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The Bible Makes Sense

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Making Sense as an Insider

The Bible is a strange book that is put together in an odd way. It seems to have no order at all but is a jumbled collection hard to penetrate. It will not do to read it from cover to cover as faithful believers have often done, and it is not much better to try to read it chronologically (even if we could date all of the materials, which we cannot). It is not helpful to try to impose on the literature an order that reflects modern scientific understandings. As much as we are able, we can try to read the Bible like insiders and let the material itself determine the order for us. Of course that is not completely possible, but if we take seriously the *shape of tradition*, we may discover clues that will let us see the material from the inside. In what follows, I shall try to be sensitive to the *function of the literature*. It is likely the case that if we can determine the function of the literature, we shall understand how it stands in relation to the other parts of the collection.

The Primal Narrative

I suggest that the place to begin in determining the shape of the tradition is with the *primal narrative*, that most simple, elemental, and nonnegotiable story line that lies at the heart of biblical faith. Such a narrative is presented with the passion of fresh believers and with the simplicity of a community that had screened out all uncertainties and felt no reason to explain. It is

an affirmation in story form that asserts, "This is the most important story we know, and we have come to believe it is decisively about us." This story is clearly for the insiders, and no effort at all is made to persuade or convince outsiders.

Gerhard von Rad, noted German scholar, has suggested that Israel's primal narrative (his word is *credo*)—the consistently believed in and recited root story that a community relies upon in crisis and the one by which the truth or falseness of every other story is judged—can be located in three texts:

1. Deut. 26:5–9, a liturgical confession that Israel recites as the offering is brought before the altar. The offering is a crucial statement of loyalty and allegiance, and in that context Israel asserts her deepest and most precious story.
2. Deut. 6:20–24, a teaching recital in response to the stylized question of a child. It has been suggested that this is a formula for catechetical instruction, though it is the child who asks and the parents who answer (not a bad catechetical method).
3. Josh. 24:1–13, a speech before a national assembly in which Israel is constituted as a self-conscious covenantal community, some think for the first time. The assembly consists of all kinds of people with diverse stories. Here is declared to them the one story that is now to be the shared ground for their common life.

Since Von Rad, other scholars have suggested that Exod. 15:1–18 may be a much earlier and more convincing example of the primal narrative than those cited by Von Rad. It is likely that Exodus 15 is the earliest presentation we have of such a normative statement of faith, but that difference from Von Rad is not important for the point being made here. It is a recital just after the deliverance from slavery in which Israel asserted her deepest confession in an exalted mood of jubilation.

Von Rad has made it clear that these assertions come behind and before any reasoned theology or any apologetic concern to justify faith to outsiders. They are the assertions that Israel knew intuitively to be true and that she eagerly asserted in situations of urgency when it was necessary to announce her peculiar historical identity.

In a similar way, C. H. Dodd, noted English scholar, has observed that in the Christian Testament, we may discern a primal narrative that brings to us the basic substance of the earliest preaching (his word is *kerygma*) of the church and therefore the earliest faith of the church. It seems most likely that the earliest statements of such faith do not come from the Gospel accounts but from statements in the letters of Paul. Paul apparently relied on the oral traditions of the early church, the same oral traditions that were used for the forming of the Gospels. Thus the statements in the letters to Corinth are likely earlier than the Gospel accounts, though they surely report the same faith:

1. In 1 Cor. 1:23, the primal narrative is articulated as the substance of preaching.
2. In 1 Cor. 3:1, it is presented as the foundation of all Christian faith, which means it is the most elemental statement of faith that can be made. As for all narratives of this kind, there are no theological presuppositions or assertions behind them. This is the bedrock of the faith of the church.
3. In 1 Cor. 15:3–8, it is presented as the essential tradition that is remembered by the church in its theological reflection.

Now the *credo* of Israel discerned by Von Rad and the *kerygma* of the church articulated by Dodd are quite different from each other for obvious reasons. The one is formulated by a community concerned with Israel's faith, and the other by a community focused on the events of Jesus' presence and ministry. The one is cast in completely Semitic idiom, and the other is presented in a Hellenistic context. The one is the product of long and not very well understood processes; whereas the other appeared in a relatively short time. But they have important similarities that are decisive for understanding the real intent of the biblical tradition:

a. Both are recitals of *acts of God* that have radically changed life for those who affirm them. The decisive grammar of biblical faith presents an active verb with God himself as the subject and the church or the world as the object of the verb, that is, as the recipient of God's action.

b. Both are statements of confession or assertion that make no attempt to explain or prove. They are bold, primitive affirmations of faith, stripped of every ornamentation or justification.

c. Both are narratives that recite ways in which God has acted to change the shape of the entire historical process. That is, they tell of God introducing the cause of freedom in a society that was characteristically oppressive. They tell of the capacity for life to be wrought out of situations of hopelessness and death. And since these events have happened, human consciousness cannot be the same. It is now known by those who have faced this evidence that real newness can come into human history that is not derived from old forms and patterns. Concrete events like the healing of a man or the finding of a baby have now been given universal significance. The finding of the baby is an announcement to the arrangers of this world that a new world is promised by God and will come. The healing of a man is understood as a dismantling of the old arrangements that kept people from being human. The impact of these memories concerns both the shape of public life and the images we have of our personal existence. The substance of these kernels of biblical faith (*credo*, *kerygma*) presents the essentials of all of biblical faith. For Israel:

1. A *promise* was made to our forebears in the midst of great precariousness.
2. God *delivered* Israel from slavery to freedom with a great show of power that defeated the greatest power of the time.
3. God led Israel *in the wilderness*, a place of precarious pilgrimage, and nourished and sustained the people.
4. God brought Israel to the *good land* that God had promised.

For the early church, as Dodd has summarized:

1. The prophecies are fulfilled, and the *New Age* is inaugurated by the coming of Christ.
2. He was born of the *seed of David*.
3. He *died* according to the Scriptures, to deliver us out of the present evil age.
4. He was *buried*.
5. He *rose* on the third day according to the Scriptures.
6. He is *exalted* at the right hand of God, as son of God and Lord of the living and dead.
7. He *will come again* as Judge and Savior of humankind.

To this summary might be added, although Dodd did not do so, the outpouring of the Spirit as the effect of Jesus' exaltation.

These two lists provide a summary of biblical faith in broad outline and may provide us with a way of understanding the strange ordering of the literature.

The Expanded Narrative

After understanding the primal narrative, we may next speak of the *expanded narrative*. Obviously the biblical text now presents to us all kinds of materials that do not have the clarity or conciseness of the *credo* or *kerygma*. In the process of building the tradition, the primal narrative was expanded over a period of time in ways that seem to us not very careful or disciplined. Rather, they give the impression of being careless and disordered. The primal narratives have attracted to them all kinds of diverse material that may or may not be related to the themes of the primal narrative. But they have been pressed into relationship with the primal themes and into their service. That is, they have been brought into contact with this central story and have had their meanings changed by it. In reading this more extended material, it is helpful in each case to consider it as a more elaborate and complete presentation of the same theme found in the kernel, which means that this literature also is confessional and not reportorial in character.

Thus in Genesis, chapters 12–50, the story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph is an extended presentation of the promise made to "my father who is a wandering Aramean." And in each unit of Genesis 12–50, we may look for the promise being kept to the precarious ("wandering") one. For those who read as insiders, the central issue of these texts is whether God will keep the promise. The stories in their present form reflect doubt and uncertainty. They also reflect calculation and manipulation by persons who could not rest on the promises but had a better way of their own. Often the stories agonize because God does not seem ready or able to keep the promise of giving a son; the next generation then must also bear the

promise. Can the barren woman become the mother of the child of promise (Genesis 18:1–15)? Can the younger son secure the promise that should have gone elsewhere (Genesis 27)? Can the beloved son come out of the pit to power (Genesis 40–41)? These are all dimensions of the single statement of the old credo.

As Israel told the story with imaginative attentiveness to detail, the primal narrative became handled and illuminated in many ways over a long period of time in many different circumstances. In the same way, for the early church, it seems probable that different communities in different places told the stories in different ways. The communities related to Matthew, and Luke knew and valued the birth stories as the community of Mark did not. Each community arranged the materials differently to serve its own purposes and each had different memories about Easter.

The expanded narrative is a collection of all the ways in which the primal narrative has been perceived and handled. So with the other themes in the credo of Israel:

The assertion of deliverance from Egypt (Dent. 6:21–22; 26:6–8; Josh. 24:5–7) is expanded into the fulsome story of Exodus 1–15.

The memory of wilderness sojourn is now extended into Exodus 16–18 and Numbers 10–24.

The affirmation of the gift of the land is elaborated in Joshua 1–12.

The brief confessional statement has become a longer statement with many curious components, each of which asserts Israel's basic faith. Some scholars have called the extended form an *epic* derived from the *credo*.

In the Christian Testament, the primal narrative has been extended to become the whole Gospel narrative of the birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. The primal narrative focuses rather exclusively on the last events and the fuller Gospel narrative is filled out with memories of his life and ministry. But even that is not mere biography. It consists rather of memories seen through the prism of the dominant theme of crucifixion and resurrection, so that many stories in the Gospels are episodes where, by Jesus' presence, action, and words, a deathly situation was turned to life (cf. Mark

5:24–34; Luke 7:36–50; Luke 19:1–10). Thus for an insider, even these narratives, seemingly removed from the primal narrative, do present that same faith. The narratives of the Hexateuch (Genesis to Joshua) and the Gospels embody many attempts by many persons and groups over a long period of time to define the basic credo-kerygma, given their particular understandings.

Derivative Narratives

In both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Testament, this literature had peculiar primacy. But each community had a subsequent history told in what we may call *derivative narrative* that is, the history of (a) Israel after Moses-Joshua and (b) the church after Jesus. In both cases, the community of faith could not keep retelling the old story. As time passed, new experiences happened that were incorporated into the story. Thus the *old primal story* was supplemented by an *ongoing tradition*. Though this also belongs to the self-identifying process of the community, in neither case is this derivative material regarded with the same seriousness or authority. In the Hebrew Scriptures, this derivative narrative, which includes all the books from Judges through Nehemiah, reports the life, faith, and actions of the believing community as it worked its difficult way through changing historical circumstances with varying degrees of faithfulness and fickleness. In the Christian Testament, this derivative literature is the Book of Acts, which presents the actions of the Apostles through several crises in the early church. In neither case is this pure reporting of a historical chronicle. In both cases, it is a theological statement about how the spirit of God has ruled the history of this people, the bearers of a new presence in history.

Thus much of Israel's derivative narrative concerns the power of God's word to work its will, that is, to keep the promises announced earlier (cf. 1 Kings 8:20; 12:15; 15:29; 16:12,34; 21:27–29; 22:35; 2 Kings 1:17; 23:16–18; 23:30; 24:2). Similarly in the Christian Testament, the story ostensibly reports the actions of leaders in the church, but it is also the history of God's spirit (Acts 2:17–18; 6:10; 18:5; 19:21) or of God's word (Acts 6:7; 8:4; 12:24; 19:20) at work in a new way in history. Presumably

the narrative could have been presented as "objective reporting." But for an insider it is important to recognize the intensely believing character of the material. To fail to see this is to miss the point of the literature. In each case, this narrative takes the primal memory of the basic narrative and testifies to its power and authority in the life of the ongoing community that is removed in time from the primal events but still is powered by their enduring impact. Clearly, in both cases, this can only in a very special way be called "history" because it is history in which the Lord of the primal narrative plays the central and crucial role. Only insiders can understand what that means for our history as well as for our sacred literature.

The Literature of Institutionalization

Of course every enduring community, including those formed in the zeal of a fresh religious commitment, must organize its life to preserve its initial intent; to guard against perversion; to define the structure of order, the role of leadership, and the scope of freedom; and to deal with specific internal problems and concerns. The literature reporting these facets of the history of the community we may call the *literature of institutionalization*, which is often several generations removed from the original leadership, for only then do such problems surface with their full import and danger.

This literature, crucial for the community itself, often does not make for exciting reading. In the Hebrew Scriptures, it includes the dreary texts of Exodus 25–40, the Book of Leviticus, Numbers 1–10 and 25–36, and in a removed way, Ezekiel 40–48. This literature is designed to authorize and legitimate forms of leadership, customs and mores, as well as liturgical practice. In the Christian Testament, in quite another genre (presented as letters), we may identify 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus as literature of institutionalization, showing the faithful community dealing with the daily tasks of order, survival, maintenance, and discipline.

The Literature of Mature Theological Reflection

Much more interesting and edifying is another kind of literature we may designate as the *literature of mature theological reflection*. Nothing in the Bible comes close to sustained, systematic thought that is self-conscious about epistemology or method. Thus all of it stays primitive in its idiom and boldly free in its confessional character. But we may observe that Deuteronomy and Romans respectively seem to some authorities to be the most eloquent and ripest insights of the reflective community of faith.

In Deuteronomy, the central issues concern the power of covenant and the rule of covenantal law in a community tempted to syncretism. Deuteronomy is a literature that concerns the community of faith when it is seriously compromised with other religious values and perceptions. Perhaps this temptation is the fertility religion of Canaan. Or perhaps it is the oppressive imperial religion of Assyria. Either way, the Israelites apparently found it attractive to incorporate foreign influences into their religion in ways that seriously perverted the meaning of covenant with the God of Israel. Deuteronomy is written in protest against such syncretism and in order to reassert the faith of Israel in its less contaminated form. In Romans (again in the form of a letter), the reflective issue concerns the meaning and significance of a religion of grace. These two books lie at the confessional, theological center of the Bible and seek to say most forcefully what the primal narrative had asserted. They are both attempts to take up the claim of the primal narrative and give it more cohesive and comprehensive expression.

The Literature of Instruction and Vocation

Finally we may identify the *literature of instruction and vocation* that includes the prophetic (Isaiah to Malachi) and sapiential (Job to Ecclesiastes) literature of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Epistles (1 Corinthians to Jude) of the Christian Testament. These are texts in which the preacher-teachers of the community have announced the claims of faith in a particular situation.

catchall in which a function justifies the grouping, namely, the attempt to say what this faith means in a particular situation. This literature includes wisdom sayings as in Proverbs and James that seem quite removed from the primal narrative, as well as the agonies of the poetry of Job and the sophisticated theological ruminations of Hebrews. At times this literature is essentially *instructional* in character. This is true not only of the wisdom pieces we have mentioned. It is also true of Paul's letters, which often contain instructional material about how the church is to deal with specific situations. At other times, these are essentially *lyrical* in character as in the Psalms and some of the hymnic fragments in the Letters (as in Phil. 2:5-11 and Col. 1:15-20). In this grouping, I would also include *visionary* materials commonly labeled "apocalyptic" (Daniel, Revelation), which are attempts by a weary and desperate community to articulate a form of rationality that would maintain freedom for faith in an oppressive context. But functionally this literature is the same, for it seeks to assert the primal narrative in a way of power and authority for a special circumstance. Out of all these times and in these various ways (instructional, lyrical, visionary), these materials are presented with the passion of those who consider this faith the only option.

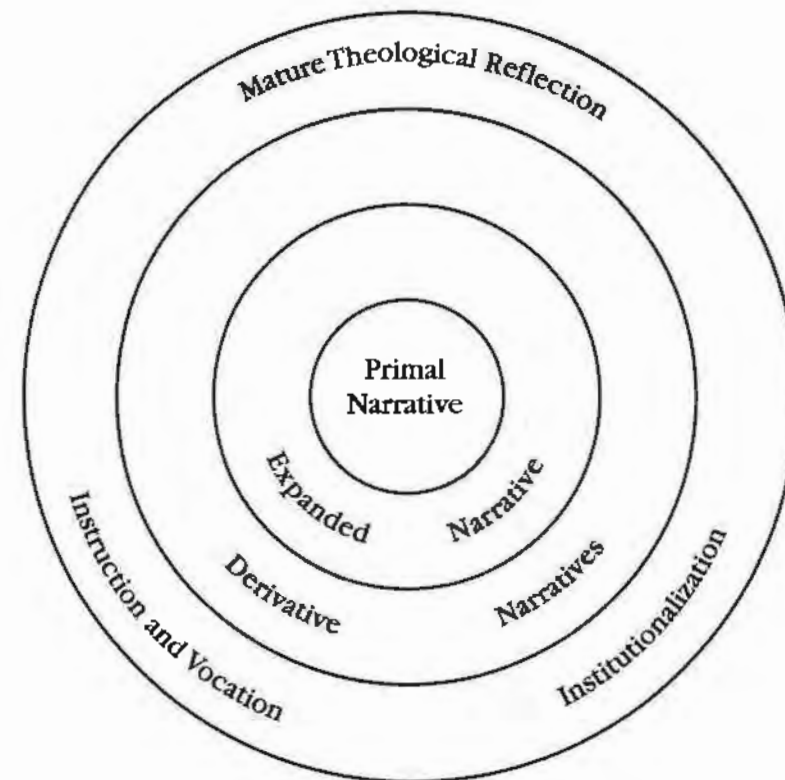
This singular passion is most evident in the prophets of Israel, whom I have included in the literature of instruction and vocation. It is the prophets who insist that the primal narrative has power, authority, and relevance in all kinds of new situations. Indeed, a proper understanding of the prophets, as of the Epistles, requires linking them to the primal narrative.

The Relationship of These Kinds of Literature

The categories suggested here should not be pressed, for they are only an introductory scheme for orientation and will not hold up under detailed scrutiny. But they are enough to note how all of the literature can be understood by insiders as the way our community has faced the question of identity and mission.

Finally we may make some suggestions about the intricate relationship that these various literatures have to one another.

I have urged that all parts are related to and informed by the primal narrative. Everything must be assessed by those assertions. The next most important assertions are the expanded narratives that mean to deal with the same claims and substance as the primal narrative. We are more removed in the derivative narrative, for it features the confessing community as it becomes more removed in time from the primal events. However, even this material seeks to show the claims of the primal narrative in the continuing community that recites them. The last three groupings, the literature of institutionalization, the literature of mature theological reflection, and the literature of instruction and vocation, are all functions of the derivative literature. That is, they deal with three tasks that the community must address if it is to be faithful to the primal narrative: it must (a) organize its life, (b) articulate its best understandings, and (c) locate specific contacts between faith and life. Such an understanding organizes the material in this way:



and rulers in faith for many generations have sought to understand and live all of life in response to the covenanting God who brings slaves out of bondage and who brings life out of death. That focus sets all the literature in context.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What is the "basic story" of your life? Name the two or three or four basic events or perceptions that shape your life.
 - Which parts of that are "good news"?
 - Which parts are "bad news"?
2. Israel's credo is about going out from a place (Jer. 2:6) and coming in to a new place (Jer. 2:7).
 - In your basic story, what safe places, safe relationships, safe connections have you been able to risk in pilgrimage? Has this permitted you to grow?
 - What places, relationships, connections have been too precious to leave? Has this immobilized or protected you?
3. The Christian Testament church first confessed that Jesus died and was raised.
 - In your life, have you died to what is old in your person? What would you like to die to?
 - Have you been surprised by new life? Where in your life might it come?

Scripture Passages for Meditation

Mark 10:17-22

Acts 3:1-10

Comment

In his book *A Place for You*, Paul Tournier writes that the task of mature living consists in two things:

1. finding a safe place for yourself
2. leaving that safe place in a new venture

Of course that means one is never safe for long but always between places.

Mark 10:17-22 is not just a story about one rich man; it is a model for discipleship. The one whom Jesus addresses (that's us) is called to *give* away what he has and *come* with Jesus, to

that one cannot because the place of his riches is too safe. The Gospel of Mark is probably out of the early congregation in Rome, which had each day to decide between faith in Jesus and the demands of the emperor. Some days it is hard to choose the venture of faith against the safety of establishment reality.

The narrative of these texts concerns the amazing power of the Christ. Because the disciples had themselves left things to go on pilgrimage with Jesus, they had the power to move other people from a place of hopelessness (Acts 3:2) to new life (v. 7). They did a resurrection act. They addressed a man who belonged nowhere and gave him a safe place in the Gospel.

The church and its members are still promised power to move people, but it depends on a decision to leave our own safe place as Israel has always been called to do.

The call of the Gospel is to leave what is organized against the promises of God and to be on the way to the place where God's purposes have power. It is a call that takes the form of demand because such leaving is abrasive and painful. It is a call that takes the form of a gift, because the place of promise is never invented by us. It is always given by God in ways we cannot imagine or control.