

An Introduction to the Formation in Faith Narrative Lectionary (Old Testament)

As a participant household in Formation in Faith you and your household are being asked to read one passage together each week from the Narrative Lectionary. The lectionary is a list of biblical readings that, while not comprehensive, offer an overview of the sweeping story that is scripture. It is the story of God, the Creator of all things, in relation to the world at large and especially with humanity, those created in God's image. It is our hope that in reading together prayerfully the readings contained in the lectionary, you will get an overview of the scope of God's redeeming work through the ages, be encouraged to explore that story more deeply, and see your place in the ongoing story.

This purpose of this essay is to give you an overview of scripture as narrative or story. Of course, it was not written as one continuous story. The Bible was written by numerous authors over many centuries. Neither is all the material in the Bible stories. There are plenty of stories, but there is also poetry, exhortations, letters, and prophecy. But as the People of God over time in gathering, compiling, and retelling these stories, poems, and other material, by the guidance of God's Spirit, a story structure has formed.

Although there are different ways to outline the biblical narrative, many have found Bishop Tom Wright's 5 Act scheme a very helpful means of understanding the story. Below is an outline of the first three Acts which are contained within the Old Testament.

(Note on dates below: these are approximations as historians and archeologists differ on dates and times. They are given to show the breadth of time in the biblical story.)

Act I: Creation (Genesis Chapters 1 and 2)

The first Act tells of God's creation of the universe, including the earth, and humankind. We might say that this first act has two scenes. The first is a rather poetic telling of the formation of creation, culminating in the creation of human beings in the Image of God on the Sixth Day, and God resting on the Seventh. The second scene tells the story of creation from the perspective of the Man and the Woman; they are set as stewards over the garden and over the animals.

What we glean about Creation is that it is dependent upon God's creative actions, and that God has deemed the whole creation as "very good." In seeing Humankind as being created in the Image of God we discover the vocation of humanity is threefold: the upward call of praising God, the inward call of human community, and the outward call of caring for God's world and all that dwell in it.

Scholarly consensus is that the two "scenes" of the creation story were written by different authors centuries apart. In our Lectionary this year we will be reading only the first creation story.

Studying these early chapters of the Bible often raise the question of evolution and creation. While the discussion of their relationship is well beyond what we are doing with Formation in Faith, suffice it to say that for our purposes science asks the "how?" question, while the Bible asks the "why?" They need not be in opposition.

Act II: The Fall (Genesis chapters 3 through 11)

The second Act asks “what went wrong?” The world was created good, with humankind as the very Image of God. And yet, it is clear to anyone who watches the news or reads the paper that the world is not a paradise. This act has several “scenes” as well, beginning with the Man and the Woman disobeying God by eating the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The result both shame and blame as fellowship is broken between God, the Man, and the Woman.

Human relationships continue to worsen as the envy of Cain leads him to kill his brother Abel. This act culminates with humanity conspiring together to build a tower into heaven, the very place of God. God levels the hubris of humanity by casting down the Tower of Babel, and separating nations one from another.

A central story in this act is the familiar one of Noah and the Ark. While the tale is often told as one about saving animals from the flood, at least some of the intent behind it being retold for some many generations among the Israelites is a means of discussing the option many look to when seeking remedies for what is wrong with the human race: just get rid of all the evil doers. Eight righteous are saved through the waters, but as they disembark, they continue the downward spiral of sin. The problem is much more pervasive, it seems.

Both the first and second acts of the narrative exist in what we might call “prehistory.” The stories narrated cannot be located on the historical timeline provided by historians and archeologists. To a large extent they function as mirrors of our own existence; our call to live out the vocation of being God’s stewards in creation, and a reflection of how we sin and fall short of the glory of God.

Act III: Israel (The remainder of the Old Testament beginning with Genesis chapter 12)

This is the longest act in the divine drama. It begins with the calling of Abraham and Sarah and their progeny to be the covenant people of God. At the heart of this act is God’s great rescue project for his fallen world. Rather than destroy the wicked, God calls a small and insignificant people to be the covenant people. They are to live out the tarnished vocation of being created in the Image of God, and thus be a light to the nations. Yet, the people struggle to be faithful to this call throughout this Third Act. Nevertheless, God remains faithful to the covenant through 2,000 years of history. The themes that emerge from this act shape the story of Jesus in Act IV, who draws all these strands together.

We need to remember that these are centuries and centuries of what we might think of as family stories passed down. Not all of them will seem to have a spiritual message, or will be easily understood.

Briefly, then, these are the “scenes” of Act III:

Patriarchs and Matriarchs (Genesis 12 and on. Roughly 4,000 years ago)

God calls Abraham and Sarah from Mesopotamia to dwell in the land of Canaan, and enter into covenant with him. They and their descendants prove not to be the most powerful or

best of people. They are flawed. But they commit to God and the covenant he made with them. Prominent themes are the promise of God, and Covenant.

This scene contains well known tales such as the Sacrifice of Isaac, Jacob cheating Esau of his birthright, Jacob's ladder, and Joseph being sold into Egyptian captivity by his brothers. (Note: since Cain and Abel, brothers can't quite seem to get along.) It ends with the people of Israel in Egypt.

Moses, Exodus, and Torah (Exodus through Deuteronomy. Roughly 3,400 years ago)

Israel has languished under Egyptian oppression as slaves. God has compassion upon his people and sends Moses to proclaim their liberation by God's hand. Pharaoh resists, and his troops are drown when the Israelites are led through the Red Sea. Moses leads the people through the Wilderness, yet they grumble and even engage in creating an idol to worship. God continues to be faithful and gives them the Covenant Law, Torah, the cornerstone of which is what we know as the Ten Commandments. This is the means of living into the Covenant, by which they might be a light to the nations. The scene ends with the aged Moses on the verge of the Promised Land dying on Mt. Nebo as the people prepare to enter the land of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua.

Our narrative lectionary focuses upon three significant episodes in the story of Moses and the Exodus: the Call of Moses before the Burning Bush, the Exodus through the Red Sea, and the giving of the Covenant Law on Mt. Sinai. Certainly there are other stories that could be explored, such as the infancy and youth of Moses, the gift of Manna and quail to the hungry Israelites, and the grumbling of the people longing for their previous existence as slaves.

Much of the material in this "scene" is the specific laws that governed the people. Some were universal moral principles, while others were specific to their context, such as laws surrounding kosher food. Some of these latter types of law are to be understood as cultural markers to help the people understand their unique national identity among the many nations and empires with which they had contact.

The Conquest and Settlement of Canaan (Joshua, Judges, and Ruth. Beginning roughly 3,400 years ago and ending roughly 3,000 years ago)

The next scene contains some of the most well known stories of the Bible such as the Battle of Jericho, Samson and Delilah, and Gideon. We have chosen the story of Ruth and her faithfulness to her mother in law, Naomi, to represent this period. The themes in Ruth are covenant faithfulness and the relationship between Israelites and Gentiles.

The entire period ends with the sentence in Judges "In those days there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes." (Judges 21:25)

Kingdom Period (Numerous books beginning with the Books of Samuel. Roughly 3,000 to 2,600 hundred years ago)

The Hebrew people clamored for a king, as all pagan nations around them had kings. God is meant to be Israel's King, but the LORD agrees to their request, and chooses Saul to be the

monarch. Saul displeases God, and David is anointed in Saul's place. Thus begins the line of the House of David, which God promises will be eternal.

David's son Solomon reigns after him. He builds the great First Temple of Jerusalem as the place for God to dwell among the covenant people. The image of the Temple as the resting place of God becomes a major theme into the New Testament period.

Nevertheless, even the best of Kings prove weak and sinful. During the reign of Solomon the Kingdom is split in two, with ten of the Israelite starting a new kingdom in the north that will be called Israel, while the descendants of David will maintain their rule over the kingdom of Judah, which contains Jerusalem and the Temple. More and more the royal families pursue unjust policies toward the poor, unchaste relationships among themselves, and acceptance of foreign gods and pagan practices.

Through this another very significant strand of the biblical narrative emerges, the ministry of the Prophets. God raises up prophets to provide a check to the power of the monarchy and to call the people back to the LORD through repentance. They speak of God's preferential option for the poor, especially widows and orphans. And they call the covenant people to trust in God, rather than in unholy alliances with oppressive empires and regimes. Elijah is an example of one of these prophets.

Exile (Various prophetic works including Lamentations and Daniel. 2,500 years ago.)

The two kingdoms of Israel and Judah come to devastating ends. The northern kingdom of Israel is destroyed by the Assyrians and its people either annihilated or assimilated into the Assyrian empire. They lose their unique identity as part of the Covenant People. Judah later falls to the Babylonians, and a large share of their population carried off into exile in Babylon. The Temple is destroyed. The people are challenged to remember their identity as God's people in a foreign land.

Return from Exile (Ezra and Nehemiah and several Prophets. Roughly 2500 years ago)

Babylon falls to the Persian Empire. Cyrus, the Persian emperor, sends the Jewish people back from exile. They begin to rebuild the Temple and reestablish their communities and practices. On the one hand, it is good to be back from exile. Yet on the other prophets warn that they have not learned the lessons of the past and are returning to their old ways. Even though they are home, they are not free. Empires such as the Greeks after Alexander the Great, and later the Romans occupy their land and oppress the people.

Act III ends with many loose ends and unresolved narrative threads. The people long for a king like David who can gather the Covenant People together. They await a new Moses to lead them through a new Exodus into liberty. And most of all, they want to know the presence of the God of holiness and mercy to dwell among them. Such threads will be taken up in the next Act.