

Biblical Philosophy: The Message and Worldview of the Bible A Synopsis

The philosophy of the Bible involves a description of what is true about the reality we inhabit. Who are we? Why are we here? Why is anything here? The wisdom that the Bible seeks to impart is to articulate a worldview that answers these questions and to tell the story of reality that informs us with respect to how we ought to live, by what personal commitments we ought to define our existence, and on what our future destiny rests.

God and Reality

It all begins with understanding God and the nature of reality. God is the person whose creative will is expressed in every little iota of what is and in every little nanosecond of what occurs. We know virtually nothing of who and what God is, in and of himself. We only know what he has revealed to us about himself. God is not a mysterious triune being—that is a later invention of Christianity. Rather, God is an individual person. He is not a human person with a body, but an invisible, intangible being who has the attributes of personhood—mind, will, purpose, creative imagination, moral character, and moral judgment. We humans are made in the “image of God.” Therefore, the attributes of personhood that distinguish us from instinct-driven animals, those distinctives of personhood are included among the attributes of God.

Being a person in this sense, God is the creator of our reality. But what is this reality? Being the product of God’s creative imagination and purpose, it is first and foremost a story. We inhabit a story. Our lives are a story. All of the history of the entire cosmos is a complex network of interlocking stories. From every sub-atomic particle to every solar system, from every toad to every prince, every existing being is at the center of a story; and the stories all interlock. And the whole network of interlocking stories has a unifying meaning, significance, and purpose, for it is the product of one mind. In other words, reality is a narrative and God is the author of that narrative.

As such, God exists on an entirely different level or order of existence from us. He is not our peer. He is not just one more being among many beings. He is not at the top of a hierarchical heap of beings. He is above, beyond, outside, and other than everything that is. And, at the same time, he is below, within, underlying, supporting, and sustaining everything that is. God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being. His will and purpose is the very substance of our existence. His creative mind and imagination—that is the very ground of who we are. God does not exist—not in the sense that we do. Rather, he is the source, ground, and cause of all that exists. Hence, God IS with an entirely different sort of “is.” He exists on an entirely different level of existence. His existence cannot, in any way, be compared to our existence. To do so is to fail to understand who God is.

Consequently, we can never “see” God. We can never go and be with God. We can never go to heaven and live with God. To even think in such terms is to misconstrue who God is in relation to his creation. God can no more exist alongside us than the author of a novel can exist alongside the characters in his novel. And we can no more go to live with God than the characters in a novel can go to live with their author.

The Purpose of Reality

So why tell a story? Why is God creating the narrative that is created reality? There can be one and only one reason, really. It is to give expression to who he is, to take who and what he is and objectify it in something else. Presumably, a human novelist tries to embody the personal values, experiences, perspectives, and beliefs that make him who he is within the meaning and significance of the novel he is writing. Analogously, God created the interlocking narratives of our existence to embody the person that he is (and to embody all the good things that his person includes). He is telling the complex story of cosmic reality in order that the meaning and significance of that story might reflect within it the person that he is. He is telling the story of each and every created being in order that each individual story might capture something of the worth of God, its storyteller. To use more biblical language, he created reality so that all of reality might declare the glory of God, its creator.

The rather obnoxious ramification of God's purpose for reality is that it was not created for me. God did not create the world for me so that, in that world, I might live happily ever after. Neither did he create the world with such a purpose for any other creature. The creation was not created for the creature; the creation was created for God, its Creator. It was created solely for the benefit of its Author. God created a story that would ultimately embody, reflect, declare, and objectify his magnificent person and character. We all exist to serve that purpose. Ultimately, we exist to bring benefit to him; he does not exist to bring benefit to us.

The Moral Worth of Reality

It is a peculiar character of any story that it is an organic whole. By an "organic whole" I mean something that ultimately needs to be judged and evaluated as a whole. It cannot be judged or evaluated by examining its parts. A story can contain many ugly things within it and still be a truly beautiful story. A story can contain many evil deeds within it but yet, when taken as a whole, it can be a morally good and worthy story. Indeed, in an organic whole, the ugliness of the individual parts makes an essential contribution to the beauty of the whole. And, being an organic whole, the evil deeds contained within a story make an absolutely necessary and essential contribution to the moral worth of a morally good story.

The same is true of the story that we inhabit. There is much evil in the world. Created reality contains much that is ugly. Our lives are filled with grief, sorrow, suffering, disappointment, failure, and evil. But the story God is telling is larger than any one of its elements. The worth of the story is not defined by the outcome for any particular character. If the story does not end well for Satan, it is not thereby a bad story. Indeed, how could it be a morally worthy story without ending badly for Satan? And the story is not finished until all has been resolved. What God is creating is an organic whole, not a collection of individual parts. And it is the organic whole, not any isolated part, that reflects God's person and being. It is the meaning, significance, and worth of the whole overarching story that finally embodies the glory of God's being and character. Taken in isolation, the parts can often be anything but a reflection of his glory. We make a mistake if we think we can know and judge God by any one particular event or by any one particular element of created reality. The story is not being told as a vehicle for the parts; the parts are there to serve the meaning and worth of the whole.

The Many Different Chapters to the Story of Reality

Created reality comes in many different chapters. It begins with the story of this present world and age. The story as it is recorded in the Bible opens on this planet, under the constraints

and limits of this physical world, and with mankind as we now know him. As Paul would describe it, it is the story of this "present evil age." We are currently in the midst of this particular chapter of the story. But a significant transition awaits us. The story of this present evil age will eventually end. It will transition to an entirely different age—to the age to come, to what the Bible often calls the Age of Ages. That will be a radically different story, consisting of radically different elements and a radically different purpose. But there will be continuity with the story of this present age. The overall purpose of God's creation requires both ages to fill out and complete what God purposes to accomplish by creating anything at all.

Not only will the story of created reality contain a radical transition from the present chapter to the chapter to come, it also contains significant transitions within the various sub-ages that make up this present evil age. There is the story of mankind up to God's judgment of mankind in and through Noah's flood. There is the story that begins with the man Abraham and has not yet reached its culmination. Then there is the story that begins with God's turning from the Jews to bring his blessings to the Gentiles. Like any good story, the story of this present evil age is a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, interlocking story with many different themes and many different purposes.

Created reality is by no means a simple thing with a simple single purpose. It is a terrible misconception to think that it is. God did not create reality because he purposed to create humanity, give them a place to live, and furnish it with every good thing for them to enjoy—all with the expectation that they would dwell there happily ever after. It is not a simple-purposed reality where complexity was introduced when man messed things up. No, from the outset, created reality was intended to be complex, not simple. From the very beginning, God intended created reality to be a highly involved, multi-faceted story with many twists, turns, and reversals. To think of it in any other way is to badly misunderstand the reality we live in.

God In His Story

There are two possible relations that an author could have to a story that he is telling. Human authors almost always adopt the first. The human author remains entirely above his story, entirely outside his story, entirely invisible to any character within the story. In most novels, you have no interaction between a character in the novel and the person of the author himself. Consequently, so far as the characters in the novel are concerned, there need be no author at all. He plays no role. He makes no contribution to the dynamics of the story itself. He is its author. He determines the entire story and everything within it. But he does not interject himself into the story as a fellow-character within the story.

But that, of course, constitutes the other possibility for an author. Rather than remain invisibly above it all, an author could actually create a persona and, as that persona, take up an active role within the dynamic of the story itself. God chose this latter mode. God has adopted a persona and has assigned himself a set of roles within the dynamics of our story.

God appeared to Abraham and made promises to him. He appeared to Moses and presented himself as a fellow-actor in the drama of history. As if he were a fellow-character within the story, he told the people of Israel that he wanted to be their god and for them to be his people. He made a covenant with them. If they honored that covenant, he would prosper them. If they disregarded it, he would bring harm to them. In making himself known to the people of Israel, he made himself known to mankind in general. He was a part of our story. He would command us, instruct us, judge us, condemn us, bless us, and generally be a force to be reckoned with. He was not merely the invisible author above and beyond reality; he also intended to occupy a vital role and to adopt a discernible persona within the story of mankind. Although he

is the unknowable, transcendent author of all reality, whom no man has ever seen and whom no man ever could see, yet he interjected himself into his own story as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and as the Judge of all creation.

The Overarching Story: A Story of Mercy

As we have seen, the story of created reality is not one simple story; it is a number of various plots and sub-plots all intersecting and interlocking. But above all the different plots and sub-plots are larger story arcs that unite them, tie them together, and supply them with their ultimate meaning and significance.

So, what sort of story is it? How are we to understand this overarching narrative that gives meaning and significance to the story of our own lives? What is the overarching theme of this story within which God, the author, interjects himself as a player?

The most important theme of all is the story of divine mercy. The story of God’s dealings with mankind is, first and foremost, intended to reflect and give expression to God’s mercy. By displaying how deeply merciful is God’s persona in the story of reality, we see a reflection of how truly good the transcendent author is in his intrinsic being. Created reality tells a story that explores how deep and profound is the goodness of God’s person and character. It tells a story that explores the “glory” of his righteousness. Directly, it describes the righteousness of God’s persona within the story; but by doing so, it reflects and embodies the righteousness of the transcendent author himself.

So, what is this story of mercy that is embedded in created reality? To tell this story is to tell the story of God’s relation to mankind:

The story begins with the creation of mankind. Human beings were created in the image of God. They were created to be the kind of creature who could image God’s goodness. And, yet, they were created to be rebels against God and his purposes. (Remember, we were created to be characters in a story that God wants to tell, not to live happily ever after.) So, in the story of mankind, human beings begin as bad guys. We come into this world as inherently evil beings. As a result, every one of us deserves to be punished by the divine Judge and ultimately to be destroyed. But that is not how the story goes. The story of mankind is the story of God (or, more precisely, his persona) inviting individual human beings to stop their rebellion against him in exchange for the promise of mercy. For any human being who ceases his rebellion, God will grant him the reward of ongoing existence in the everlasting age beyond this one. Though he does not deserve it, if a human being ends his hostility to God and his opposition to God’s purposes, God will grant him a place in the future age, where death, evil, and futility no longer exist.

This is a display of pure, unqualified mercy. In his role as the Judge of every living thing, God could easily, righteously, and justly destroy every last individual human being. Every one of us deserves nothing other than condemnation and destruction. But, instead, God—in his profound goodness—promised to forgive the evil rebellion of certain individuals and to grant them the blessing of ongoing life in the age to come. Amidst all the things that the story of created reality tells about its author, nothing is more important, nothing is more prominent, than this story of God’s mercy.

Jesus: The Center of the Story of Mercy

This story of mercy—the story that ultimately gives meaning and significance to all the other stories—finds its center in a particular man, Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus was a man just like you and me. But, then again, he was unique. He was the man that God brought into existence to uniquely embody himself—to be the unique representative, in human form, of the particular person who God himself is. It is one thing for God to have given himself a particular persona, to have assumed a set of roles, and to have shown himself through a variety of temporary visual appearances. It is yet another thing to make a particular human being to permanently, and uniquely, represent God. That is who Jesus is. He is not simply a visual manifestation of God, like the burning bush on Mt. Sinai. He is a real, identifiable man, with his own (permanent) personal identity, who is also God himself. Jesus was God himself translated into the medium of a human life and identity. The author of this grand story created a character within created reality who truly is the author himself. As such, Jesus became the human embodiment of every role that God had assumed. God was the Judge of all creation. He embodied this divine authority in Jesus. God was the King and sovereign ruler over all creation. God created Jesus to be the human being who embodied this divine rule over all creation within his human person. For all of eternity, everything that God had revealed himself to be within the story of created reality was to be embodied in this human being Jesus. Jesus, as the representation of God himself, would reign forever over the righteous Kingdom of God. For the remainder of time, when Jesus spoke, it would always be as if the transcendent God himself was speaking. When Jesus acted, it would be as if the transcendent God himself was acting. Once he came into existence, Jesus would be God himself within the never-ending story.

But God gave Jesus—this embodiment of himself—a particularly poignant role to play. This was a story of mercy. But how would the story go? How, and on what basis, would God show mercy? And to whom would he show it?

God made Jesus the very center of the primary, most important story. He made Jesus the very locus of divine mercy. Jesus was tasked with the job of interceding for those whom God purposed to rescue from destruction. Jesus would be their high priest, their mediator, their advocate. If Jesus wants an individual to have Life in the final chapter, he need only ask God to grant that individual mercy, and it will be granted. And there was more to his role. To serve as our high priest, he was asked to bring an offering as well. God asked him to bring the offering of his own life, specifically, to allow himself to be crucified by the Romans. Why? So that he might die a representative death, a death invested with meaning from God. God, through Jesus, announced that the death of this innocent man Jesus would depict what each of us human sinners deserve for our sins.

Jesus obeyed the will of God. He voluntarily submitted to a torturous death on the Roman cross. His incredible, heroic obedience to the will of God, and his God-like, self-sacrificing love for mankind did not go unnoticed. God was well pleased with Jesus. By his extraordinary love and obedience, the man Jesus earned the right to intercede for mankind and secure mercy for whomever he chose. As a consequence, anyone who belongs to Jesus will not be condemned. He will not be destroyed. Anyone who belongs to Jesus will be granted Life forever in the final coming age. This is the grand, overarching story of God's mercy. And Jesus is smack dab in the middle of that story. Without Jesus, no man receives mercy. But to whomever Jesus wants to grant it, mercy will be given.

But how would a particular individual sinner know that Jesus was going to rescue him from death? It could have remained an invisible fact, hidden in the mind of Jesus and the purposes of God. But God did not leave it hidden. He determined to place an identifying mark on those who belonged to Jesus, on those whom Jesus would rescue. He did not mark the outer body, as with circumcision. He marked the inward core of those he would save. He replaced their

rebellious, hard, resistant, God-rejecting spirit with a willing, open, receptive, God-loving spirit. Anyone who has such a spirit belongs to Jesus and will be granted mercy. Anyone who does not have such a spirit does not belong to Jesus and will not receive mercy. And the most telling and dramatic symptom of this willing, receptive spirit is an openness to accept the truth about Jesus. So, who is the one who will receive mercy? It is the one who openly acknowledges the truth that Jesus is the messiah, the unique image of God among men, and who defines his existence by the reality of that truth.

The Story and the Message

This, then, is the grand, overarching story of God's creation. It is the story of God, in his mercy, granting Life in the age to come to some of us sinners who do not deserve it. It is God granting mercy and forgiveness to anyone who embraces the truth that Jesus is the unique one created by God to rule for him. It is a story that highlights and dramatizes the essential nature of the author of all history: he is a profoundly good God who loves, even to the point of mercy.

There are other storylines in God's story. Though it would be very profitable to do so, I will not explore here the most important sub-plot—the story of God selecting a people group, Jews descended from Jacob, to be his people. Over the centuries, God made many promises to this people through prophets that he sent to them. Before the present evil age has come to its end, God will have faithfully fulfilled each and every promise that he ever made to them. This storyline, a prominent sub-plot within human history, is a story of God's loyal, enduring faithfulness to what he has promised.

There are yet other stories. Each people group has its story. Each family has its story. And each individual has his story. The stories abound. But all of them are intended to reflect back on who their author is and to give expression to his goodness. This is the fundamental worldview of the Bible. This is biblical philosophy. And its message, ultimately, is this: believe in the Lord, Jesus, the messiah, and—by the mercy of God—you will receive ongoing life in the never-ending story of the coming age.