

PUTTING
TOGETHER
HOW TO MAKE SENSE
OF THE OLD TESTAMENT THE
PIECES

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INTRODUCTION

PUTTING TOGETHER THE PIECES

“In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself, and am never more myself than when I do.”

C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*¹

A FRAGMENTED VISION OF LIFE

Imagine someone gives you a box with puzzle pieces from five completely different puzzles, dumps the pieces onto a table, and tells you to put it all together. You begin with a piece from a winter scene in the Swiss Alps here, a few from a Norman Rockwell picture there, another from a painting of a Thanksgiving table setting, and before long you feel like pulling your hair out. No matter how hard you try and how much time you invest in attempting to complete the puzzle, the pieces simply will not fit together into a coherent whole. Despite your best efforts, the fruit of your labor represents, in a word, fragmentation.

The fragmented nature of modern life isn’t difficult to see if we simply take some time to reflect on our common

¹ Lewis, C. S. *An Experiment in Criticism*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.

experiences. Take the education system with the normal arrangement of subjects: We totter off to our first years of school, and we begin our formal education. We learn math—how to add, subtract, multiply, and divide numbers. Through our English and Grammar classes, we learn new vocabulary words that expand our word bank. Geography teaches us the spatial relationships between cities, states, countries, continents, oceans. History teaches us about how different people groups have discovered new lands, constructed societies, fought wars, achieved independence, invented new technologies and artifacts, and created various works of art. In science, we examine leaves, catch bugs, observe how water and light behave in different situations, dissect frogs, count tree rings, diagram the intricate inner-workings of plant and animal cells, learn the locations and names of the constellations in the night sky.

Through this whole education process, some fundamental matters are missing. Where, for example, in all of the common subjects, do we find the answers to the basic questions of life, things like: What does it mean to be a human? Why am I here? What is the ultimate purpose of life? How am I supposed to live? Whether we've thought carefully about them or not, we all have some ideas about how we might answer these questions. Everyone has what are called *presuppositions*: literally meaning ideas that, prior to reflection (*pre*), we assume to be true (*suppose*). Many people's presuppositions on these issues are ultimately incoherent, in that they don't actually make sense when taken as a whole. The answer we give for one question often creates a problem for another.

Consider, for example, the college student who thinks of his or her origin as accidental, the result of unintelligent forces eventually slinging him onto the scene of

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history. Imagine that our hypothetical student attends a march against genocide in some part of the world. He believes passionately that no society should deny an innocent human being the right to life. From the Christian perspective, we agree with him, but he's got a big problem: whether or not he can justify his conclusion *within his own system of beliefs*. Where, in his account of humanity's origin, does he find justification for something like an intrinsic right? If it is not intrinsic, on what basis is he arguing for these rights? Who told him that human beings have rights? His science courses didn't give him this truth. They told him how many chromosomes a human has and how many bones make up the body, but they gave him nothing about rights. History simply reports on what *has happened*, not on what *should have happened*. Any history book that tells him what *should* have happened is looking beyond history to ethics, or to philosophy, or dare we say it, to religion for these ideas. Without an objective and unchanging reference point, he searches for answers with "his feet firmly planted in mid-air," as Francis Schaeffer has said.

My purpose for writing this book, much less this chapter, is not to offer a solution for the issues of fragmentation that are writ large throughout our society. My task is much more focused and meager than this. I hope to, in some small way, alleviate the fragmentation that characterizes our Bible reading practices and in turn, our overall view of the Bible.

Earlier, I mentioned presuppositions we all hold about the great questions of life and reality. The tricky thing about these beliefs is that they do not just lie dormant, or passive—minding their own business in the back of our consciousness. Presuppositions function like medicine. The medicine we take, though we may give little to

no thought to it when we swallow the pill, immediately begins to affect us. The headache fades, or the stomach settles, or the cough dies down. Our beliefs about the Bible are like this: We have taken them in, mentally digested them, and there they now lie, inside of us. They, too, affect us—even emotionally. They impact how we *feel* about the Bible. They influence both *if* and *how* we read our Bibles. One such presupposition is that the Bible is primarily a book of rules for how to live a moral life.

As an adjunct instructor of philosophy at a Christian college in North Carolina, I've had the privilege of interacting with many students, including a young man named Chris. A local minister had befriended Chris and his family after Chris had accepted Christ. This minister had begun helping him to understand what it means to become a Christian and to follow Jesus. During one of their conversations, the minister said to him, "Chris, the Bible is not *primarily* a rule book, and being a Christian isn't *essentially* following a bunch of rules."

For Chris, this exploded a long-held presupposition he had about the Bible. He had grown up in a certain religious context in which he was taught that the Bible was basically a compilation of rules, commandments, and instructions on what he should and should not do. He did not see how any of it fit together, let alone how it applied to modern twenty-first century living. Convinced that he totally lacked the moral and religious fiber to keep up with such a massive list of demands, coupled with a fair amount of skepticism as to the Bible's relevance to modern life, he largely avoided reading or thinking about it. What he believed about the Bible influenced how he felt about it—which in turn influenced what he did with it.

At a church where I formerly served as pastor, I taught a high school Bible class just before the gathered worship

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time. A common presupposition of the students in my class was that the Bible was a random collection of stories, wise sayings, strange prophetic announcements, and various poetic sections that, while not really connected very well into a larger story, help to provide us with theological and moral insights. We began walking together through the story of the Bible beginning in Genesis and moving forward through the Old Testament. We looked at how the Bible introduces God, gives us insight into the nature of reality, unveils what it means to be human, shows us what has gone wrong in the world and tells us of the curse that has resulted because of that wrong—and how it finally points us to the great promise God has made to undo the tragic curse. I showed them how Moses had intentionally structured the book of Genesis, for example, to focus on this great promise, the promise that God would send a seed to crush the head of the serpent. We saw how this promise runs like a thread through the entirety of the Scriptures, culminating in the incarnation of Christ and his sacrificial mission. We connected the dots from Adam to Seth to Noah to Shem to Terah to Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to Judah, and on and on.

From time to time, I would have the students teach *me* these stories as an exercise, and I was always surprised by how focused they had become. They were getting their biblical bearings, plotting out key landmarks on the journey, and seeing the Bible as one coherent story for the first time. I cannot emphasize enough how “un-flashy” my approach and my teaching were. I brought no bells and whistles—just the story.

At one point during this project, a student named Drew told me that he had set a goal to read through his Bible cover to cover for the first time—in ninety days. This is no small task for anyone—and it was entirely his idea,

and so he began. Each week in class together, he would give me an update on his progress, until finally, one Sunday, he told me, “I’ve just finished reading my Bible cover to cover.” He had finished *twenty-seven days early*. He had read the entire Bible in just *sixty-three days*. I asked him to tell me what had motivated him to read his Bible with such a level of commitment. He told me that seeing the coherence of the story, how it all fits together, helped to alleviate the intimidation that comes with viewing the Bible as disconnected stories and teachings. What had previously felt to him solely like *duty*, suddenly became *delight*.

So what kind of book is the Bible? How we answer this question will influence how we read it, and how we read it will greatly impact how we live. The aim of this first chapter, again, is to provide some level of help to our all-too-common Bible reading predicament, what I’ll call here “fragmented reading.”

Let’s consider some fragmented ways of reading. Let’s say you view the Bible as a book of commandments to be followed. How might you read it? You’d likely read it in the same way you’d read the instruction manual for something like a coffee maker. When you sit down to read the instruction manual (if you even bother), you read in a vastly different way and with an entirely different attitude and expectation than you do when you sit down to read a book such as, say, Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*. For the instruction manual, you would probably read quickly, probably skimming so you can get the coffee maker working as soon as possible. In other words, you read solely to be able to *do*. The goal is the cup of coffee, and the method of reading that gets you to the cup most quickly is what you want. Few people would describe this kind of a reading experience as enjoyable—moreover, once you

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know what to do, you have no need for the instructions any longer. They have served their purpose and may now be thrown away; or, if your home is like mine, pitched in a drawer with a dozen other manuals which you will never look at again.

This is one way of reading, and it serves a purpose. You will notice, though, by way of contrast, that you do not read a book like *The Hobbit* this way. You read it to enjoy the story, understand the characters and their motivations, discover how the plot unfolds. This is already a drastically different kind of reading experience from what you got through the instruction manual. In reading Tolkien, you find yourself vicariously living through the dangers, perils, and triumphs. You *live* Bilbo's bravery as he faces his fears and sneaks into Smaug's lair while he sits atop the stolen sea of treasure. You *live* Bard's triumph when he shoots down Smaug with the well-aimed arrow. You want to see the sights, smell the aromas, taste the delicacies. You want the full experience, and along with that, you want to know how the story unfolds. You want to see how things will end up for Bilbo and the dwarves. This kind of experience is far from drudgery—it is enjoyment. It pulls you into its world.

Notice—and this is *very important*—that without having to be told that you should, you intuitively expect coherence, loose ends to be tied up, the plot to be brought to completion. In fact, if you have ever read a story that has left things untidy and has abandoned certain key plotlines, never to return to them again, you feel a sense of frustration that results from your intuitive expectation—we might even say your *longing for*—coherence and completion. Surely we've all experienced the feeling when we finish reading the last page and are left frustrated and wondering if the publisher might have left a couple of

chapters out of our copy.

Think about the instruction manual again: Your reading is *purposefully* fragmented. You do not read your coffee maker instructions for enjoyment or to experience anything. If you should find that an instruction manual produces this sense inside of you, it might be time to get some help from a counselor—or maybe just start your own coffee business.

How would you read the Bible if you viewed it as a collection of unrelated stories that primarily teach theological and moral lessons? A fair comparison would probably be something like Aesop's Fables. We've all heard of "The Boy Who Cried Wolf." In the English version, the story is told of a shepherd boy who continually tricks his fellow villagers into thinking that wolves are attacking his sheep by literally crying, "Wolf!" Each time, the villagers investigate, only to find that the boy has been lying. One day, when a wolf actually *does* show up, the boy cries for help again, but the villagers are used to his trickery and ignore his cries for help. The boy and his sheep are eaten by the wolf. The point of the story is that if you lie repeatedly, no one will believe you—even if you tell the truth.

We read these stories to extract moral lessons for how we ought to live our lives. Even though the stories come bound in one volume, we know they do not fit together to make up any larger story. "The Ant and the Grasshopper" has nothing to do with "The Boy Who Cried Wolf," which itself has nothing to do with "The Tortoise and the Hare," and so on. The stories are disconnected from each other apart from the fact that each concludes with a moral lesson. Many people view the Bible like Aesop's Fables, even though, unlike fables, the Christian believes the Bible stories to be true history. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to see each story connected to a larger one. Reading the

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Bible in this way essentially views it like a quilt-in-process whose finished squares have not yet been stitched together, and so the overall pattern is indiscernible. This was true for Drew—it was when he started to see the Bible as a coherent story that it opened up to him.

It's easy to understand why we might fall into the trap of reading our Bibles like instruction manuals: firstly, we *do* believe that as Christians we are called not simply to know, but also to act upon what we know—to live it out. Jesus's famous Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel reinforces this. In this sermon, Jesus contrasts those who hear his words and do them with those who merely hear but do not do them. As genuine Christians, we want to live faithfully for Christ in both word and deed.

I think the second reason why we tend to read *merely* to do lies beneath the surface of how our pragmatic, activity-oriented culture has conditioned us to think about what really matters in life. We are people of progress, coming on the heels of the Enlightenment dream. The way forward as a society, we tend to believe, is the way of activity, of industry, of production, and the necessary consumption that justifies it. We read the story of Mary sitting at Jesus's feet while Martha busies herself about the home frantically serving, and the instinct arises within us to chide Mary for her laziness and her lack of practicality. Martha was at the very least getting things *done*.

A BETTER WAY TO READ OUR BIBLES

Rather than reading the Bible *merely* to do, we should seek first to know, to understand, to see the whole, to delight in it, to wonder at it, to breathe the fresh air of

reality within the Scriptures. To return to my example from earlier, I am suggesting reading the Bible first of all in a way more akin to reading *The Hobbit* than the coffee-maker instructions or Aesop's Fables. The question before us, again, is: *What kind of a book is the Bible?* The answer, very simply, is that the Bible, fundamentally, is a *story*. This is not to say that narrative is the only literary genre that God has chosen to employ through his written revelation to us. Far from it, the God as the master artist has chosen to paint his picture using a rich variety of colors and brush techniques, *but* he has put all of these colors onto one canvas and given us one coherent and complete picture.

Consider a book like Proverbs. Tim Keller, in *God's Wisdom for Navigating Life: A Year of Daily Devotions in the Book of Proverbs*, writes, "While we call Proverbs a 'book,' it really is one chapter in a much larger book—the Bible—which presents, through all its various parts and narratives, a single, coherent story." Authors Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen also agree with this description. They write, in their book *The Drama of Scripture*, "The Bible is not a mere jumble of history, poetry, lessons in morality and theology, comforting promises, guiding principles, and commands; instead, it is fundamentally coherent. Every part of the Bible—each event, book, character, command, prophecy, and poem—must be understood in the context of *one* story line."² In short, what we see when we look at the Scriptures is a wonderful mixture of unity and diversity—they are one giant genre into which the varied and diverse subgenres cohere into one overall story. And we must come to see it and read it as such.

² Bartholomew, Craig G., and Michael W. Goheen. *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*. Baker Academic, 2014: 14.

THE POWER OF STORY

What is the significance of recognizing the Bible as one large story? What is it about the nature of *story* and how it affects us that is so important? As far back as world history goes, no matter how far or what culture, we find that human beings have always been telling stories. Humans seem to possess a universal desire for telling and for hearing stories. Interestingly, we experience reality not as disjointed episodes, but as connected ones; that is, we stand connected to the history that has occurred before us and that impacts the future that will come after us. Stories unfold in the same way reality does. One might say that even in our storytelling, no matter how imaginative we get, we stand with one foot firmly planted in reality. Perhaps this is one of the ways that we experience our having been made in God's image. God, who is the supremely creative storyteller, has given to us, his image-bearers, a similar ability.

What truths can we draw from such observations? What are we doing when we write stories or when we find ourselves being drawn into a captivating story? Part of the answer is that we are trying to make sense of our world and of ourselves. As human beings, we hunger *to know* who we are, why we are here, and what all of this means.

Consider a modern story that most of us will be familiar with, whether we have read much or not—the prototypical Disney film. The pattern is easily recognizable because it is almost always the same. Take *Aladdin*, for example: Aladdin, a poor boy, defeats the wicked sorcerer Jafar, becomes a prince, and finds true love. Or *The Lion King*: Simba, heir to the throne of his father's kingdom, flees after he is shamed into believing he is responsible for his father's death. He retreats into exile but later

returns to dethrone his murderous uncle and bring peace to the kingdom. The story of a person rising to greatness gets to the very heart of the American dream and the individualism in which our culture is steeped.

We can begin to see two great powers that stories possess. First, the stories that capture our imaginations and stir our hearts shape the way that we come to understand the nature of reality. This involves everything from how we think about the origin and purpose of life, what we believe the greatest problem(s) in life to be, how we understand morality and on what foundation we think morality rests, if any. It even goes all the way to what we think about our ultimate destiny regarding death and any conception we might have of an afterlife. Stories don't just show us an imaginary world—they transform the way we view the real world. Bartholomew and Goheen say exactly this: "All human communities live out some story that provides a context for understanding the meaning of history and gives shape and direction to their lives."³

Second, stories influence our notion of personal identity—both who we are and who we wish to become. Louis Markos, professor of English at Houston Baptist University, describes this power well: "Literature holds up a mirror to life, and, in that mirror, it captures—or, better, holds in suspension—the subtle weave of beliefs and actions and passions that make us human.... Literature [...] has the power [...] to explain ourselves to ourselves."⁴ To put it another way, stories raise two fundamental questions which they also help us to answer: *What is the world like?* and *Who am I?*

One famous writer who recognized this power of stories to shape our understanding of reality and of ourselves

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Markos, Louis. *Literature: A Student's Guide*. Crossway, 2012: 16, 20.

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was J. R. R. Tolkien. Just months after the First World War had begun, in December 1914, Tolkien and some like-minded friends sat around a fire in a small room, pipes lit, and began discussing what contribution they might make to the world. They called this fateful meeting the “Council of London.” The friends decided, should they survive the war, that each would use his gifts “to restore various neglected values to a decadent and mechanized world...to kindle a new light, or, what is the same thing, rekindle an old light in the world...(Smith through poetry, Gilson through the visual arts),” and Tolkien through stories.

A little over a year after the Council of London meeting, while stationed in the trenches of the battlefield and preparing to charge enemy lines, one of those men wrote a letter to Tolkien. He wrote:

My dear John Ronald, publish by all means. I am a wild and whole-hearted admirer [of your poetry] ... Yes, publish ... You I am sure are chosen, like Saul among the children of Israel. Make haste, before you come out to this orgy of death and cruelty ... May God bless you, my dear John Ronald, and may you say the things I have tried to say long after I am not there to say them, if such be my lot.⁵

Thankfully, Tolkien would survive the war and would go on to produce some of the finest works of literature ever written. Those who have read *The Lord of the Rings* know well their power to awaken us to the value of true sacrificial friendship. Which of us would not give half of

5 Cited in Duriez, Colin. *J. R. R. Tolkien: The Making of a Legend*. Lion Books, 2012: 91.

our belongings for a friend like Samwise Gamgee? Who among us cannot relate to the allure of the ring of power? Even though this story is fantasy, in another sense it is the true world. In the real world, friendship is of inestimable value, weak people can become strong and achieve great things, temptations lurk all about us, beckoning for us to reach out and take them, and unseen spirits both good and bad fill the world. In Tolkien's world, the true hero doesn't abandon his community and set out to make a great name for himself, but rather sacrifices all for the good of his neighbor and world.

Further, consider how ultimate victory comes in Tolkien's world. How is evil vanquished? Just when we think that Frodo, standing on the precipice above the fires of Mount Doom below, is about to destroy the ring, we see his heart turn and yield to the ring's diabolical power—but then suddenly, Gollum attacks Frodo and snatches the ring from him. But just as he grabs it, he loses his footing and falls into the lava below, destroying both himself and the evil ring of power.

Tolkien coined a word to describe this sudden plot turn from disaster to happy ending: *eucatastrophe*, literally, a “good catastrophe.” It is a sudden miraculous grace that visits the hopeless characters and brings joyful resolution. Tolkien goes as far as to call it the “*evangelium*,” which means “gospel,” or good news. What could be more true to reality and the true story of reality than this? When we consider all of these various elements within Tolkien's mythological world, we see that his imaginary world helps us to understand our own real world in some ways. Such is the power of a great story.

What if there were a story greater than all other stories ever told? What if this story-of-stories could answer for us the deepest questions of the human heart in a way

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that both corresponds to reality and coheres internally—the question of the nature of reality, of ultimate reality, of what it means to be human and what our purpose is here on the earth, of how best to understand good and evil, of whether or not there is any hope of undoing the brokenness in the world and if so, what that hope is, of what happens after we die? This is precisely what the Bible is for the world. It is the story that serves as the lens through which we interpret all other stories, ideas, and truth claims. If we want to know the world as it truly is, ourselves as we truly are, and God for who he truly is, we must turn to his story. To quote Bartholomew and Goheen once again: “We want our students first to understand the true nature of Scripture: it is God’s story, the true story of the world. Only when it is understood for what it is can it become the foundation for human life.” In the chapters that follow, we will walk through this story together, and I trust we will emerge on the other side of it knowing more truly our world, ourselves, and our Lord, as well as possessing an ever-increasing love for this wonderful book he has given to us by his spirit.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION:

1. How have you tended to view the Bible throughout your life: As a rule-book, or as a compilation of moral and/or theological stories? In some other way? Why do you think you have viewed it this way? Were your reasons for your viewpoint very good? Why or why not?
2. Can you think of a novel you have read or a movie you have seen that moved you deeply and perhaps even inspired you to want to change a belief or take some action? What

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book or movie comes to mind? Why do you think the story moved you or inspired you? What ways do you view the world differently after engaging with this story?

3. Has the Bible as a whole, or specific parts of the Bible, ever moved you in this way? Why or why not?
4. How might coming to see the Bible primarily as a story affect how you approach it, feel about it, and respond to it?

