

The Biblical Metanarrative

<http://www.postmodernpreaching.net/metanarrative.htm>

What is a Metanarrative?

If you were to read Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace* and someone asked you what it was about, there are several answers you could give. You could say it is a book about many individual people and their stories. Just being introduced to all the names in the first few pages is a chore in itself. On another level you would say that it concerns the Napoleonic Wars. On still a higher level, you might give a reply about what the author was trying to say on a grand scale by writing his book.

Similarly, the Bible may appear to be just a collection of random stories. On a higher level, though, a unity appears. What is God trying to say through all the individual stories and events recorded?

This is where the word *metanarrative* comes into importance. The metanarrative of the Bible is literally the "big story," the all-encompassing theme of the whole.

The metanarrative of the Bible is God's Big Story revealed within it. The story, of course, is really about God. The biblical metanarrative is the story of how God

revealed himself to the world through a chosen people.
This is the theme of the Bible.

Like Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, with its many plots and subplots, the Bible contains many stories, all woven together by the one grand theme of God's self-revelation of his nature and plan to the world. This Story of God does not come to us in the neat packaging of systematic theology. It comes to us in the stories of a chosen people who experienced God.

Why is this Important to Preaching?

Why is this important for postmodern preaching? It is important because postmodernists do not believe there are any metanarratives at all. There are no grand stories which give meaning to all of life and which define what is true.

When postmodernists come to realize that there is a biblical metanarrative, a Big Story that God has been telling the world, it has a powerful effect upon them.

Christianity Today ran an article in November, 2002, titled "I Was a Witch." It is the story of Kimberly Shumate and her long conversion to Christ. Concerning one particularly poignant moment in her journey, she writes of the power of the Big Story in her life:

As Lisa drove me home, my mind ached as I replayed Scott's words. All the Old Testament and New Testament verses had one oddly familiar voice – one tone, one heart. I wondered, *How could a book written*

by so many different people over the course of hundreds of years fit together perfectly as if one amazing storyteller has written the whole thing? The Holy Spirit began melting my vanity and arrogance with a power stronger than any hex, incantation, or spell I'd ever used. Suddenly, the blindfold I'd worn for almost 30 years was stripped away, and instantly I knew what I'd been searching for: *Jesus!*

Is There Really a Biblical Metanarrative?

A postmodern person would view the Bible as just a collection of odd stories. Postmodern scholars might say that the biblical text is 'a multi-voiced tapestry' that it can be interpreted in a 'myriad of ways'. They would see no central interpretive principle at all in the Bible.

But if the Bible is the record of the self-revelation of God to the world, then we would expect there to be some plot and direction to the Story. Christianity teaches that the self-revelation of God to the world reached a culmination in the Incarnation, when the Word became flesh. If so, then the Incarnation would have to be the central interpretive principle of the Bible.

As F. F. Bruce argues:

“... the Christian gospel . . . tells how for the world's redemption God entered into

history, the eternal came into time, the kingdom of heaven invaded the realm of earth, in the great events of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. ” F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 5th ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1960), 7-8.

Did Jesus and the early church believe in a metanarrative?

In Mark 1:15 Jesus announces, “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.” In saying this, he indicates his belief in a plan of God that has been working itself out through history. The Kingdom of God has finally arrived, with himself as its fulfillment. A major purpose behind the writing of Matthew's Gospel is to show how Jesus saw his life as a fulfillment of this plan.

The Apostle Paul believed in a metanarrative. After his encounter with Christ on the Damascus road, he understood the coming of Christ to be the integrative principle of biblical history. And from that point forward, he taught in terms of a metanarrative (for example, see Ephesians 1:9-10).

The early church also believed in a metanarrative. With the coming of Christ, they began to understand the writings of the apostles as completing the Story of God, and therefore possessing authority. So, they began to refer to these writings as “scripture” (for example, 2 Peter 3:16). Walter Elwell writes:

It was to be expected that if God's people had found life and nurture through inspired writings pointing forward to the savior, they might also be given inspired writings to explain their savior to them and to the world after he had appeared. And this is exactly what happened. (Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarborough, *Encountering the New Testament: A Historical and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 26.)

Metanarrative Frameworks

Postmodernist scholars do not believe the Bible has a metanarrative. They warn against imposing an artificial system of interpretation onto the Bible.

For those of us who believe in the presence of a biblical metanarrative, the temptation is to think that we can exhaustively or definitively explain it, or to equate our systemic understanding of the metanarrative with the metanarrative itself. That's why it is perhaps best to think in terms of *metanarrative frameworks*.

A metanarrative framework is an attempt to explain the biblical metanarrative, although not exhaustively or in exclusion of other frameworks. There are many ways we can understand the biblical metanarrative. Here are nine frameworks, each of which contribute to our understanding of the whole biblical metanarrative:

1. *Old Testament - New Testament*

The early church naturally divided the Bible into two parts, the Old Covenant and the New Covenant to reflect the coming of Christ.

2. *The Incarnation*

God's self-revelation reaches its highest culmination for us in the Incarnation. Everything leads up to

this and everything leads from it in the Bible. Cf. 1 John 1, Hebrews 1.

3. *N. T. Wright's Worldview Approach*

N. T. Wright teaches that the biblical metanarrative conveys a worldview. Any worldview typically provides us with stories through which we can view reality. These stories also provide us with an answer to four basic questions about existence – (1) who are we? (2) where are we? (3) what is wrong? and (4) what is the solution?

4. *Drama*

Similar to N. T. Wright's approach, we can understand God's Big story as a drama. Every drama revolves around a problem that needs to be solved. In the Bible we see the elements of this drama: Paradise, Sin, A Resolution Promised, A Resolution Obtained. The metanarrative can be explained in terms of this literary movement.

5. *Salvation History*

The story of the Bible is the story of God's self-revelation to the world through a chosen people. The history of that chosen people becomes a way to understand the biblical metanarrative. The major events of this chosen people in the Bible are: Creation, Exodus, Covenant Nation, Exile, Restoration.

6. *Jewish Two-Age View of History*

Many Jewish people in the time of Christ divided history into two segments: the Present Age, and

the Age to Come. As we shall see, the New Testament uses this framework to teach metanarrative thinking.

7. *The Hebrew Prophetic Tradition*

The longings of the Hebrew prophetic and sacramental systems find their fulfillment in Christ. The book of Hebrews, in particular, uses this approach.

8. *The Promised Line*

God makes a progressive series of covenant promises: to Eve, Abraham and David. Through these promises, he reveals his intent to bring salvation to the world.

9. *The Presence of God*

Dr. Gordon D. Fee traces the metanarrative in terms of the Presence of God: the Presence of God was given, was lost and is restored. See his book, *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God* (Hendrickson: Peabody, MA, 1996), pp. 9-23.

Let's use these frameworks to trace the biblical metanarrative in more detail.

Tracing the Metanarrative in Genesis

In many ways, the book of Genesis is the most important in the Bible. It establishes the themes found in the rest of the Bible. In particular, it especially addresses Wright's four questions that define any worldview:

Who are we?
Where are we?
What is wrong?
What is the solution?

Genesis begins by answering the first two of these questions. In affirming that God is the creator of everything that exists, Genesis 1 tells us who we are and where we are:

we belong to God and we live in God's world.

Having started there, the literary structure of Genesis 1 reveals still more about ourselves and our place in God's creation.

The literary structure of Genesis 1 is built on two words found in Gen 1:2 - *tohu* and *bohu*. In the beginning, the "earth was formless (*tohu*) and empty (*bohu*)" (NIV). Here, the text is describing the process of creation as God imposing form on the chaos and then filling that form.

So, from a literary point of view, the Seven Days of creation can be understood in terms of God first creating forms, or realms, and then filling those realms:

Days of the Forming of Realms	Days of the Filling of Realms
Day 1: Realm of Light	Day 4: The Bodies of light
Day 2: Realm of the water under and the water above	Day 5: Creatures of air and seas
Day 3: Realm of the land and the vegetation	Day 6: livestock, man / Vs. 30 green plants

Day 7: chaos banished, continuing rest before God, permanent state, humanity's intended place

A study of the literary structure reveals to us that the Seventh Day was on-going because in it God ruled and the forces of chaos were banished. It was God's intent for humanity to live in this never-ending condition from

the start. This understanding sets us up for Genesis 3, where the Fall takes place.

Genesis 3 answers the worldview question, “What’s the problem?” The problem is that evil has entered the human race. And here we learn, once evil enters into the world, humanity loses the Seventh Day. We are no longer living in the realm God intended for us. Sin reverses the process of creation and causes chaos to return. We have lost the presence of God.

Genesis 3 also addresses the fourth worldview question, “What’s the solution?” We see this solution first promised in Genesis 3:15. Eve’s offspring would crush the head of the serpent, the originator of the evil.

And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.

Traditionally, Christian scholars have called this passage the *proto-evangelium*. It is the first mention of the hope of the Gospel. All the rest of the Bible describes how God keeps his promise to solve the problem of evil.

The prophecy of Genesis 3:15 also suggests that there would be two lines: a line bearing the promise of a redeemer, and another line which would be opposed to the promise-bearers. In Genesis 4 we see the dynamics of these two lines of Genesis 3:15 vividly portrayed. Cain rises up to kill Abel, his brother. Abel is humble

and of the line of the promise-bearers, but he is persecuted by Cain, who is proud, arrogant and self-sufficient.

The line of Cain is listed in 4:17-18. Seth takes the place of the murdered Abel (Gen 4:25). Seth's line is listed in Genesis 5.

Ancient genealogies did not simply present birth records; they were stylized to communicate a message. Many of the names in Seth's line are similar to those in Cain's line, but often slightly different. Genesis seems to be deliberately saying that the lines were similar, yet not. Something was wrong in Cain's line.

We see this especially in the seventh person listed in both lists. The seventh in Cain's line is Lamech, a man of pride and violence. The seventh in Seth's line is Enoch, a man who "walked with God."

Another telling difference between the two lines concerns the ages of the descendants. The ages of Cain's descendants are completely omitted, while Seth's descendants are mentioned as having lived vast ages. In the ancient Middle Eastern world, long ages were a sign of blessing. The inclusion about the ages seems to be another way of indicating that the line of Seth was the line of promise and blessing.

In Genesis 6-8, the wickedness of the human race increases and as it does, creation becomes undone. The waters of chaos return to cover the earth again just as

they did at the beginning of creation (Genesis 1:2). Yet, despite the wickedness and the return of chaos, a remnant remains. The line of promise now continues in Seth's descendant, Noah.

By Genesis 9 -10, the line of Cain has been wiped out, but it is “reborn” as the line of the similar-sounding “Canaan.” And the line of the promise, originally from Seth and then through Noah now continues in the line of Shem (the Semites).

In Genesis 11 traces the line of the promise from Shem to Abraham. Again, the genealogies have a purpose. Notice, once again, that the line of Shem mentions the great ages of each member. Again, the presence of these numbers seems to be an indicator that Shem's line is the line of blessing, through whom the promise of Genesis 3:15 will one day be completed.

In Genesis 12:2-3, God gives another promise, this time to Abraham. The Abrahamic promise is every bit as important as the original promise in Genesis 3:15:

I will make you into a great nation
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you. (NIV)

In this promise to Abraham and his descendants, God chooses a people to reveal himself to the world. Eventually, the entire world will benefit from the promise given to Abraham.

The rest of Genesis concerns the descendants of Abraham: Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Each seemed to have the conscious awareness, based on the promise to Abraham, that they were promise-bearers.

Tracing the Metanarrative in the Rest of the Old Testament

Exodus is the story of the return of the Presence of God to the descendants of Abraham. God reveals his name as Redeemer to them. For generations, God had them be slaves. In the exodus, Israel learned that Yahweh is a redeemer.

After being redeemed from slavery, Israel entered into a covenant relationship with God. As a nation, they came to experience and know Yahweh. The Presence of God accompanied them, as seen in the Tabernacle and, later, in the Temple. Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy describe this covenant relationship.

The terms of the covenant are stated in Deuteronomy 28-30. If the nation followed in God's ways, it would experience blessing as God's chosen, covenant line. But

if they refused to follow God's way, they would experience curses. They were to be holy because God was revealing himself to the world through them.

Much of the rest of the Old Testament is prophecy. The prophets were the messengers of the covenant. They reminded the people of the terms of the covenant and called them back to the knowledge of God. Their prophecies reflected the words of warning and blessing as found in Deuteronomy 28-30. When the people turned their backs on God, the Temple was destroyed - symbolizing the lost Presence - and the nation was sent into exile.

Another major theme in the Old Testament is kingship. When the chosen people desired to have a king rule of them, God revealed that the fulfillment of the promise would come in a king who would rule over them.

This set the occasion for God's third major promise, this time given to David (2 Samuel 7:11-13 ff.). The first promise is found in Genesis 3:15 and the second is found in Genesis 12:2-3. Now, in this third promise, to David, God indicates that the promised line would develop through the house of David.

God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:11-13 ff. is reflected in numerous places within the prophetic

writings of the Old Testament (for example, Psalm 2, Psalm 110, Isaiah 7 - 9:7, Isaiah 53, Micah 5:2 and Jeremiah 31:31ff). The prophets began to speak of a Messiah to be born as the fulfillment of the long line of promise that began with Genesis 3:15.

When the nation went into exile, the prophets prophesied that there would be a restoration. But their prophecies became mixed. While speaking of the restoration of the nation, the prophets began speaking about the Messiah. In fact, the messianic passages in the prophetic writings almost always occur in passages dealing with the restoration of the nation from exile. This suggests that the restoration would be fulfilled in the person of the Messiah, not in a nation.

Tracing the Metanarrative in the New Testament

Matthew begins his Gospel by linking what he will say about Jesus with the promises of the past. He begins by presenting a genealogy that traces the promised line from Abraham to David through the post-exilic times promising a restoration, to Jesus.

His very first words are, “A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ” (NIV). But by this word *record* he means more than a history. The word in Greek, *geneseos*, traces back into the Hebrew word *toledoth*, used in

Genesis to mean “continuing history.” (So, in Genesis 2:4, 5:1, 6:9, 10:1, 11:10, 11:27, 25:12, 25:19, 36:1, 37:2).

Matthew is implying, “God’s plan is now continuing in Jesus and all that will follow from him.” He roots the life of Christ in the promises of the past, leading up the event of Christ’s coming, but then he also suggests that God’s plan is still being worked out through those who become Christ’s followers.

This is why Matthew ends with the Great Commission, which is really just a re-statement of the promise originally given to Abraham in Genesis 12, that the entire world will be blessed. As we keep the great commission, we participate in the line of promise ourselves. We become part of the metanarrative, God’s Big Story.

Mark also presents the metanarrative, but in a different way. Mark’s Gospel reflects the Jewish Two-Age View of History.

Many Jews in the time of Jesus divided history into two distinct ages. The Present Age was the time before the coming of the Messiah, under Satan’s power, with sin and sickness and demonic possession prevalent. The Age to Come would be the time of the Messiah, when

the power of God would be evident and miracles, healing, exorcism and righteousness would prevail. The expectation was that there would be a sudden break, from one age to the other.

When Mark's Gospel opens, we see this sudden break. There is a bold announcement that the kingdom of God has come, followed by a series of healings and exorcisms - displays of the power of the age to come.

The contrast with the Old Testament is remarkable. Most of the Old Testament hardly mentions a case of healing and never mentions an exorcism. But then, Mark erupts with power. It is saying that history has shifted. By reciting these signs, Mark is indicating that the Messiah has definitely come. His presentation is a metanarrative presentation.

Luke also connects with the metanarrative. He reflects the metanarrative in two major ways. First, he describes incidents in the life of Christ in terms of the past history of the nation of Israel. So, Luke 4:16-21 is linked with Isaiah 61. Pentecost is linked with Joel 2. The early preaching of the apostles quotes from Psalm 2, 16 and 110. Stephen's defense in Acts 7 recounts the whole redemptive history of the Old Testament in terms of Christ. And in Acts 15, the decision of the church is made with Amos 9 in mind.

Secondly, and most interestingly, Luke associates the personal experiences of his readers with the Holy Spirit as a sign that they were participating in the Age to Come. Remember, these were largely Gentile believers who did not share in the national history of Israel. But they did experience the Holy Spirit in their lives. Luke's point is that they experienced the Spirit because they were really sharing in the eschatological blessings of the Age to Come.

In doing this, Luke helped them to understand their experiences and he also connected them to the metanarrative, God's Big Plan. Similarly, the experience of postmodern believers with the Holy Spirit can be used to teach them about God's Big Plan.

John's Gospel also presents the metanarrative, but in a most remarkable way. Here, he explains the coming of Christ in *cosmic terms*. He associates Christ, not just with Abraham and David, but with Creation itself (John 1). He presents a worldview metanarrative framework. (For an example of how the metanarrative can be interpreted in terms of cosmology today, see the article on cosmology, available through the site download link.)

John's Gospel also describes the full return of the Presence of God to the covenant people through the

coming of Christ (see John 1:14). From Christ flows the fullness of the Spirit of God without measure (John 3:34, 7:37-39).

The writings of the Apostle Paul also contain metanarrative thinking.

In Ephesians 3:3, Paul talks about the metanarrative as being an “administration” (NIV) – a master plan – the full aspects of which God has kept hidden, but which has now been revealed. God’s intent is that his plan of blessing and salvation did not end with a single ethnic group, but is for all races and nations (Eph 3:8-9, cf. Eph 1).

The Church, composed of both Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ, is the bearer of the line of blessing that we first met in Genesis. The inclusion of the Gentiles into God’s plan of salvation is a culmination – a mystery revealed, the final chapter of God’s Big Story (cf. Ephesians 1:9, 3:3-4, 3:9, 6:19, Romans 16:25-26, Colossians 1:25-27). Paul prays for the Ephesians to be able to grasp God’s great plan (Ephesians 3:14-21). Interestingly, he interprets his own apostleship as important in fulfilling the metanarrative (Ephesians 3:1-13).

The book of Hebrews makes another notable addition to metanarrative thinking in the New Testament. There, the author links the metanarrative to the Hebrew prophetic tradition. This happens in the very beginning of the book, in Hebrews 1:1-4 but is also found in the rest of the book.

The book of Revelation completes the metanarrative of the Bible by showing the triumph of God over evil in the world. It provides full of glimpses of the blessings of the age to come. The final few chapters hearken back to the earliest words of Genesis. The tree of life and the presence of God suggest that the Seventh Day of Creation has returned and redeemed humanity has come to live in final shalom in God's presence. So, the Big Story of the Bible draws to a close, with a final resolution to the Drama which sin caused.

Thus, we have attempted to understand the biblical metanarrative by using metanarrative frameworks.