

THE DRAMA
of SCRIPTURE

THE DRAMA *of* SCRIPTURE

Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story

SECOND EDITION

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AND MICHAEL W. GOHEEN

SPCK

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*To Bernie and Margaret Poole,
whose faithfulness to the biblical story
has impacted three generations*

*To Ron Hedelius,
for his faithful service as chair of the board
of The Paideia Centre for Public Theology*

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PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION

We have been surprised yet deeply gratified by the success of *The Drama of Scripture* in the last decade of its existence. We never could have imagined that it would be translated into so many different languages and used so widely in seminaries, universities, and churches. It has also made a positive impact on our own lives in a variety of ways, not least of which are the relationships and opportunities it has opened up to us. But much more importantly our prayer continues to be not that we would benefit from this book but that it would lead more believers to find their place in the biblical story and thus be more faithful. Only the final day of judgment will reveal the degree to which that has happened and therefore the book's real success.

Our thinking and scholarship continues to develop, of course. Moreover, we have heard from many professors, pastors, and readers who have used *Drama* in various ways. They have offered suggestions for improvement, corrections, and further development. And so a second edition allows us to take some of this into account and, we hope, do a better job of telling the biblical story. The changes are not massive. The majority of the text remains as it was. However, there have been additions, deletions, rearrangements, and added endnotes that we believe will make this a better text.

We continue to recognize that we do not work as lone individual scholars. Our coauthorship bears witness to the importance of communal scholarship and the collegiality we enjoy at many levels. Since *Drama*, we have coauthored two more books with another on its way. We are deeply dependent on other communities as well to carry out our academic work. And so

we want to acknowledge them. Craig is thankful for the opportunities for teaching and research that the H. Evan Runner chair at Redeemer University College provides, as well as the rich fellowship among colleagues in The Paideia Centre for Public Theology. Mike is grateful for his two church communities, which continue to nurture his faith—New West Christian Reformed Church (Burnaby, BC) and Missio Dei Communities (Tempe, AZ). He has also been enriched by pastors and students in Phoenix, AZ, where he spends time working with cohorts in theological education. Tyler Johnson and Chris Gonzalez, especially, have become friends and valued coworkers. The academic institutions where Mike serves, Mission Training Center (Phoenix), Newbigin House of Studies (San Francisco), and Calvin Theological Seminary (Grand Rapids), have also provided a wonderful context for his work. Scot Sherman and Chuck DeGroat (Newbigin House) and Mike Williams (Covenant Seminary) have been valuable academic colleagues and dialogue partners. Mike’s family has been a constant source of encouragement and stimulation. His wife, Marnie, has invested deeply in his academic work. His grown children, Erin, Ben, Brittany, and Brielle, and their spouses, Mark, Mylana, Dave, and Brad, have all engaged this book in various ways. His seven grandchildren give him even more motivation to pass this story along to the next generation. Also we make grateful use of Ben Goheen’s diagrams in the first chapter. We will not repeat acknowledgments made in the first preface, even though most would be appropriate, other than to note again the important role Doug Loney had in making the text lively and unified.

Mike wants to dedicate this second edition to his parents-in-law Bernie and Margaret Poole. Both are now with the Lord, but their godliness, the fruit of being deeply immersed in the biblical story, continues to pay rich dividends now to a third generation, in Mike’s grandchildren. Craig dedicates this edition to Ron Hedelius. Ron has been an invaluable source of encouragement and support as the chair of the board of The Paideia Centre for Public Theology.

We offer this book up to the Lord with the prayer that God might use our paltry and imperfect efforts in his mission to restore the world he loves.

PREFACE TO FIRST EDITION

This book had its beginnings in a meeting of Mike Goheen and Craig Bartholomew in Birmingham, England, in the summer of 2000. Needing a text for the biblical theology course he taught, Mike approached Craig (a biblical scholar) to write one. Craig proposed that the two of them work together on the book, to keep it sensitive to biblical scholarship (Craig's strength) as well as missiology and worldview studies (Mike's focus). It has been said that if you want to ruin a friendship, you should write a book together! We're happy to report that as we have come to the end of this project we are still good friends. In fact, the project has been mutually enriching.

The Drama of Scripture is written with first-year university students in mind. It is designed as a text for an introductory course in biblical theology taught at Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ontario, Canada. As a Christian university, Redeemer is committed to distinctively Christian scholarship that is shaped by the Bible. 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, including the life of the scholar. Our second goal for students is that they learn to articulate a thoroughly biblical worldview by systematically developing the most comprehensive categories of the Bible's story line: creation, sin, and redemption. This book is written to meet the first goal, set the basis for the second goal, and quite naturally lead to it.

The Drama of Scripture tells the biblical story of redemption as a unified, coherent narrative of God's ongoing work within his kingdom. After God created the world and human rebellion marred it, God set out to restore

what he had made: “God did not turn his back on a world bent on destruction; he turned his face toward it in love. He set out on the long road of redemption to restore the lost as his people and the world as his kingdom.”¹ The Bible narrates the story of God’s journey on that long road of redemption. It is a unified and progressively unfolding drama of God’s action in history for the salvation of the whole world. 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 the *one* story line.²

Many of us have read the Bible as if it were merely a mosaic of little bits—theological bits, moral bits, historical-critical bits, sermon bits, devotional bits. But when we read the Bible in such a fragmented way, we ignore its divine author’s intention to shape our lives through its story. All human communities live out of some story that provides a context for understanding the meaning of history and gives shape and direction to their lives. If we allow the Bible to become fragmented, it is in danger of being absorbed into whatever *other* story is shaping our culture, and it will thus cease to shape our lives as it should. Idolatry has twisted the dominant cultural story of the secular Western world. If as believers we allow this story (rather than the Bible) to become the foundation of our thoughts and actions, then our lives will manifest not the truths of Scripture but the lies of an idolatrous culture. Hence, the unity of Scripture is no minor matter: a fragmented Bible may actually produce theologically orthodox, morally upright, warmly pious idol worshippers!

If our lives are to be shaped by the story of Scripture, we need to understand two things well: the biblical story is a compelling unity on which we may depend, and each of us has a place within that story. This book is the telling of that story. We invite readers to make it their story, to find their place in it, and to indwell it as the true story of our world.

There are three important emphases in this book. First, we stress the comprehensive scope of God’s redemptive work in creation. The biblical story does not move toward the destruction of the world and our own rescue to heaven. Instead, it culminates in the restoration of the entire creation to its original goodness. The comprehensive scope of creation, sin, and redemption is evident throughout the biblical story and is central to a faithful biblical worldview.

Second, we emphasize the believer's own place within the biblical story. Some refer to four questions as foundational to a biblical worldview: "Who am I?" "Where am I?" "What's wrong?" "What's the solution?" N. T. Wright adds an important fifth question: "What time is it?"³ He thus asks us, "Where do we belong in this story? How does it shape our lives in the present?" As part of our telling of the Bible's grand story, we will explore the biblical answers to these five questions.

Third, we highlight the centrality of mission within the biblical story.⁴ The Bible narrates God's mission to restore the creation. Israel's mission flows from this: God chose a people to again embody God's creational purposes for humanity and so be a light to the nations, and the Old Testament narrates the history of Israel's response to their divine calling. Jesus comes on the scene and in his mission takes upon himself Israel's missionary vocation. He embodies God's purpose for humanity and accomplishes the victory over sin, opening the way to a new world. When his earthly ministry is over, he leaves his church with the mandate to continue in that same mission. In our own time, standing as we do between Pentecost and the return of Jesus, our central task as God's people is to witness to the rule of Jesus Christ over all of life.

We have also borrowed from Wright his helpful metaphor of the Bible as a drama.⁵ But whereas Wright speaks of *five* acts (creation, sin, Israel, Christ, church), we tell the story in terms of six acts.⁶ We add the coming of the new creation as the final, unique element of the biblical drama. We have also added a prologue. This prologue addresses in a preliminary way what it means to say that human life is shaped by a story.

If you are using this text for a course or Bible study, you can access resources on our website www.biblicaltheology.ca that will enhance your use of this book: a course syllabus, PowerPoint slides, a reading schedule for a thirteen-week course, supplementary reading, and more. Many more resources can also be found at www.missionworldview.com.

Projects of this scope always involve contributions from many people besides the authors, and there are several to whom we here express our gratitude. First, we thank the many students at Redeemer University College who read the manuscript at various stages and offered critical comment, especially Elizabeth Buist, Elizabeth Klapwyk, Ian Van Leeuwen, and Dylon Nofziger. We appreciate the help Dawn Berkelaar provided in a small section of the book. For the diagrams and drawings in the book, we

are grateful for Ben Goheen's artistic talent. Fred Hughes, formerly head of the School of Theology and Religion at the University of Gloucestershire, has been supportive of this project from its inception, has read the entire manuscript of an earlier version, and has offered many helpful suggestions. He also opened up the opportunity for Mike and Craig to work together, inviting Mike as a visiting scholar to the International Centre for Biblical Interpretation at the University of Gloucestershire during the summer of 2002, when we wrote most of the manuscript. We are also thankful for the support of Redeemer University College, which from the beginning of the project has offered support and assistance of many kinds. We are indebted to our friends and colleagues Gene Haas and Al Wolters in the Religion and Theology Department at Redeemer, and Wayne Kobes in the Theology Department at Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa. Both Gene and Wayne also teach first-year biblical theology courses and have been helpful with their advice. Al has been a mentor to both authors, and we have greatly appreciated his wise counsel and unflagging support.

In the United Kingdom Alan Dyer and Mark Birchall were always supportive of this project and made many helpful comments as they read the manuscript more than once. Sadly, about the time we handed the manuscript over to the publisher, Mark went to be with the Lord. He will be sorely missed. In South Africa Wayne Barkhuizen made helpful comments on the manuscript.

Jim Kinney, director of Baker Academic, has been very helpful and encouraging. He and some of his colleagues read an early draft and offered insightful criticism and counsel that significantly shaped the final manuscript. Undoubtedly, the one to whom we are most indebted is Doug Loney, our colleague at Redeemer, dean of Arts and Humanities and a member of the English Department. Doug has given to this project much time and skill as a writer, taking our manuscript in its two different writing styles and turning it into what we believe to be a lively and coherent text. We also thank Doug's wife, Karey, and Mike's wife, Marnie, for their patience and support. We dedicate this book to our Redeemer colleagues, Doug Loney and Al Wolters, and to Gordon Wenham of the University of Gloucestershire, whose faithful work in Old Testament studies over many years has been a blessing to us both.

PROLOGUE

The Bible as a Grand Story

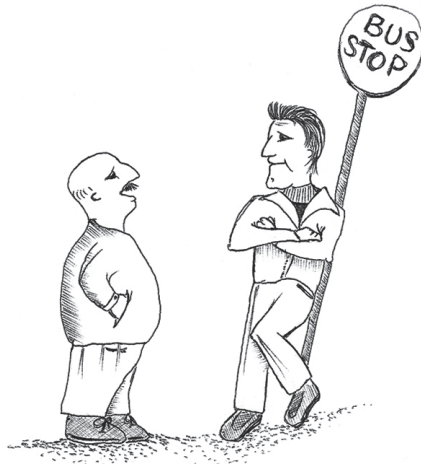


Figure 1 Bus Stop Encounter

Alasdair MacIntyre offers an amusing story to show how particular events can be understood only in the context of a story.¹ He imagines himself at a bus stop when a man standing next to him says: “The name of the common wild duck is *histrionicus*, *histrionicus*, *histrionicus*.” The meaning of the sentence is clear enough. But what on earth is he talking about? This particular action can be understood only if it is placed in a broader framework of meaning, a story that renders the sentence comprehensible. Three stories, for example, could make this particular incident meaningful. The

man has mistaken him for another person he saw yesterday in the library who asked, “Do you by any chance know the Latin name of the common duck?” Or he has just come from a session with his psychotherapist who is helping him deal with his painful shyness. The psychotherapist urges him to talk to strangers. The young man asks, “What shall I say?” The psychotherapist says, “Oh, anything at all.” Or he is a Soviet spy who has arranged to meet his contact at this bus stop. The code that will reveal his identity is the statement about the Latin name of the duck. The point is this: the meaning of the encounter at the bus stop depends on which story shapes it. In fact, each story gives the event a different meaning.

This is also true of human life. In order to make sense of our lives we depend on some story. Some story provides the broader framework of meaning for every part of our lives. Again MacIntyre says it well: “I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story do I find myself a part?’”² Our lives—the questions and events and decisions and relationships that fill it—take their meaning from within some narrative.

This brings us to another example, a story that is perhaps closer to our own experience of life than a fable about bus-stop encounters and Latin names for ducks.



Figure 2 Percy and Abby

Percival and Abigail, a young man and woman, find themselves at the same table during an after-service social for newcomers to the church. Over coffee and egg-salad sandwiches, they begin to talk of this and that. Eventually the others at their table have wandered away, and someone has rather pointedly removed their coffee cups and begun to stack chairs. But

Percy and Abby barely notice these things. Each is beginning to think that it might be worthwhile to get to know this other person just a little better. So they arrange to meet again, at a quiet café, for dessert and (of course) more coffee. But their real reason for meeting there is that it's a much better place for private conversation than that crowded church hall. (Out of respect for this young couple's privacy, we have decided not to include another cartoon here.)

As the conversation picks up again, Abigail and Percival gradually find themselves telling each other bits and pieces of—what? Yes, of course: they begin to tell the stories of their lives. How he is the youngest of four and the only boy, spoiled rotten by three dotting sisters. How she was born in New Delhi, while her parents were serving at the consulate, and spent her high school years in four different countries. Little by little, they lay down the broad strokes of the plot and begin to fill in the details: Percy's hardly been two hundred miles from the family farm (though he longs to travel). Abby speaks four languages and can understand a couple more. His childhood holidays were spent with a boatload of cousins at his grandparents' cottage in Muskoka. She once celebrated New Year's Day by snorkeling in Mauri Bay (South Africa). And so on and on, through the memories of childhood faiths and fears, first summer jobs, education plans, and hopes for the future.

The only proper answer to "Tell me about yourself" is to tell a story or a series of stories. By sharing these personal narratives, we come to know one another. We want to understand not only who that other person is now, at this moment, but also how he or she came to be so. What are the experiences, ideas, and people that have shaped their lives? Their personal stories give the context and explain much about their lives. Yet as they continue their conversation, they might ask: Are we left with our own personal stories to make sense of our lives? Or is there a true story that is bigger than both of us, through which we can understand the world and find meaning for our lives? Are our personal stories—apart or together—parts of a more comprehensive story?

The story in which I find significance and purpose might be simply "the story of my life," the narrative of my private biographical journey. But it might be broader than this: the story of my family or my town—even of my country and my civilization. The more deeply I probe for meaning, the larger the context I will seek. And this leads to a very important question:

