

History as Theology

28 July 2021

Slide 1

History as Theology

Historical accounts.

How much can we learn?

Much of Bible is historical “narrative”.

The appeal of stories is universal. In fact, one of the most common human impulses can be summed up in four words: “tell me a story.” During the

course of a typical day, nearly everyone finds occasion to string together incidents and thereby tell a story. A typical meal with family or friends is an incipient storytelling session. We turn the day’s experiences into a story in order to cope with our difficulties and relish our triumphs.

The Bible continuously satisfies the universal human desire for narrative. This was highlighted when Henry R. Luce, founder of *Time* magazine, said in an interview, “*Time* didn’t start this emphasis on stories about people; the Bible did.” Although the Bible is comprised of dozens of literary genres, the dominant one is narrative. Even the non-narrative parts are placed within an overall story known as universal history and salvation history. A biblical scholar of a bygone era rendered the oft-quoted verdict that “the narrative mode is uniquely important in Christianity,” starting with the Bible.

Slide 2

- Three historical events
 - The Healing of Aeneas
 - Dorcas Restored to Life
 - Cornelius’s Vision

Slide 3

- Why narrative?

- It is rooted in the character of God, who is the God who acts.
- Biblical writers are preoccupied with history, and they overwhelmingly want us to know what actually happened.
- Life itself has a narrative quality, being comprised of exactly the same ingredients that stories possess (setting, characters, plot, progression in time, and so forth).

• Ryken, L. (2015). *How Bible Stories Work: A Guided Study of Biblical Narrative* (p. 12). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

We can assign this dominance of narrative in the Bible to at least three causes. First, it is rooted in the character of God, who is the God who acts. Second, biblical writers are preoccupied with history, and they overwhelmingly want us to know what actually

happened. To record what happened is to tell a story. Third, life itself has a narrative quality, being comprised of exactly the same ingredients that stories possess (setting, characters, plot, progression in time, and so forth). The narrative quality of the Bible is part of its truthfulness to life.

The history recorded in the Bible exists on a continuum of which literary narrative is only a part. On one end of the continuum we find the historical impulse to record the facts of what occurred, but nothing more. On the literary end of the continuum we find events, settings, and characters presented in full detail and with artistry, so that we relive the story in our imaginations and relish the storyteller's skill. The historical material of the Bible covers the entire continuum. The more fully a historical account is presented, the more amenable it is to the methods of narrative analysis that I present in this book.¹

“By their fruits you shall know them.”

God reveals himself through events of history.

¹ Ryken, L. (2015). [*How Bible Stories Work: A Guided Study of Biblical Narrative*](#) (pp. 11–12). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

Slide 4

- 2 Flat Whites
- 2-4 Psalms
- 1-3 Chapters of the Old Testament
- One Chapter of the New Testament
- Prayer

Usual practice – make flat whites – read the bible – 2 or more psalms – 2 or 3 chapters from OT – 1 chapter from NT – pray.

2 Samuel David – In many ways David is an unsavoury character but God uses him and we have soe remarkable psalms

from him.

Slide 5

- Why the Old Testament?
- Bible is a record of God's dealing with His people
 - Hebrew people
 - Primarily historical accounts or writings set in the context of an historical situation
- It tells us of how God deals with all His people
- It reminds us of who God is through what He does

Two ways to treat the story of David.

Common way is allegorical – David prefigures Jesus in some way – or he shows qualities worth emulating – making the accounts of David's life a moral tale.

Actually, it is really straight history – warts and all. At moments we are impressed by him, and at other times disgusted by his behaviour. But, what matters, is that David is a real person. And the accounts of his life are not a moral tale but real history. We may struggle to see how this man can be described as “a man after God's own heart.” But in that struggle we learn something of the nature of God, even when we can't put it into words.

NT

Luke keeps a careful and well-researched record of both life of Jesus, and the expansion of the early church.

Luke relies on witnesses, often naming those involved – you can check up!

Slide 6

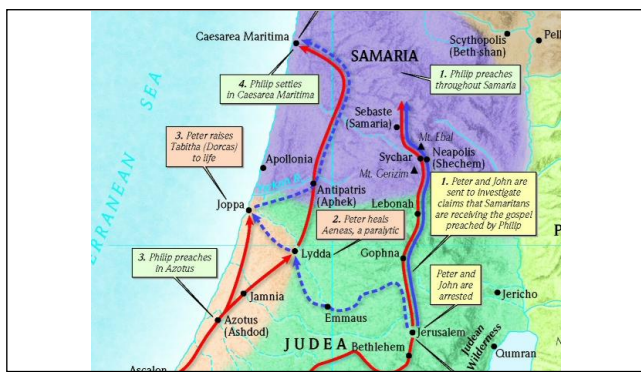
- Things calmed down after that and the church had smooth sailing for a while.
- All over the country—Judea, Samaria, Galilee—the church grew.
- They were permeated with a deep sense of reverence for God.
- The Holy Spirit was with them, strengthening them.
- They prospered wonderfully.
 - Peterson, E. H. (2005). *The Message: the Bible in contemporary language* (Ac 9:31). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

Two remarkable miracles and one vision.

Diverting from the story of Paul back to Peter

³¹ So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied²

Slide 7



summaries in Acts (cf. 2:43–47).³

Context

The following passage will show its extension to the coastal towns of Judea. The “peace” of the church is described in terms of the encouragement of the Spirit, the growth of the church, and its reverence and worship (“the fear of the Lord”), terms reminiscent of the earlier

Slide 8

The Healing of Aeneas

- Bedridden for eight years.
- “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you;
- rise and make your bed.”
- And immediately he rose.
- And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.

Healing of the lame man.

Reminiscent of Jesus healing those who were lame.

Peter is on preaching tour.

Result was a remarkable expansion of the church in that place.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ac 9:31). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

³ Polhill, J. B. (1992). [Acts](#) (Vol. 26, p. 244). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

As we have seen before, the miracles in Acts are signs of the power of Jesus and often serve as the initial basis that leads to ultimate commitment. They are never, however, a substitute for faith (cf. 3:9f. with 3:19f.).⁴

Note that there is no formula.

Slide 9

The Raising of Dorcas

- She was full of good works and acts of charity.
- She became ill and died.
- All the widows stood beside Peter weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas had made.
- But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed;
- Turning to the body he said, "Tabitha, arise."
- And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up.
- And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

The healing of Tabitha (Dorcas - gazelle) is told in a very matter of fact manner.

Joppa was the coastal port of Judea at the time, and Lydda was 15km south east of Joppa.

In three and a half years Jesus had only raised three people from the dead [as

recorded in the Gospels], but Peter had seen all three.⁵

They send for Peter. Perhaps Luke is reinforcing the fact that notable miracles were being done primarily by the Apostles.

²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But earnestly desire the higher gifts. ⁶

Not matter of status but of God's design.

the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, ²⁴ which our more presentable parts do not require.⁷

Tabitha was a wonderful woman. Of special mention are the widows who began to assume a place of honour in the church – unlike in the surrounding society.

⁴ Polhill, J. B. (1992). [Acts](#) (Vol. 26, p. 246). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁵ Gangel, K. O. (1998). [Acts](#) (Vol. 5, p. 147). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Co 12:29–31). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Co 12:22–24). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

A Dorcas society (19th century) is a local group of people, usually based in a church, with a mission of providing clothing to the poor. Dorcas societies are named after Dorcas (also called Tabitha), a person described in the Acts of the Apostles. (Wikipedia)

Slide 10



Edwin Long's *A Dorcas Meeting in the 6th Century* (painted 1873–1877) imagines a Dorcas society of Late antiquity.

The words that Peter uses are quite different in the two incidents. No formula. No mention of the name of Jesus in the remarkable miracle of restoring Tabitha to life. However, Luke notes that Peter knelt down and prayed. He was not restoring Tabitha to life by his own power.

The words he uses recall the words of Jesus raising the daughter of Jairus, the ruler of a synagogue. Only one syllable difference.

The news quickly spreads and many in Joppa come to believe. They can see Dorcas! There was obvious evidence of this miracle.

Slide 11

Do These Events Happen Today?

- Yes and No – Not in the same way
- Notice that it is through Peter that God performs these miracles
- The Apostolic Era was a special time for the church
- God can still do miracles
- Raising the dead – does this happen now?

What about the raising of dead today?

Although there are accounts that such events occur today, there seems to be little to verify such events. Accounts on the internet are not to be trusted. Christians appear to be as gullible as others. We choose to believe what suits us or supports our faith. We are not

known for careful investigation. Opposite of Luke's careful research into these matters.

Personal experience.

Revival known as the Toronto Blessing.

Claims in NZ of gold dust setting on people's hands. A Baptist church in my vicinity was claiming such events. There was no evidence that the glistening on people's palms was nothing other than perspiration. Others claimed to have fillings transformed from the mercurial amalgam to gold. Even claims that such changes had been verified by dentists. Not so! God has given us this physical world as a means of verifying such accounts. If it didn't happen, it didn't happen no matter how much we wanted to believe that it did.

What about raising a person from the dead?

Korean pastor.. At St M's. Wife died. Sincerely believed that she would be raised from the dead. Prayed around the body for days. Fervent prayer in Korean style. At one stage a child remarked that she had seen the body twitch. Greatly increased their belief. His wife did not recover!

This does not mean that God cannot do these things. He did. Luke's account of the raising of Dorcas is presented as a verifiable fact.

Notice that there is no interest in any after death experience in this account or in any account of the raising of the dead in the New Testament, including Lazarus who had been dead for four days.

God has created a physical world so that we might know him and be confident in his existence and his will and purposes.

Slide 12

- God reveals himself in the events of history
- God also uses visions and dreams
- But these involve physical events as well
- Iranian Christian conversion dreams +

But God does use means that transcend our material existence as well.

Slide 13

Cornelius's Vision

- [At Caesarea] there was a substantial Jewish minority there and considerable friction between the Jews and the larger Gentile community.
 - Polhill, J. B. (1992). *Acts* (Vol. 26, p. 252). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.
- Cornelius was a Roman soldier of high rank, a "God fearing", but not a proselyte.
- It seems an appropriate place and person for God to deal with Peter's prejudices.

We go to Caesarea,

There was a substantial Jewish minority there and considerable friction between the Jews and the larger Gentile community. It was fitting that it should be the place where Peter came to terms with his own prejudices and realized that human barriers have no place with

the God who "does not show favoritism."⁸

Centurion Cornelius. Centurion of the Italian Cohort. Caesarea was an important city as its name indicates. Cornelius is not a proselyte to Judaism but a God-fearing man, who devoutly sought after God. He clearly had a positive influence on his household which would normally include some of his soldiers.

Slide 14

Cornelius's Vision

- It is mid afternoon that Cornelius has a vision.
- Cornelius alone experiences the vision.
- It is not a physical event like the appearances of Jesus to the Apostles.
- It provides no saving information about God but provides encouragement and instruction.
- Cornelius is free to respond.
- Through his response, a door is opened for the Gentiles to enter the church.

God takes notice of both his prayers and his generosity, compare with Dorcas. In a vision, God sends an angel to Cornelius where he is instructed to send for Peter. God uses both spiritual and physical means to bring people to himself.

People are not converted without

human agency. This is God's way of working. Even accounts of conversions of Iranians to Christianity involve Christians explaining the gospel to others.

⁸ Polhill, J. B. (1992). [*Acts*](#) (Vol. 26, p. 252). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Slide 15

- Much of the Bible is historical narrative.
- If we are to understand and apply it, we need to immerse ourselves in it.

Much of what we read is written, not just for our information, but to provide for us an understanding of who God is and what God does. One of our readings last week was from 1 Cor 10.

Slide 16

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.

10 For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³ and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank

from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. ⁵ Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

⁶ Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.

⁷ Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.” ⁸ We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. ⁹ We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, ¹⁰ nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. ¹¹ Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. ¹² Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. ¹³ No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. ⁹

⁹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (1 Co 10:1–13). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

How important is the Bible to you? Do you regularly read it? Do you listen when the Bible is read in church. Do you realise that when the Bible is read, then God is speaking to us, he is speaking to you. We need to hear God speaking to us when we read, maybe through the thoughts that arise in our minds, and we need also to understand what the Bible actually says, because it is the authoritative witness to God's actions and to God's ultimate revelation of himself in Jesus.

Slide 17

- If we can see how God acts in history, we are more likely to see God acting our own lives.
- God does not change.
- God reveals himself supremely in Jesus.
 - Not just in his teaching
 - But also in his character and actions

Our lives are a story, a story in which God plays a part. But which part. It's often when we look back over our lives that we become aware of the part played by our parents and significant other people in forming who we are. We can see this because we know those

people, we know their characters and their actions.

Slide 18

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

The Holy Bible: English Standard Version. (2016). (John 14:8–9). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

⁸ Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I

am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves. ¹⁰

¹⁰ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (Jn 14:8–11). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

How can we see God acting in our lives, in our history. But how do we know it is God and not our imagination, or just circumstances. It's only because we have come to know God through the actions he has taken throughout history. Particularly we know God in the person of Jesus, his Son. "He who seen me, has seen the Father." Says Jesus to Philip. If we want to see how God is working in our lives, we must read the record of how God has acted in history, particularly as recorded in the Bible. It's by his actions that we know him. "

Slide 19

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

The Holy Bible: English Standard Version. (2016).
(1 John 3:16). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

"¹⁶ **By this we know love**, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.¹¹"

Absorb God's actions by osmosis by immersing ourselves in the stories of the Bible

Slide 20

BLESSED lord, which hast caused all holy Scriptures to bee written for our learnyng; graunte us that we maye in suche wise heare them, read, marke, learne, and inwardly digeste them; that by pacience, and coumfort of thy holy woorde, we may embrace, and ever holde fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast geven us in our saviour Jesus Christe.

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer,
The Book of Common Prayer 1549

¹¹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (1 Jn 3:16). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

Slide 21

God of inspiration,
you caused all holy scriptures to be written
for our instruction,
grant us so to hear them,
read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them,
that by steadfastness
and by the encouragement of your holy Word,
we may embrace and ever hold fast
to the blessed hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ,
who is alive with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God now and for ever.