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Telling Transformation: How We Redeem Narratives and Narratives Redeem Us

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Storytelling has been identified as one of the most fundamental features of humanity. It is so ubiquitous that Hayden White calls narrative a “metacode, a human universal.”¹ Indeed, we might say that stories are a prerequisite for religion; most religious traditions can trace their origins to a rich repository of stories, parables, myths, and legends. Thus, Paul Ricoeur bids us to understand religions on their own terms (literally): “A religious faith may be identified through its language.”² Not only do narratives reflect a community’s worldview, but they also create and perpetuate the unique identities of those who tell them. As Jerry Camery-Hoggatt suggests, all the workings of a church—its mission trips, worship style, Christian education program, youth ministry, outreach initiatives—will never “have as large an impact on the spirituality of the church” as what he calls “the sermons we hear at the water cooler”—in other words, the stories we tell.³ In this article, I will explore narrative’s function in bringing about redemption.

¹Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity,” in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 2.

²Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 35.

³Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, *Grapevine: The Spirituality of Gossip* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2002) 22.

To read or hear a story is not a passive activity. Narratives—whether biblical, literary, or personal—have the power to transform us, to redeem us and make us new. Paying attention to how this happens will be part of the work of the pastor and the wonder of the Christian life.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY REDEMPTION?

Although redemption generally is understood today to be a theological term, originally it was a secular word referring to deliverance of slaves from bondage through the payment of a price by a redeemer. As passages like Lev 25:25, 47–52 and Ruth 4:6 attest, the redeemer was often the freed person’s kinsman. This secular understanding of redemption informs its frequent use throughout Scripture to describe God’s deliverance of Israel.⁴

By the first century C.E., Jewish eschatological expectations focused on the coming Messiah—the ultimate Redeemer of Israel—who would deliver God’s chosen people from adversity and evil once and for all. The stories about Jesus of Nazareth were told as fulfillment of these expectations; although many first-century Jews understood messianic redemption in literal, nationalistic terms, the New Testament uses of redemption language are distinctly metaphorical. Despite the many theological debates engendered by these texts, Christians generally understand christological redemption as the eternal forgiveness of sins, accomplished through Jesus’ salvific death and resurrection.⁵ In addition to this specific understanding of redemption, which is unique to the work of the incarnate Christ, Christians also affirm that God continues to work redemptively in the world today. One crucial way that God accomplishes such work is through establishing Christian communities that actualize the work of the cross by remembering and (re)telling stories of redemption.

Throughout this article, I consider redemption as an extension of its original etymological sense, “to buy back.” Redemption here refers to a general restoration to wholeness, healing, and reconciliation—with God, within oneself, and with others—and the transformations necessary for such restoration to occur. This broad sense of redemption is connected to narratives in two ways: first, the very idea of redemption is what Colleen Cullinan dubs a “‘narrative concept,’ that is, an idea that tells a story.”⁶ Inherent in the meaning of the word is the story of an initial state of well-being, a subsequent loss, and a final restoration. Second, redemption can be enacted through the sharing of stories (perhaps this is why the gospel writers chose the narrative genre). Stories engage the heart and mind in ways that propositional statements simply cannot do. Cullinan goes so far as to insist that “*it is only through the telling of stories that redemption can happen at all.*”⁷ What role do the stories we read and tell play in the process of redemption? How do stories transform? I offer first a bit of background on various approaches to the study of narrative.

⁴Among others, examples include Exod 6:6, 15:13; Deut 7:8, 13:5; Isa 41:14, 47:4.

⁵For instance, see the redemption language used in Luke 13:22–24; John 8:36; Acts 13:39; Rom 3:24, 8:21; 1 Cor 1:30, 6:20; Gal 3:13, 4:5, 5:1; Eph 1:7; Col 1:13–14; Titus 2:14; Heb 9:12, 15; 1 Pet 1:18.

⁶Colleen Carpenter Cullinan, *Redeeming the Story: Women, Suffering, and Christ* (New York: Continuum, 2004) 90.

⁷*Ibid.* (emphasis original).

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY NARRATIVE?

The fact that stories are so common does not make them simple. Narrative theory has entered religious studies discourses in a vast array of varying arenas, including narrative approaches to texts, narrative theology, narrative research as an approach to studying religious experience, the role of narrative in reception histories of religions, narrative preaching, narrative ethics, the role of narrative in religious and moral education, and narrative as a form of pastoral care. The preponderance of narrative theories leads me to ask: Why stories? What makes stories so compelling for so many people, in so many ways?

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Michael D. Jackson provides a possible answer: “Stories are a kind of theatre where we collaborate in reinventing ourselves and authorising notions, both individual and collective, of who we are.”⁸ Stories draw people to face one another and enable us to structure, interpret, and reflect on the vagaries of human experience together. Storytelling thereby fulfills a performative function, not only mirroring reality, but creating it—and in this way, storytelling can be a redemptive, transformative act.

To what extent can these assertions be applied to the stories in the New Testament, whose tellers are long dead? Interpreting written religious narratives in particular is especially complicated because the so-called “religions of the book” (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) view them as sacred Scripture—the word of God. The New Testament’s authority derives not from individual authors or readers, but from its institutionally recognized status as divine revelation. Nevertheless, readers must interpret, and we all do so from different vantage points. Mark Ledbetter notes: “In our attempts to find *the* story, we create other stories with our literary and rhetorical theories, and our historical and social methods.”⁹ As every seminary student knows, interpretive dilemmas arise from language’s fractured and illusory nature, translational challenges, and the text’s underlying ideological influences.

Despite their substantial differences, many interpreters of biblical narratives share the tendency to frame the reader-text relationship as one of an object and its subject. Many Christian readers consider New Testament narratives to be redemptive—and yet, how can an object (the text) redeem a subject (the reader)? Others

⁸Michael D. Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 1998) 16.

⁹Mark Ledbetter, “Telling the Other Story: A Literary Response to Socio-Rhetorical Criticism of the New Testament,” *Semeia* 64 (1993) 301 (emphasis original).

argue that specific New Testament stories perpetuate injustice and therefore must themselves be redeemed. After briefly discussing the ways stories function interpersonally, we will turn to the topic of reading New Testament narratives.

NARRATIVES AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY

John Berger describes narratives as the fundamental elements of a community's evolving self-portrait: "A village's portrait of itself is constructed, not out of stone, but out of words, spoken and remembered: out of opinions, stories, eyewitness reports, legends, comments and hearsay."¹⁰ Stories are sites of contestation and negotiation, functioning within the discursive practices of communities to shape both the communities themselves and the individuals within them. Still, even as stories are embedded within particular locations and communities, they are never fixed in only *one* sociohistorical situation. Instead, as Cullinan writes, "[W]e live in the midst of many interlocking and overlapping stories. Our own story is built out of the stories that hold together the history, hopes, and meaning of our nation, our hometown, our family, our religion, and our own past."¹¹ Stories are (re)produced through a complex matrix of multiple thought worlds and constantly changing communal discourses. This means that every time a story is told, it is differently realized in the hearts and minds of both tellers and hearers. Every preacher who has greeted congregants after a Sunday service can attest that individuals hear different messages in the very same sermon.

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It is for these reasons that in her discussion of stories, Hannah Arendt emphasizes the intersubjective space between public and private realms, the "subjective in-between," in which individuals and cultures negotiate their existence and mutually constitute each other.¹² For Arendt, stories allow individuals to make their personal experiences public, and in this way, to enter into the common realm shared by all humans. In this sense, stories are profoundly universal. Though Arendt does not stress this, the converse is also true: public stories shape private experience. The stories one hears in the public realm (told from the pulpit, for instance) inevitably inform one's understanding of individual, subjective experiences. These two essential characteristics of stories—the universal and the particular—should be recognized and held in creative tension with one another.

The concept of redemption as restoration to wholeness and unity is conducive to holding the universal and particular in tension; as Jackson writes, "It is in

¹⁰John Berger, "The Storyteller," in *The Sense of Sight*, ed. Lloyd Spencer (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 16.

¹¹Cullinan, *Redeeming the Story*, 156.

¹²Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 183.

this elusive intercourse between public stories and private experiences that redemption may be possible.”¹³ How, then, do stories redeem?

NARRATIVES THAT REDEEM

First, stories restore a sense of freedom and agency for people, which is crucial for the process of redemption. The teller need not be the actor in the story; instead, the teller is restored to a place of agency simply by virtue of choosing his or her own story, rather than passively accepting the story that someone else—often an oppressor—has provided. This is necessary, because at times the powerful narratives in our lives shape our understanding of ensuing events in negative ways. Even if the dominant narrative is detrimental, we often tend to perpetuate that narrative in our interpretations of later experiences. Jackson highlights this move from passivity to agency:

Storytelling reworks and remodels subject-object relations in ways that subtly alter the balance between actor and acted upon, thus allowing us to feel that we actively participate in a world that for a moment seemed to discount, demean, and disempower us.¹⁴

Stories engage our imaginations and offer alternatives to negative narratives. This is why David Kelsey calls for “‘imagining’ what redemption might mean. It is by imagination that we try to grasp the whole of something.”¹⁵ Narratives bring new perspectives into the realm of what is imaginable—what is possible—for us. Early Christian martyrdom accounts are a case in point: in these texts, being persecuted and killed is reframed as a “happy ending” for Christians. As Judith Perkins puts it, “Narratives script reality for readers and Christian texts were inscribing one particular narrative pattern over and over for their readers and listeners. Christian narratives consistently offered a new literary happy ending for readers—death; in particular, the martyr’s death.”¹⁶ These stories represent a reimagining of the otherwise gruesome fate of being tortured and killed for one’s faith.

Not only do stories help one imagine redemption, but they also cultivate the inner resources necessary to actuate transformation. Bruno Bettelheim insists that “in order not to be at the mercy of the vagaries of life, one must develop one’s inner resources,” and stories facilitate that process.¹⁷ For instance, redemption often depends upon one’s ability to forgive others.¹⁸ Arendt, citing Jesus as the “discoverer”

¹³Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling*, 250.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁵David Kelsey, *Imagining Redemption* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005) 43–44.

¹⁶Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 1995) 24.

¹⁷Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Penguin, 1978) 4.

¹⁸Divine forgiveness and human forgiveness are integrally related. Just as God forgives humans through christological redemption, so are we called to forgive one another, thereby manifesting and enacting redemption in our everyday lives. Divine forgiveness serves as both motivation and model for our forgiveness of others.

of the value of forgiveness for human healing, describes forgiveness as a refusal to remain in the (literal or metaphorical) clutches of a persecutor.¹⁹ As Jackson writes, “Re-presenting traumatic events as a story is a kind of redemption, for one both subverts the power of the original events to determine one’s experience of them, and one moves beyond the self.”²⁰ Forgiving others, letting go of patterns of resentment and thereby reclaiming one’s own story, leads to a greater sense of liberation and personal agency in a chaotic world.

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In addition, storytelling—and story hearing—restore us to a sense of shared humanity. Narratives express the perennial human experiences of comedy, tragedy, hope, and pain. When a story is shared with others, not only do the teller and hearers discover that they are not alone, but storytelling in community also expands one’s repertoire of possible responses to life by exposing us to others’ (successful and failed) strategies for transformation.

REDEEMING NARRATIVES

When is a story actually redemptive? Permit me to share a personal story. My grandfather was physically and emotionally abusive to his children. I am truly grateful that my father chose to stop that pattern. Still, there were moments when my dad wrestled with difficult childhood memories. At one point, he had a particularly vivid image of his father coming to beat him. My brother, who was three at the time, climbed up on my father’s lap and said, “Daddy, what’s wrong?” My dad, wanting to be honest, but also wanting to present the story in a way a small child could understand, replied, “I was having a bad dream that a giant was coming to hurt me.” Immediately, my brother threw his arms around my father and said, “Daddy, if I were a giant, I would use my big strong arms to hold you and make you feel safe.” For my dad, this was a transformative moment—a redemptive experience.

This example reminds us that some stories need to be redeemed in order to be redemptive. Storytelling allows for the revision (re-visioning) of stories that have limited us or defined us in negative ways. Therapists Alan Parry and Robert Doan report that people often develop “survival stories” in which they are objects acted upon by external forces outside their control. These stories can help children survive, often under tragic or harrowing circumstances, but the same stories ultimately become limiting or destructive later in life. The goal of therapy, then, is “re-

¹⁹Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 212.

²⁰Jackson, *Politics of Storytelling*, 59.

vision” of those stories—a re-visioning of one’s story such that the teller regains a sense of agency: “At [the point of re-vision] the individuals can resume the writing and living of their own stories and abdicate from those stories into which they were born and which have defined them and lived them.”²¹

Revision can happen either consciously (and logically) or unconsciously. In the foregoing example, my father deliberately revised his story in order to translate it into a little boy’s paradigm; this was a logical change. My brother, on the other hand, revised my father’s revision; this was a protological change. Sometimes, stories provide an opportunity for redemption by enabling a re-visioning (conscious or otherwise) of one’s dominant stories. But whether a story actually *is* redemptive depends on the background and personal perspectives that inform one’s understanding of the story. The preacher who shares a story from behind the pulpit on Sunday morning cannot know for certain whether that story will be redemptive for parishioners, because as preacher/novelist Frederick Buechner puts it, “You do not just live in a world but a world lives in you....[T]he hearers...also brought their worlds with them.”²² Colleen Cullinan is therefore right to insist that, “different ways to tell the story will ‘work’ for different people, and even for the same people at different points in their lives—and *that’s okay*.”²³

NARRATIVES OF REDEMPTION

Conceiving of stories as containing redemptive potentialities that are contingent on subjective factors facilitates a crucial paradigm shift regarding written texts. The redemptive characteristics of narrative described above are operative even when the stories are written, rather than told orally, and even when the stories are ancient, rather than contemporary. When we construct the reader-text relationship in the static, detached terms of active subject/passive object, we trivialize the transformative potential of the “subjective in-between” that exists even between a text and its reader. Instead, interpreters ought to allow for a more fluid, dynamic intersubjective relationship between text and reader.

Here, we turn to our consideration of early Christian narratives, which we will consider narratives of redemption not only because they tell stories of redemption but also because they have the potential to bring about redemption. Biblical stories are punctuated throughout by invitations to transformation; centuries of Christian witness bespeak the almost infinite number of ways these stories can entice, entrap, convict and convince—and ultimately, change lives. The parable of the Good Samaritan can convict readers that their stereotyped definition of “goodness” is wrong; Jesus’ interactions with marginalized readers can give readers hope

²¹Alan Parry and Robert E. Doan, *Story Re-Visions: Narrative Therapy in the Postmodern World* (New York: Guilford, 1994) 40.

²²Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel of Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) 3.

²³Cullinan, *Redeeming the Story*, 144.

that God never rejects them, and can encourage readers to serve the oppressed; the story of Mary, who was suspected of infidelity to her fiancé, can give hope to women who suffer indignity and shame. Of course, the ultimate example of the narrative that redeems is the gospel story itself. The scandal of the cross is that this ultimate symbol of defeat was transformed into the ultimate symbol of victory, and this story is replayed in miniature every day in the lives of Christians around the world.

At first blush, then, it might seem that Christians *do* conceive of the biblical text as an active subject; for the Christian, Scriptures “take on the character of personal address.”²⁴ The author of Hebrews writes that Scripture is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12). In the words of one Christian scholar, the Bible “is the Word that issues forth when the Spirit takes the Word and renders it the living voice of the Lord. Therefore, it is not a text we can master through techniques but a text that wants to master us.”²⁵

Ironically, however, even this view can simply reinscribe the subject-object dichotomy by creating the picture of a subject (the word of God) acting on the passive object (the reader who is “mastered” by the text). However, human experience attests to the inadequacy of such a dichotomy. Not everyone who reads the biblical text is “mastered” by it. Not everyone will “leave behind the darkness of the world he carries on his back like a snail.”²⁶ There are several reasons that the subject-object binary is inadequate.

First, reading is an extremely dynamic and subjective process. Readers come to a text just as they come to other people—informed by their own presuppositions and experiences—such that each reader is predisposed to understand texts in particular ways. Readers *interact* with texts. This explains, for example, why some pre-Civil War Americans found in the biblical stories the justification for slavery,²⁷ while others found in them the foundation for the abolition of slavery.²⁸ This is also why some people find the biblical narratives life-transforming—in a word, redemptive—and others find the exact same words lifeless.

Reader-response critics add that the mental processes involved in reading—encountering new ideas sequentially, resolving textual ambiguities, anticipating future events based on cultural norms—inevitably influence a reader’s understanding of narrative. Every story differs based on a reader’s individual read-

²⁴Clark H. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (Vancouver: Regent College, 2002) 156.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶Buechner, *Telling the Truth*, 8.

²⁷In *A Scriptural View* (1865), Baptist minister Thorton Stringfellow wrote, “Jesus Christ recognized this institution [slavery] as one that was lawful among men.” Quoted in Jim Hill and Rand Cheadle, *The Bible Tells Me So: Uses and Abuses of Holy Scripture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996) 6.

²⁸An editorial in the *Baltimore Sun* (1853) asks: “Are slavery and war to *endure* for ever because we find them in the Bible? Or are they to *cease* at once and for ever because the Bible inculcates peace and brotherhood?” Quoted in Hill and Cheadle, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 7 (emphasis original).

ing habits and socially constructed interpretive frameworks. Actual readers' social and ideological locations inevitably influence their "hermeneutical appropriation" of texts.²⁹ Reading is, in a sense, an interactive dialogue between text and reader.

early Christian authors lived within multiple contexts; their stories testify to their attempts to re-vision inherited stories and to negotiate a coherent sense of identity, in conversation with other texts and other communities

Another reason that interpreters ought to view the reader-text relationship as dynamic and intersubjective concerns a recent shift in biblical studies. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, biblical scholars adhered to a correspondence theory of meaning, assuming that historical texts accurately and objectively reflect the situations they describe. However, many scholars now have shifted to questions about how stories function rhetorically to persuade specific people in specific historical situations. As John Darr writes, "The Lukan text is designed to persuade its readers to become believing witnesses of and to 'the things which have been fulfilled among us' (Luke 1:1)."³⁰ Early Christian authors lived within multiple contexts; their stories testify to their attempts to re-vision inherited stories and to negotiate a coherent sense of identity, in conversation with other texts and other communities. This is why Elizabeth Castelli characterizes early Christian narratives as "a form of culture making."³¹

Recent shifts in biblical studies also call interpreters to avoid adopting an aura of inevitability when reading biblical texts; instead, we must identify—and make explicit—our criteria for determining why we find specific narratives to be compelling, convincing, damaging, or redemptive. As interpreters, we are responsible for the ways that our readings of biblical narratives either perpetuate injustices or enable redemption. In short, we "must strive to know what's happening in the telling [and] what the stakes are when we (merely) tell someone else that something happened."³²

A third reason to conceive of the reader-text relationship in intersubjective terms is that written texts have indeterminacies and multiple potentialities for meaning (consider the long history of disputes over biblical interpretation). Language is inherently selective and ambiguous, a fact that militates against the view that texts are ontological repositories of meaning into which readers must simply

²⁹See the now-classic treatment of this topic, *Reading from This Place*, vol. 1, *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, vol. 1, ed. Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

³⁰John Darr, *On Character Building: The Reader and the Rhetoric of Characterization in Luke-Acts* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) 53.

³¹Elizabeth Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University, 2004) 4.

³²Martin Kreiswirth, "Merely Telling Stories? Narrative and Knowledge in the Human Sciences," *Poetics Today* 21/2 (2002) 316.

gaze passively to find the truth. This opens up space for both the interpreter's active involvement in meaning-making, and as Christians believe, for the Holy Spirit's guidance "into all truth" (John 16:12).

In light of these observations, viewing the interpretive process as multi-valent and fluid can help us see that the biblical narratives likely held (and continue to hold) potentialities for many socio-rhetorical functions at once, and that certain features were (and continue to be) viewed as more salient in different temporal, geographical, and social contexts. By conceiving of a reader's encounter with written stories as intersubjective and potentially transformative, one can (ideally) honor the universality of the biblical narratives without universalizing, and one can honor their particularity without essentializing. We can develop more nuanced understandings of the complex ways that we redeem narratives and narratives redeem us—and we can then turn and tell tales of truth and transformation. ⊕



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