garden, where Jesus is found by Judas and betrayed, handed over to the religious authorities who beat and question him. They then shuffle him to a series of civil Roman leaders, the highest rank of which eventually condemns him to crucifixion at the wishes of the people. On the cross he bears the full weight of all that is broken and sinful in the world--and lets it kill him.

Once more, we have one of those: *What the hell?* moments. What kind of king would let himself die like this? One of the earliest pieces of Roman graffiti we have found is entitled *Alexamenos worships his God*. It is scrawled into a Roman wall and it shows a man bowing down and worshipping before a man hanging on a cross, except this man on the cross has the head of a donkey. The artist is trying to stress how bizarre it is that anyone would believe in a "god" that supposedly would have died on a cross. This is the *strangest* story of a King anyone would surely have heard. But once again, the story's not done.

Three days later, the most important event in the entire history of the cosmos occurs. Jesus is raised from the dead, showing his conquering power over all that he just bore the weight of; proving his lordship and kingship over all things. In this event, Jesus reverses the direction of sin in the world and becomes the first of many that will taste of a bodily resurrection. In this act, he guarantees the

resurrection of those that are his at the end of all things. Jesus' resurrected, physical, material body is seen by over 500 people over the next month and half as he continues to live life with his followers.

Jesus eventually ascends to heaven to sit at the right of his Father until the end of history. He leaves his disciples with a "great commission" saying, "All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me, therefore, as you are going, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all I have commanded you".

Act 5 is the story of Jesus' followers fulfilling this command.

Act 5 | Spreading the News of the King: The Mission of the Church

This begins the book of Acts. The early believers are now left without Jesus wondering "What now?" They devote themselves to those things that Jesus promised he would meet his people in--those things that would help further mold this world into that land he would return to: Scripture, Teaching, Prayer, Communion, Gathering, and Singing. Eventually, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descends and inhabits all of the believers equipping them and motivating them to fulfill this last command of Jesus to make disciples as they live lives displaying what life looks like under the rule of this loving and gracious all-authoritative one.

But there's a problem: everyone's hanging out in Jerusalem still. Jesus commanded them to go out into *all* of the world, but they're not. And so, God brings persecution on the early Christians, scattering them so they might fulfill their calling. One of these persecutors, a man named Saul, is radically converted by God and given a new name, Paul. Paul goes to Peter, one of the early church leaders and asks if he might be the primary one tasked with establishing churches outside of Jerusalem. Peter and the other apostles bless Paul and encourage him in this.

Paul makes three separate missionary journeys, all chronicled in Acts. It is on these journeys that he writes most of the thirteen letters we have attributed to him in the Bible. The book of Acts ends on a very strange note, with Paul under house arrest in Rome, but yet continuing to preach the gospel "with all boldness and without hindrance".

Based on historical records elsewhere, it looks like Paul got out of that imprisonment, continued to preach and write a few more letters, and eventually going as far as Spain to establish a church. Then, under the persecution of another Roman emperor, Paul is arrested again and then beheaded for his faith. Most of the the disciples are martyred for their faith as well. The stewardship of the faith is then handed to a second generation of church leaders (James, Jude, Timothy, etc). The curtain falls ominously on Acts 5.

Act 6 | The Return of the King: Redemption Completed

Under this persecution, the early believers are trying to figure out what is happening. Yes, the church is spreading, but is it supposed to be this messy of a process? In Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) there appears to have been a particular rough spot of persecution by the Roman government occurring for the Christians living there. John the Elder, another early church leader, finds himself imprisoned on the island of Patmos. It is during this imprisonment, God meets him and gives him a vision of

encouragement for the suffering persecuted Christians. He is invited by God to receive a vision of his throne room, and this begins the last book of the Bible, known as the Revelation of John.

The book follows an established ancient literary genre known as “apocalyptic literature” that would have been familiar to the original audience of the letter. There is much symbolism throughout the book and much of it deals with the political strife *of that time*, but this vision that John is given includes glimpses of the future Act 6 that are meant to anchor and encourage suffering believers then and now.

We see that at the end of all things, when the Kingdom of God has broken into this world to a certain extent, Jesus will return to the earth from heaven. As he does, all people will be raised again, and their final judgments will be given to them. The entire created order—all of reality itself—will be refined and raised as well, with every last drop of sin, ugliness, and fallenness purged from it. And those that have been counted among God’s people will dwell in this land with him for the rest of time. Michael Goheen and Craig Batholomew summarize this end of the story well in their essay “The Storyline of the Bible”:

[John] is shown that, whatever evidence exists to the contrary, Jesus, whom the church follows, is in control of world events. He is moving history toward its appointed end. At that end, the old world dominated by evil, pain, suffering, and death will be overthrown. God will again dwell among humanity as He did in the beginning. He will wipe away tears. There will be no more death, mourning, pain, suffering, or evil. With joy, those of us who have followed this story anticipate hearing God’s own voice: ‘I am making everything new!’ (Rev. 21:5) The marvellous imagery of the last chapters of Revelation directs the reader’s gaze to the end of history and to the restoration of the whole of God’s creation. He invites all the thirsty to come even now and to drink the waters of life but warns all those who remain outside the kingdom. The Bible ends with a promise repeated three times—‘I am coming soon’ (Rev. 22:7, 12, 20). And we echo the response of the author of Revelation: ‘Yes! Come Lord Jesus.’

Act 6. Done.

So How Might We Live?

Now what do we do? In this great story, we’ve been given Acts 1-4, the first scene of Act 5, and a sketch of Acts 6. Currently, we find ourselves in the middle of Act 5 trying to figure out how we live and how we use these earlier Acts we have written for us to help us in this endeavor. To do this, we must learn these writings (and the sketch of Act 6) very well, and use this to learn *all we can* about the earlier Acts, their Author, their culture, and their trajectory. We immerse ourselves in the world of these earlier Acts, finding their rhythm and themes and direction in order to know how we must live in Act 5 both *creatively* and *consistently* in relation to the previous Acts. And so, in a sense, we *improvise!* We use what we know of the earlier Acts to inform us as to the intended nature, goal, and trajectory of this story and then we do our best to live faithfully to that. We’re not trying to get *back* to Act 1, mind you, but Act 1 does tell us a lot about the Author of this Story and his goal for his creation—facts that will help us as we messily and imperfectly learn what life might look like as we usher in the beauty of Act 6.

One Final Encouragement

The Bible is not some book that stands above history and merely comments on it as time goes on. It is borne out of and is a product of its history and culture and by the time it gets to us, it is not very clean, perfect, or pristine. It carries with it the marks, hits, impacts, wounds, and scars of being written and handled by time-bound, enculturated individuals. This is where so many of our western, post-Enlightenment questions about manuscripts, translations, books being chosen or kicked out, archaeology, history and literalism come from. We have the preconceived notion that a truly "holy" book should be without its own set of marks, wounds, and scars. But let me encourage you that the Jesus we worship is one that on his post-Resurrection body still carries the scars of the life he lived here on earth. And we may want to look at him and say "Jesus, those are blemishes--'imperfections' in your skin and your body." But he will respond with "No, they *are* the point! They are to show how far I will go and how messy I will let myself get just to reveal myself to you." And though we have questions and frustrations with every History Channel special we watch, my hope is that we can walk away from those not abandoning or doubting our faith, but having new reasons to stand in awe of the God that traversed heaven and earth to know us and have us know Him.