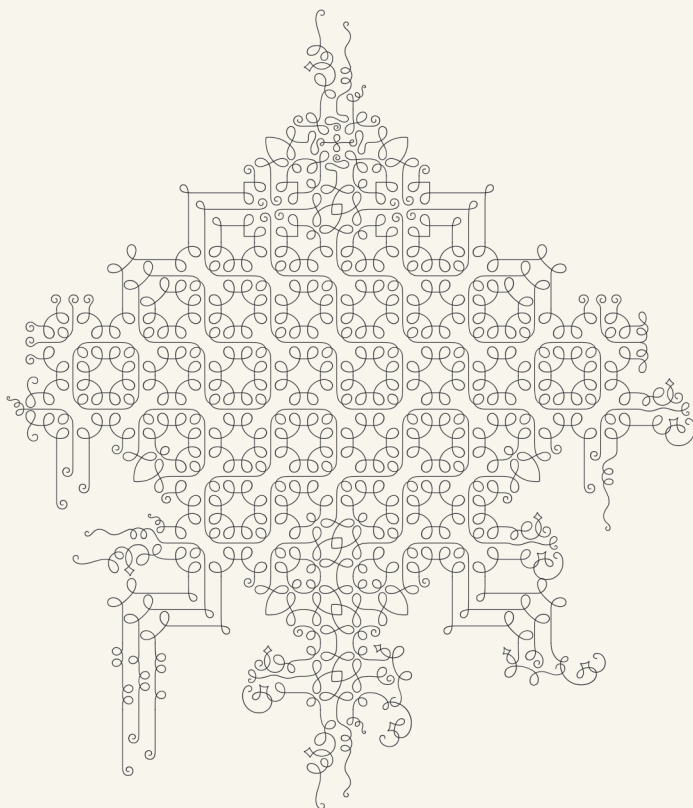


DIALOG

# *The Story of God*

EXPLORING THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE



Michael Lodahl

## CONTENTS

1. Telling the Story of God: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience 6
2. The God Who Creates:  
And the Creation God Invites to Be 14
3. The Tragedy of God's Story:  
The Doctrine of Sin 22
4. The People of Israel in God's Story:  
The Doctrine of Covenants 30
5. A New Twist in God's Story:  
The Doctrine of Christ 38
6. Living in God's Story: The Doctrine  
of the Church 46
7. The End of God's Story: The Doctrine  
of Last Things 54



# Telling the Story of God:

Scripture, Tradition, Reason  
and Experience

What is the Story of God? And how do we tell it?

There is this wonderful, mysterious story told in the gospel of Luke:

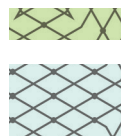
On the first Easter Sunday, in the day's waning hours, a pair of disheartened disciples trudged on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. In melancholy tones they mulled over what they had seen during the horrible weekend, "talking with each other about all these things that had happened" (Luke 24:14).

They were trying to make some sense of Jesus' betrayal, arrest, suffering, and crucifixion; they were desperately seeking a way to comprehend their recent traumatic *experience*. In their own words to the Stranger who had joined them somewhat mysteriously on their painful journey, "we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (v. 21). But how could Israel's redeemer have met such a horrid fate? It made no sense to them; it was contrary to reason.

In this story from the *Scriptures*—a story with which, through the exercise of *reason*, I have chosen to begin this book—these disciples themselves were employing *reason* to try to interpret their *experiences* in Jerusalem over the weekend.

We should add that their hope in Jesus as Israel's redeemer had been fueled by certain *traditions* of interpreting the Hebrew *Scriptures*. They were reflecting one of the traditional Jewish beliefs about the messiah—a tradition clearly rooted in the Jewish people's long history of reading the Torah (Law) and the Prophets.

In the midst of their confusion and disappointment, we read that "Jesus himself came near and went with them" (v. 15)—but they did not recognize the Resurrected One. After listening to their litany of dashed hopes, the mysterious Stranger "interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures . . . beginning with Moses and all the prophets" (v. 27). The





Resurrected Christ, inexplicably incognito, was giving them eyes to read their Scriptures in a radically new way. He did so, we should note, through the interchange of conversation, interpretation, teaching—the use of *reason*. He did not perform magic, but actually engaged them in reasoned discourse about how to rightly interpret Scripture.

But this story bears witness to far more than the employment of reason; after all, this unknown traveler was the resurrected Christ—not your everyday *experience*! Scholars note that in biblical writing, the use of a passive verb (such as “their eyes were kept from recognizing him” in verse 16) often denotes divine action. Somehow, it was God’s will that they not yet recognize Jesus. There is, then, something exceedingly mysterious here, something elusive and transcendent. Their review of the scriptures was a religious *experience* par excellence. The living Christ walked alongside his reeling disciples in the midst of their disheartenment.

The nature of this dramatic experience becomes all the more evident when we recall how these disciples later described their stroll with the Stranger: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” (v. 32). Their heartwarming *experience* included *rational* communication and argument through opening the *Scriptures*. Even so, it was not until Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and distributed it, reliving all those meals with his disciples, those feedings of the hungry multitudes, that final Passover meal, that “their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight” (v. 31). The implication, again, is that God opened their eyes (cf. Acts 10:40). They realized they were in the company of the living Lord Jesus—and then he instantly vanished. This is surely a spiritual experience for the ages.

But Luke's account does not end there. The amazed pair raced back to Jerusalem to report their experience to the other disciples, especially how Jesus "had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35). This story in the *Scriptures*, then, testifies to an *experience* of the risen Christ that would provide rich resources for the development of the *tradition* of the Lord's Supper, in which we too believe and expect that Jesus will be made known to us "in the breaking of the bread." By breaking that bread together, we are physically drawn into the story of living as disciples on the rough and tangled roads of life, striving to make sense of its hard realities, yet journeying in the very company of the living Christ. It is he who continues to open the Scriptures to us, and it is his resurrection presence that still sets hearts on fire.

### The Wesleyan Quadrilateral

In the Church of England during the time of John Wesley (1703-1791), it was typical for theologians to acknowledge the importance of church *tradition* and human *reason* in rightly interpreting the *Scriptures*. Wesley certainly agreed with this, but he also cleared a significant place for spiritual *experience* (as well as experience in the more general sense). These four elements have become known as "the Wesleyan quadrilateral," and though the idea of the quadrilateral is sometimes misunderstood or misused, it certainly points us in an important and helpful direction. The story of the resurrected Christ and his disciples, which is found in the *Scriptures*, but which I also chose for a *reason* (that is, I didn't simply open up the Bible and point randomly to a verse on the page) helps us see how *Scripture*, *tradition*, *reason*, and *experience* are deeply intertwined.

While most of us will probably never have quite so dramatic an encounter with Christ as the discouraged disciples on the Emmaus Road, it remains

true that all theological reflection—even the simplest reading of a biblical passage—involves all four of these elements to some extent or another. Thus, even if it is Wesleyans who tend to talk the most about the “the Wesleyan quadrilateral,” it is inevitable that anyone who attempts to think carefully about his or her Christian faith will necessarily incorporate Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.

An important point to be gained from these considerations is that the Bible never stands alone as it speaks to us. We must read it, and when we read we are also always interpreting—and every act of interpretation inevitably entails the use of reason. Reason, in turn, never stands alone either; the way we think about things is shaped and informed by a complex variety of traditions.

## Reason and Tradition

To tell God’s Story well, then, we need to recognize the important role that tradition plays in both our hearing and our telling. The traditions that surround and nurture us provide us with ways in which to think, and so also the lens through which we read, understand, and apply the Bible. Tradition is not only something we inherit, a body of accumulated interpretation of Scripture, but also something we may contribute to through preaching, teaching, praying, worshipping, writing, testifying, and simply living. (I am thinking of the wonderful saints of my home church whose lives influenced me so deeply during my teen years.) The tradition that has shaped you includes the sermons and Sunday School lessons you have heard or prepared, the hymns and other forms of worship in which you have participated with other believers over the years, the books and Bible commentaries you have browsed, and the pastors or other Christian leaders you have watched in the acts and virtues of day-to-day living (Heb. 13:7). Tradition is the inevitable reality of being limited, finite creatures living in history and within specific

communities, including not only religious denominations but also the cultural, ethnic, and political dimensions of communal life. We are not absolutely determined by our traditions, but we (including our capacity for reasoning) are certainly deeply shaped by them.

## Scripture and Experience

Further, we always open our Bibles with a rich stream of experience flowing into our work of interpretation. Given his strong convictions about the Holy Spirit “bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:16; see also Gal. 4:6) and his own “heart-warming” experience of Christ as a young man, it is not surprising that Wesley imparted to the Methodists (and later to the American holiness movement) a lively hope for experiencing the dynamic presence and activity of the Spirit in our hearts and churches. And while we need the Scriptures to shape our expectations about experiences with God, Wesley also believed that experience could in turn provide critical insights for interpreting the scriptures!

In one dramatic example, a critic asked Wesley what he would do if no one could find any actual human beings living up to the ideal of Christian perfection that Wesley preached. He replied that if that were actually the case, he would have to quit preaching it. But, his critic asked, didn’t Wesley believe that his teaching was supported by Scripture? If it were scriptural, would it matter if no one actually lived up to it? Wesley responded thus: “If I were convinced that no one in England had attained what has been so clearly and strongly preached by such a number of preachers, in so many places, and for so long a time, I would be clearly convinced that we had all mistaken the meaning of those Scriptures.”<sup>1</sup> If the interpretation of Scripture does

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1. Wesley, John. *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1966), p. 67.



not fit with what actually is the case as established through long and careful observation, said Wesley, then the interpretation is inadequate.

An even more important point regarding experience is that we need the living Jesus to be our companion and teacher on the rough road of life. Let us remember that the Risen Christ “interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (v. 27). This is a critical theme in the Story of God—that Jesus is at the heart of that Story. We believe that God’s ultimate and final revelation is Jesus himself, for “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14; see also Hebrews 1:1-3). It is Jesus’ life and ministry, words and works, death and resurrection all taken together that most fundamentally reveal to us who God is and what God is like.

## Bodies and Sacraments

We should remember, too, that even though the disciples’ hearts burned within them as Christ taught them about himself from the Hebrew Scriptures, it was not until Jesus actually broke bread with them that “their eyes were opened.” It was in *the breaking of the bread* that God allowed Jesus to be recognized. We need the Scriptures, interpretation, teaching, and the guidance of the Spirit of Christ as we read, but we also need to encounter the living Christ sacramentally in the bread we break and the cup we share. “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?” Paul asked the Corinthian church. “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:16-17). We are not just thinking minds or even just feeling hearts; we are also bodies enfolded in a material world, created by God and deemed by God to be very good (Gen. 1:31). Through these material elements of the bread and the cup, the Story of God communicates to our bodies in a physical way.

Once more, I will employ reason in selecting and citing Scripture: we read earlier in the same letter to the Corinthians that “no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11). Just as it was God who opened the eyes of those two confused, worn, and forlorn disciples after their heart-wrenching weekend in Jerusalem, God laid Jesus as the foundation for Christian faith, life, and thought. May we pray for the same sort of eye-opening grace as we move into Chapter 2 of God’s Story, in which we begin to think upon the doctrine of God as Creator of all things. As we do so, we will try to build faithfully upon the foundation that the Creator has in fact laid for us: the foundation of Jesus Christ, the crucified and living Lord whom we celebrate and encounter at his holy meal of the broken bread and the shared cup. ●

### Reflect on this...

*What are your thoughts and feelings after reading this chapter?*

*How has this chapter helped you better understand the Story of God?*

*In what ways are you involved in this part of God’s Story today?*



# *The Story of God*

EXPLORING THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

The Bible contains hundreds of stories, but overarching them all is a single story—the story of God. Through all its twists and turns, the Bible reveals a single picture of God and his purposes for us.

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