



## Scripture: “The Oracles of God”

In these introductory chapters we shall attempt to understand “How God’s Story Gets Told.” In many ways, it is the same way anyone’s story gets told—except that this is a very old story, told over a considerable length of time with many tellers, twists, and complications, and with a rather unobtrusive main Character who seems not to be overly concerned that we get the Story “just right” in every detail. Certainly there are many believers in the Story who are convinced that God has given them (or, more likely, their denomination or religious movement) all the right details, but there are an awful lot of absolutely convinced Christians who disagree deeply with one another—and God has not done anything overwhelmingly obvious to settle the arguments! All of this makes for the complicated, yet rewarding, task of theology.

Christian theologians generally agree on this, however: no matter how complicated the job of telling God’s Story might get, we have a common authoritative source in the Bible. The Scriptures provide the beginning place for theology, or thinking about God. Amazingly enough, it is in this vast collection of Hebrew literature, written in various genres and collected over several centuries, that Christians encounter the Story of God, the loving Creator and Redeemer of the world through Jesus Christ. No wonder Christians have been heard to sing:

*Tell me the old, old story of unseen things above—  
Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love.  
Tell me the story simply, as to a little child;  
For I am weak and weary, and helpless and defiled.  
Tell me the story slowly, that I may take it in—  
That wonderful redemption, God’s remedy for sin.  
Tell me the story often, for I forget so soon.  
The early dew of morning has passed away at noon.  
Tell me the old, old story. Tell me the old, old story.  
Tell me the old, old story of Jesus and His love.*

—Katherine Hankey

It may not be classic poetry, but the simple words of this nineteenth-century hymn bespeak the power of the biblical story to offer hope and healing to its participants.

The power of the “old, old story of Jesus and his love” lies in its testimony to the God of Israel, the Creator of all things, who graciously and lovingly interacts with creation—even to the point of entering into creation as a human among us—to bring about redemption not only for human beings, but for all of creation (Rom. 8:18-25). In the Jewish tradition, the events in which God is particularly remembered and celebrated as a saving God for the people of Israel are the Exodus from Egypt and the subsequent establishment of the Sinai covenant, all through the human leadership of Moses. (This is what Jews still celebrate in the Passover observance.) For Christians, a parallel cluster of saving events centers around the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, particularly his death and resurrection. (This is what Christians still celebrate in the observance of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.) Christians “love to tell the story . . . of Jesus and His love” precisely because that story tells of a loving God who acts for our salvation.

Thus, in both Judaism and Christianity, faith is centered in eventfulness, in time and place and history. The approach to religious belief taken in the Bible stands in tension with the more philosophical and meditative modes of much of Asian religious philosophy, and with the classical Greeks’ more speculative quest for eternal truth untouched by historical change and challenge.

But if we say that biblical faith has to do with events in history—and most particularly with the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus—we find ourselves faced with another problem. What is implied by the word *history*? Do we mean simply everything that has ever happened? Does history include every event, no matter how small? If it does, then it is obvious that history is beyond our capacity to grasp. Not every event is accessible to us, and for that matter, not every event is important to us. Obviously, not all events in Jesus’ life were included by the Gospel writers. Such considerations begin to reveal to us the inevitability of perspective and of value commitments when it comes to this slippery thing we call history. For example, if you were asked to give your life history, you would not even try to recount every little thing that ever happened to you and every little thing you ever did. We can’t even recall all those little things, which are not nearly so important as some of the more memorable, life-changing events, persons, and choices that most profoundly make us who we are.

History is a little like that, except, of course, on a much larger scale. Histories are shaped by the perceptions and memories shared by communities (nations, tribes, religious denominations), and usually written by people who

represent such a community (the historian), in which a pattern or succession of events is selected and interpreted to tell that people’s story from a particular perspective and for a particular reason.

For example, most Americans would agree that General George Custer is an important figure in American history. But how does he fit? In the years immediately following the Battle of Little Bighorn, Custer was celebrated as a Christlike figure who “gave his life” to open the gates of paradise, as it were, for westward-peering settlers. In the early twentieth century, he was still celebrated as a hero and patriot, if not quite so obviously in religious categories. Then came the 1960s and early 1970s, the age of the anti-hero, and Custer generally was belittled as a self-glorifying buffoon. More recently, Custer has been interpreted as a pawn of the U.S. government. What is crucial to recognize is that, in each case, American perceptions of General Custer are made to fit into the larger story Americans are telling about themselves and their country.

The critical point, finally, is that history and story are tightly related. Any person’s or people’s history involves the selection and interpretation of actions and events in such a way as to tell a story; history and story are forms of narrative by which a people’s sense of identity is construed. An important implication of this is that there are many histories—as many as there are viewpoints from which to tell the human story. Various cultures, peoples, and religions all have their histories—all tell their stories—from divergent and sometimes warring perspectives.

Further, this insight into the nature of history (histories) has important implications for our understanding of the Bible; recall that our reason for these reflections on history was the observation that biblical faith is rooted in historical events, and a conviction that God is at work for our salvation in the very history of our planet. We might say, then, that the various writers of the Bible interpreted the events of their cultural histories in such a way as to affirm the presence and saving activity of God. A wonderful example of this is found in Exodus 14, where the great event of Jewish liberation and salvation is recounted. According to the text, “Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided” (v. 21). First of all, we have to set aside that famous motion picture scene of Charlton Heston at the banks of the sea, with the waters rolling back in a matter of minutes. Second, we should appreciate how similar this sounds to Genesis 1’s description of the separation of the waters from the waters—indeed, the parting of the waters—in the very act of creation itself (vv. 7, 9). Israel’s deliverance is new creation.

Exodus tells us that “a strong east wind [blew] all night,” which means that the biblical story itself incorporates the natural element in the story. The event,

if you will, was the blowing of the wind; the interpretation, which truly made the occurrence history for the believing Hebrew, was that “the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night.” But we should notice, again, that this is reminiscent of the creation story in Genesis 1, where “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” (v. 2). Thus, Israel’s creation story frames the story of Israel’s deliverance: God’s act of separating the waters in order to create a new people, God’s own people. Later, when the Hebrews were safely on the other side, Moses composed a hymn that was even more poetic in its interpretation:

Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power—

your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy. . . .

At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up,

the floods stood up in a heap;

the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea. (Exod. 15:6, 8)

The Hebrew prophets, of course, worked similarly by interpreting Israel’s national and international fortunes (and misfortunes) as the activities of God, often as Yahweh’s chastisement upon the people for their unfaithfulness and idolatry. Such events could, of course, have been interpreted simply from the perspective of power politics: were the Babylonians God’s punishment for Israel’s sins, or were the Babylonians simply power-hungry conquerors? But throughout the Scriptures, Israel’s history is interpreted as the arena for the Story of God. And the same process continued when the apostles proclaimed Jesus to be the Christ; they were, like the prophets before them, affirming that in specific events in Israel’s history, God was acting redemptively for humans and indeed for all creation. Jesus himself prompted the disciples to undertake such interpretations when he asked them questions like, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” and “But who do *you* say that I am?” (Matt. 16:13, 15, *italics added*). The fact that people were interpreting Jesus’ identity in many ways means that it was not particularly obvious who he was. Peter’s response of faith, “You are the Messiah,” was hailed by Jesus as an evidence of divine revelation (vv. 16-17), but it was nonetheless one interpretation among many. (“Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets” [v. 14]. I have a feeling the disciples mentioned only the more favorable interpretations that were floating around.) The upshot of this is that the four Gospels we carry in our Bibles are a kind of history in the sense we have been talking about history; they are stories of Jesus rooted in selected events in his life and ministry, chosen for particular reasons, and told from the perspective of faith in Christ in order to inspire that same faith. They are, like most of the rest of the Bible, theological history, or theology told in historical-narrative event.

Let me offer an illustration. There is no question that the central event from which Christian faith blooms is Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Christians throughout the centuries have affirmed unreservedly that the Resurrection truly happened in historically datable, first-century Palestine. In the early years of the Christian movement, the apostle Paul put it this way: "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4). It is clear that Paul, along with the Early Church as a whole, saw God's raising of the crucified Jesus as the event in history that brings salvation to us: "and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. . . . If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (vv. 14, 17). This is God's decisively saving act in history—raising Christ "on the third day."

However, if one reads the four Gospel accounts of the Resurrection closely, one finds a great deal of latitude in the way this saving and revelatory event is narrated. For instance, the Gospel of Mark, believed by many to have been the earliest of the Gospels, says that when the women came to Jesus' tomb on the first day of the week, they were greeted by "a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side" (16:5). Matthew, on the other hand, says it was "an angel of the Lord" (28:2), while Luke says it was "two men in dazzling clothes" (24:4), and John mentions "two angels in white" (20:12).

All this detail perhaps would not be important if Mark's "young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side" did not sound so very much like an intentional contrast to another nameless "young man" (also unique to the Gospel of Mark) who, at the site of Jesus' arrest in Gethsemane, flees into the night in humiliation and nakedness, his underwear ("linen cloth") torn away from him by the mob that has come to arrest Jesus (14:51-52). Tradition has surmised that this fleeing "young man" was indeed Mark, the Gospel's author. Generally it has been assumed, too, that the "young man" at the tomb was an angel, but Mark could have used the specific word for angel if that is what he had meant. Rather, the text specifically mentions a "young man," sitting confidently and fully clothed, in radical contrast to the young man who fled in fear and fully naked! One might easily suspect the author of actually placing himself in the Resurrection narrative, although he was not actually and literally there—precisely because it would mean that he, too, is a witness to Jesus' resurrection, an event that transformed his fear and humiliation before the powers of this world to a confidence and assurance that only Jesus' resurrection brings.

It would not make the Resurrection any less an act of God in history if we in fact surmise that this "young man" whom we traditionally have called Mark

actually placed himself in the story as a literary device. The moral of the story would be that you cannot believe in Jesus' resurrection "from a distance." To believe is to become a witness, a transformed witness; you, too, may sit confidently and victoriously beside the empty tomb! You, too, may enter the ongoing story of Jesus' life-changing resurrection power.

There are other interesting divergences in the Resurrection accounts. Why is it that only Matthew mentions the resurrection, along with Jesus, of "the saints who had fallen asleep . . . [who] after his resurrection . . . came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many" (27:52-53)? Might it be because of Matthew's deeply Jewish mind and his desire to spread the gospel specifically among fellow Jews, who believed in a general resurrection of God's saints at the end of time? And why is it that only Luke tells in careful detail the story of Jesus' walk with the despairing disciples on the Emmaus road, and how those same disciples returned to Jerusalem with burning hearts and the compelling news that the Risen One "had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (24:35; cf. Mark 16:12-13)? Might it be because Luke was attempting to say something about the profound meaning of the Lord's Supper and of Christ's continuing resurrection presence in the Church's meal of broken bread and outpoured wine?

And why is it that only John tells us of the appearance of the resurrected Jesus in the midst of his fearful disciples, cowering behind closed and locked doors, confused and disoriented by the Crucifixion—and Jesus' breathing on them and saying to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (20:22)? Might it be because John was attempting to say something about the relationship between the resurrected Christ and the gift of the re-creating Holy Spirit upon the Church that would echo Genesis, the first creation, when God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7)? In every case we find unique accents in the telling of the event of Jesus' resurrection—accents that do not merely report facts but also give us theology through narrative.

History is story, story is narrative, and narrative is woven throughout the Scriptures. The Bible as "the history of God," in John Wesley's words, is stuffed with stories and stories within stories. There is the overarching Story of God, the Creator and Redeemer, within which we read the four stories of Jesus (Gospels), within which we read more stories (Jesus' parables). Telling a story, in fact, was the most common method for teaching theology among Jewish rabbis, and it remains a prominent Jewish teaching style even today. The novels of Chaim Potok (e.g., *The Chosen*, *My Name Is Asher Lev*) and Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel's literary works (e.g., *Night*, *Dawn*) are prominent examples.

In a sense, then, the entire Bible is a story, with a beginning (creation), a

crucial turn in the plot (human sin), a divine response (the people of Israel and, out of them, Jesus the Messiah), and an anxiously anticipated end ("a new heaven and a new earth"). It is theological narrative, with countless little stories within that great narrative, countless characters, numerous twists and turns, but one basic plot: that the God of Israel, who is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, has labored in creation to reach and redeem all peoples, and indeed all of creation. As Christians, we affirm that this saving process began in Abraham and found its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

It is the Christian belief that the biblical story is rooted in history—in a particular history of a particular people, Israel, as it has been interpreted by prophets (in the Old Testament) and apostles (in the New Testament). This story is comprised of a series of interpretations of historical events as the arena of God's presence and activity. But no historical event, as I have tried to show, is sheer facticity without also the element of human interpretation; this means that even the events of biblical history were and are open to interpretations other than those the Bible offers. An assumption the biblical writers appear to share is that God exists and is working actively in human affairs to bring about salvation. Of course, not all people share that assumption. Other interpretations are possible.

To be a Christian includes, then, believing that the Bible does not simply offer one interpretation, among others, of the world in which we live and our role in it. To be a Christian means to believe that the world is the creation of the God of Israel, revealed decisively in Jesus Christ. It is also to believe that the Bible testifies faithfully to Jesus' words and deeds, and thus reveals the nature and purposes of our Maker. Thus, it is to believe that the biblical interpretations of history are inspired (in-spire = breathe into), that the human writers of the Scriptures were given unique direction and insight by God in order to interpret correctly God's presence and activity in the history of Israel and especially in the ministry of Jesus. In short, it is to believe in divine revelation, such that the Bible yields more than simply a human perspective on the events it describes.

Inspiration does not at all necessitate the idea of a word-for-word dictation from God to the biblical writer; in fact, the Bible's own evidence tends strongly to indicate otherwise. Inspiration most obviously refers to the living presence of God's Spirit (Gr., *pneuma* = breath, air in motion) offering divine insight to the writer to interpret God's saving activity without negating or undoing the writer's real humanity. Matthew gives us a stunning example of this divine-human interactive process in a narrative briefly alluded to earlier in this chapter: Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ. To Peter's words, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," Jesus responded, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood [i.e., human resources] has not revealed

this to you, but my Father in heaven” (16:16-17). Matthew is then careful to emphasize that it was from that time of Peter’s confession that Jesus began to tell the disciples of his impending suffering in Jerusalem. But Peter—the very same Peter who acknowledged Jesus’ Messiahship and whose confession was recognized by Jesus as having been inspired by God—pulled Jesus aside to offer a little bit of free advice. “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you” (v. 22). Presumably, Peter rebuked Jesus because he held certain preconceptions about what a messiah is and does—ideas he shared with many of his fellow Galilean Jews.

The central point is that although Peter received divine inspiration regarding the identity and calling of Jesus, he understood and incorporated that moment of divinely breathed insight in the only way he could: within his own historical, social, intellectual context. God had revealed this truth to Peter, in fact the central confession in Christian faith. But this did not give Peter infallible insight into God’s purposes. Peter remained Peter—human and fallible, and yet a vessel in and through whom God could work and speak. Perhaps this incident from the Gospels provides a clarifying model of the inspiration of the writers of Scripture.

As we have noted, in Israel’s history it was the prophets who were believed to be “in-spired” or in-breathed by God; in the earliest years of the Church, it was the apostles, through the inspiration of the Spirit, who have given us reliable interpretations of God’s reconciling work through Jesus Christ. I have always liked the definition I learned from my first teacher in theology: “Inspiration is the operation of the Holy Spirit upon the writers of the Bible in such a way that their writings become the expressions of God’s will.”<sup>1</sup>

But inspiration also has a secondary meaning as the enlightening work of the same divine Spirit in our lives, particularly in the practice of reading Scripture. The confidence of the Church historically is that as we interpret the Bible with care, open to the Spirit’s guidance, we may receive God’s guidance in understanding and a lively sense of the Spirit’s activity in the story of our own lives. Indeed, it is a Christian conviction, then, that through the inspiring and enlivening presence of God, we are drawn into God’s Story through Jesus Christ. In the words of John Wesley, the eighteenth-century evangelist whose story we will hear in the following chapter, “The Spirit of God not only once inspired those who wrote [the Bible], but continually inspires, supernaturally assists those that read it with earnest prayer.”<sup>2</sup>