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## Paul Ricoeur and Biblical Hermeneutics: Narrative, Genre, and Self

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## **ABSTRACT**

In short, this thesis seeks to develop a biblical hermeneutic centered on one central axis, based on the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. That central axis is narrative. The Bible is written in various genres, ranging from prophecy to wisdom to hymn. The goal of this thesis is first to show how a biblical hermeneutic that treats narrative as the central mode of discourse informs a better understanding of the other biblical genres of discourse, and thus of the Bible as a whole. Furthermore, this thesis takes an existentialist direction by taking the narrative-centered biblical hermeneutic and deriving from it a robust hermeneutic of the self also centered on narrative. In other words, the goal is not just to interpret the Bible based on narrative, but to take that hermeneutic as a model for interpreting one's life. This hermeneutical framework is directly inspired by the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, using his concepts of biblical genre, narrative, and temporality. Chapter 1 is about narrative and prophecy and how prophecy functions as a disruptor of traditional narrative in order to make sure the people of God stay on track. Chapter 2 is about narrative and wisdom; it talks about how narrative serves as a literary vessel for wisdom to manifest in and how wisdom begets narrative, forming a symbiotic relationship. Chapter 3 is about narrative and hymnic discourse; hymns are communication with God, recalling past, envisioning a future, and reconciling with the present, all woven by a narrative thread. There is an Interlude that emphasizes the importance of narrative in weaving all the genres together and uses a discussion of divine inspiration as the catalyst for uncovering a better conception of revelation. Chapter 4 discusses narrative and prophecy, but this time makes an argument for the preacher as the modern-day prophet, as well as discussing other forms prophecy can take in one's life. Chapter 5 discusses narrative and wisdom by recognizing the hermeneutic cycle that manifests in the life of one seeking wisdom, drawing on the wisdom of others while imparting

wisdom to others. Chapter 6 discusses narrative and hymnic discourse, but this time in the context of both personal communication with God and communal worship that would take place, for instance, in a church service.

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## Introduction

The task of interpreting a text poses many challenges, but at the same time, it presents many opportunities. The reader approaches the text in order, presumably, to receive something. Since the words on the page do not change, one might expect that the same thing would be received every time the text is approached. However, ordinary experience attests to the fact that this is not the case. The same person that understood the story of David and Goliath in a certain way at the age of seven may find that story to mean something profoundly different at the age of seventy. The marginalized person reads David and Goliath as a story of the oppressed defeating his oppressor, while the Jewish Rabbi reads it as a story of God's providence in a turning point for the history of the Israeli people. The evangelical Christian may read the American constitution as a testament to the Christian roots of America, but the postmodern American socialist will read it as a testament to the white supremacist roots of America. Since this thesis mainly concerns biblical interpretation, it is worth noting that biblical examples of such polar-opposite interpretations also abound.

How can two people come to the same text and walk away with completely different meanings? The answer is simple. The reader not only receives something from a text, but she also *brings* something to the text. What does the reader bring? Her experiences, her knowledge, her presuppositions, etc. In other words, interpreting a text is not a one-way street, but rather a two-way street. In a sense, this is obviously the case. How would the words on the page mean anything if the reader did not already possess the capability to read? But there is more to it than that. The meaning that any reader derives from a text is partially dependent on factors that have nothing to do with the text itself but have everything to do with the reader. Thus, a text is not

interpreted entirely objectively, but there is always an element of *subjectivity* to the interpretation. That is, the interpretation depends, to an extent, upon the subjective experience of the reader.

With this unavoidable observation in mind, the role of hermeneutics becomes much less straightforward. It becomes much more difficult for one to argue that his or her methodology or theory of interpretation is the key to unlocking the true, objective meaning of the text because the person who developed that theory could not have come to that conclusion without the subjective experience that brought him or her there. Thus, we are left questioning every theory of interpretation, from the historical-critical method to the grammatical-historical method, and yes, even (especially) the method that will be proposed in this thesis. But what is the point of hermeneutics, if not to uncover the one true meaning of the text, especially in the case of a text as important as the Bible? Is it not paramount that we strive towards the truth, pushing aside any semblance of subjectivity that stands in our way? Recall the first sentence of this thesis: “The task of interpretation poses many challenges, *but at the same time, it presents many opportunities.*” The surprise answer is that, rather than something to be avoided, the subjectivity of interpretation is something that should be acknowledged and embraced.<sup>1</sup> With the help of renowned contemporary philosopher Merold Westphal, allow me to explain.

There is a concept in hermeneutical studies known as the “hermeneutical circle.” It takes on many forms, but in essence, it refers to the notion that the whole of a text is interpreted in relation to its parts, and in turn, the parts of a text are interpreted in relation to the whole.<sup>2</sup> For example, the words of this sentence can only be understood in relation to the whole sentence,

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<sup>1</sup> Westphal, Merold, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 28.

which can only be understood in relation to the whole paragraph, etc., until you read the whole thesis, at which point each individual chapter, paragraph, sentence, etc. takes on new meaning. This application of the hermeneutical circle is no doubt important and useful. However, the more profound and relevant use of this concept is in the relation between reader and text. The reader brings her presuppositions and experience to the text, and the text gives back what it has to say. This gives the reader new experience and ideas to grapple with, which she can then bring back to the text again for a fresh perspective, and then the text will speak something new and different. In this way, there is a hermeneutical circle between the reader and the text. Notice how this interaction resembles a dialogue between two people. The speaker tells the listener something, and then the listener must reform her way of thinking to come up with a response, to which the speaker forms a new response, and so on. According to Westphal, this is one way the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer sought to expand our understanding of the interpretation of a text; it resembles a conversation.<sup>3</sup>

Gadamer takes this thought to its logical conclusion. That is, a dialogue with the text implicates a dialogue between readers. Westphal explains this point nicely,

As a reader my dialogue takes place within the hermeneutical circle. As I am open to the text, listen to it carefully, and let it lead me to ideas that may well be “against me,” I revise or replace my operative presuppositions. But how do I know whether my changes represent progress...the change in my horizon that reading and listening, questioning and being questioned lead to may or may not represent a deepened understanding of the subject matter. How can I tell?...Gadamer’s conversation model implies a clear answer.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 115.

As part of my conversation with the text I need to carry on a conversation with other interpreters.<sup>4</sup>

One of the important features of Gadamer's notion of interpretation as conversation is an "openness, a vulnerability, to the voice of another."<sup>5</sup> Nobody enjoys a conversation where one of the partners is speaking from a self-absorbed, dominant position that refuses to listen to others. This virtue of humility applies to the interpretation of a text, as well as to the dialogue that takes place between interpreters of the same text. This is how the subjectivity of interpretation can be acknowledged and embraced. First, see the interpretation of a text as a conversation between reader and text, rather than as an autopsy conducted by a coroner, where the text is the corpse. Second, recognize that the interpretation of a text takes place within a community where no one person holds all the keys to the correct interpretation; in other words, assume a spirit of humility.

It is in this spirit that I write this thesis. This thesis seeks to advance the mission of understanding the Bible, but in no way does it claim to be the sole best method. Given this is my first foray into the depths of the intersection between philosophy and theology, this should come as no surprise, but I would like to think that even after decades of study and experience, I will still have the same attitude. To ever claim to know the whole truth is simply too great a statement for any one human to make. With that said, I have found many advantages and benefits to the hermeneutical framework outlined in the forthcoming chapters, and I hope that the reader finds it useful and enlightening as well. In the spirit of humility and dialogue, criticism and conversation are welcome.

Without further ado, what is the aim of this thesis? In short, this thesis seeks to develop a biblical hermeneutic centered on one central axis, based on the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. That

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 117.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 115.



central axis is narrative. As any biblical student would know, the Bible is written in various genres, ranging from prophecy to wisdom to hymn. The goal of this thesis is to show how a biblical hermeneutic that treats narrative as the central mode of discourse informs a better understanding of the other biblical genres of discourse, and thus of the Bible as a whole.<sup>6</sup> After all, the Bible taken as a whole is one large narrative that is not merely self-contained but extends into the present age as well as the future. Furthermore, this thesis takes an existentialist direction by taking the narrative-centered biblical hermeneutic and deriving from it a robust hermeneutic of the self also centered on narrative. In other words, the goal is not just to interpret the Bible based on narrative, but to take that hermeneutic as a model for interpreting one's life. After all, the reader (especially the professing believer) likely already views her life as a narrative in some sense, so it would benefit her to learn how the Bible can inform that way of seeing life.

As stated above, this hermeneutical framework is directly inspired by the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. Although not a self-proclaimed theologian, his work in areas such as hermeneutical studies and its relation to the intersection of philosophy and theology is nothing short of extensive, and might I add, delightfully insightful to the task of biblical interpretation. The central importance of narrative for biblical hermeneutics is his idea, so this thesis draws on several of his essays related to the subject, most notably his essay "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation." Additionally, although this thesis is inspired by Paul Ricoeur's work, I would not dare to claim to be an expert on his philosophy, so I have also leaned heavily on the works of second-hand sources written by people far more experienced with the writings of

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<sup>6</sup> Note that for the purposes of this thesis, I will not refer to narrative as a "genre", but more strictly speaking, as a "mode" of discourse. The difference between the two is beyond the scope of this thesis, but essentially, a literary "genre" is more specific than a "mode" of discourse. The effect on the reasoning is that narrative can be viewed as the axis around which all the genres of biblical discourse revolve, and not simply as another genre among the others (prophecy, wisdom, etc.). See Beaumont, Daniel, "The Modality of Narrative: A Critique of Some Recent Views of Narrative in Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 125-139.

Ricoeur. Most notably, I draw on James Fodor's book *Christian Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur and the Refiguring of Theology* and Kevin J. Vanhoozer's book *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology*. Should the ideas of Ricoeur interest the reader after this thesis, those works are an excellent starting point.

This thesis is divided into two parts. Part One attempts to develop a biblical hermeneutic centered on narrative by analyzing its relationship to three biblical genres: prophecy, wisdom, and hymns. This classification scheme of the biblical (especially Old Testament) genres is also Ricoeur's idea. In addition, Ricoeur had a fourth biblical genre: prescriptive, referring to the law in books like Exodus and Deuteronomy. While a fuller thesis may include a discussion of this genre as well, this thesis assumes a prior understanding of the foundation the biblical narrative is built on. As a result, only a discussion of the genres prophecy, wisdom, and hymns is necessary for the goal of this thesis.

In any case, Chapter 1 is about narrative and prophecy and how prophecy functions as a disruptor of traditional narrative in order to make sure the people of God stay on track. Chapter 2 is about narrative and wisdom; it talks about how narrative serves as a literary vessel for wisdom to manifest in and how wisdom begets narrative, forming a symbiotic relationship. Chapter 3 is about narrative and hymnic discourse; hymns are communication with God, recalling past, envisioning a future, and reconciling with the present, all woven by a narrative thread. Before Part Two, there is an Interlude that functions as the bridge between Part One and Part Two. It justifies the relation between the two parts by emphasizing the importance of narrative in weaving all the genres together and using a discussion of divine inspiration as the catalyst for uncovering a better conception of revelation. Part Two takes the biblical hermeneutic developed in Part One and applies it to a hermeneutic of the self, also divided into three chapters that

discuss the same three genres: prophecy, wisdom, and hymns. Chapter 4 discusses narrative and prophecy, but this time makes an argument for the preacher as the modern-day prophet, as well as discussing other forms prophecy can take in one's life. Chapter 5 discusses narrative and wisdom by recognizing the hermeneutic cycle that manifests in the life of one seeking wisdom, drawing on the wisdom of others while imparting wisdom to others. Chapter 6 discusses narrative and hymnic discourse, but this time in the context of both personal communication with God and communal worship that would take place, for instance, in a church service. The goal of Part One is to help a reader of the Bible recognize how the form of discourse is influenced by narrative, and vice versa. The goal of Part Two is to help that same reader understand how God reveals himself, not just in the words of a page, but in the life of a believer. With this in mind, let us now turn to our first discussion: narrative and prophecy.

## PART ONE

## Chapter 1: Narrative and Prophecy

### *Disruption of Tradition*

The characterization of the biblical genre of prophecy as a foretelling of the future is not merely too simple; it fails to consider the mode of biblical discourse which prophecy both relies on and confronts, namely, narrative. Once seen from the bird's-eye-view that a narrative-centric hermeneutic provides, the purpose and meaning of biblical prophecy becomes clearer. As will be seen, prophecy contends with the past and present in order to hopefully rectify, not merely foretell the future. This past is framed by a narrative that grounds the people being addressed in a tradition that they learn to rely upon. However, due to the security provided by the tradition, the people become complacent, and the ship begins to veer off the course it was charted to take. To continue the ship analogy, the crewmate in the crow's nest, with enhanced vision and authority, warns the crew of the danger they are headed towards if they do not correct their course. This is the role of the prophet.

So we see how narrative and prophecy form an interesting dialectic that characterizes a large portion of the Old Testament. The interaction of the two genres creates a strong tension where, as Ricoeur puts it, the naming of God occurs, and thus a biblical hermeneutic would be well served by the careful observance and reflection on this tension. Narrative sets the groundwork for a strong tradition, but prophecy tends to be the earthquake that rattles that foundation in order to get the people's attention. This interplay between these two modes of discourse is an excellent example of the intertextuality of the Bible. That is, the genres of the

Bible are not disjoint domains that every verse can be neatly placed into, but instead interact in ways that bring forth meaning by virtue of the interactions themselves.<sup>7</sup>

Let us further consider the tension between narrative and prophecy, specifically in regard to time. Ricoeur comments on this tension in his work “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation”: “The same history which narration founds as certain is suddenly undercut by the menace announced in the prophecy. The supporting pedestal totters. It is the structure of history which is at stake here, not just the quality of the word which pronounces it.”<sup>8</sup> Why does Ricoeur say the structure of history is at stake? Simply put, if the prophet is to be trusted, God has spoken, and what He has said is in conflict with how the people of Israel have understood their history established by tradition. Tradition is passed down from generation to generation, and the foundation of any such tradition is a narrative that weaves all the pieces together. The narrative of Israel founded in Genesis and summed up in the Exodus—how the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt and provided them a land flowing with milk and honey—is the bedrock on which all Israeli tradition follows. A prophet uses this tradition by invoking the authority of the God that showed Israel such grace and mercy in the pivotal event of the Exodus. However, the prophet actually relies on the security provided by the traditional narrative to subvert that security. The tradition is disrupted by the menacing voice of the prophet that speaks for God, and the people are forced to come to terms with their history. A fissure is created within the self-understanding of the community between the security of the recitation of the pivotal events and the foreboding of the prophet.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, “Naming God.” In *Rhetorical Invention and Religious Inquiry: New Perspectives*, edited by Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted, 162-181. Yale University Press, 2000. 171.

<sup>8</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 70, no. 1-2 (1977): 1-37. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Fodor, James, *Christian Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur and the Refiguring of Theology*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). 230.

What is the resolution to this tension, if any? By some secondhand reflections on Ricoeur, and by Ricoeur himself, this tension illuminates the path forward to gaining a proper understanding of revelation. According to James Fodor, this tension is crucial to a healthy Christian theology. In his view, "...prophetic discourse, by a sort of backward reading, releases a potential for hope from within narrative discourse that would otherwise remain hidden inside the borders of traditional history."<sup>10</sup> To put this differently, through prophecy, God brings the whole span of time, past, present, and future, to one moment, through one person, in order to illuminate the meaning of the narrative (i.e. the Abrahamic covenant) provided to God's people. This form of discourse proves itself necessary by the inability of the people of Israel to stay on track.<sup>11</sup> As Fodor elaborates,

If narrative were not touched by prophetic eschatology...the initial surplus of meaning in the traditional narrative would simply lie dormant; its charge of promise and hope beyond the closure of the established tradition would not be liberated and the anticipatory structure of the covenant itself would remain unnoticed and unrealized.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, this tension between narrative and prophecy is a feature, not a bug, of the biblical polyphony.

Furthermore, according to Kevin J. Vanhoozer in his book on Paul Ricoeur's philosophy in relation to biblical narrative, "Even in prophecies of doom, however, are glimmers of hope...There will be a new covenant, written not on stone but on human hearts of flesh."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 230

<sup>11</sup> How can the prophet prove to the people where they have gone wrong? That is the purpose of the prescriptive discourse, or the law. Unfortunately, this thesis will not cover the dialectic between narrative and prescriptive discourse, even though it could be argued this thesis would be incomplete without such a discussion. Given the scale of this project, and that this project is my first foray into this level of academic rigor, I considered it a reasonable omission. Perhaps an addendum could be made in the future.

<sup>12</sup> Fodor, James, *Christian Hermeneutics*, 230.

<sup>13</sup> Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 203.

Vanhoozer pushes further on the theme of possibility in Ricoeur's philosophical thought, so he concludes that "Read in the light of the prophets, therefore, the past is not simply exhausted but discloses a treasure trove of inexhaustible possibilities."<sup>14</sup> Thus, a proper hermeneutic of the prophetic discourse not only takes into account the disruption of tradition engendered by the menace of the prophet, but also does the due diligence required to see the possibility of hope that was there all along.

To further continue the discussion on prophecy's relation to time, history in particular, some attention should be given to the opposition between prophecy and eschatology. At first glance, these two seem similar, especially if one considers eschatology to be a branch of prophecy. However, the relation is not so simple. As Ricoeur discusses in *Thinking Biblically*, while "the imminence that the prophet confronts is decidedly intrahistorical," an eschatological vision lies outside of the realm of history, into the end times.<sup>15</sup> Since, by definition, eschatology concerns what is final, the prophet is not so concerned with communicating this to a people looking to adjust the course of its history. Rather, should the prophet give a foretelling of the future, it is more accurate to describe him as Ricoeur does, as a "sentinel of imminence." The prophet's vision concerns what is imminent to the people, and how that imminence poses a threat to their established tradition. To further clarify the unique temporal quality of the "last days," at least for how Ricoeur understood it, Vanhoozer can help us:

The "last days" are not to be understood in linear terms as the concluding points of a sequence, but rather in qualitative terms. The "end" is not the terminus of a linear

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 203

<sup>15</sup> LaCocque, André., Ricoeur, Paul, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, (United Kingdom: University of Chicago Press, 2003). 170.



progression, but a decisive invasion of the present. To put it yet another way, “end-time” is *immanent* rather than *imminent*.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, the end-times are best described as having a certain quality that can be identified in the present. In this way, the characteristics of the last days are immanent, or exist within the present age, instead of imminent, as in, about to happen.

No biblical hermeneutic would be complete without a developed concept of revelation. Revelation, in this thesis, in essence, refers to how God reveals himself, whether through Scripture or elsewhere. This is a mountain of a question that could fill libraries with exposition and reflection, but this thesis maintains that a proper understanding of biblical modes of discourse such as narrative, prophecy, wisdom, and hymns constitute a holistic framework for understanding revelation. Furthermore, a more complete understanding of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the writers of Scripture were moved by also requires a proper understanding of the biblical modes of discourse. In particular, this thesis opposes a prevailing notion of inspiration that asserts that the Holy Spirit dictated Scripture to the authors, mainly because of its lack of coherence. A proper understanding of inspiration is essential to an adequate biblical hermeneutic, so a concept of inspiration that corresponds with how God reveals himself in the various modes of biblical discourse is preferable.

With that said, what does prophecy tell us? In perhaps the most direct mode of biblical revelation, the prophet speaks as the voice of God. The “I Am” of God becomes the “I speak in the name of God” of the prophet in a double first-person speech event. God chooses to reveal Himself to His people through one individual for purposes such as giving direction, disrupting tradition, and correcting kings. God establishes one person as the ultimate authority, providing a

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<sup>16</sup> Vanhoozer, Kevin J, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 205.

channel of communication that prohibits all dispute. This mode of revelation establishes God as the author of humanity's narrative, as the King of kings and Lord of Lords. Should the people forget who is in control, the prophet steps in to be the reminder.

The prophet is an excellent example of how God can speak directly to someone as a means of revealing Himself. However, in the context of inspiration, is it reasonable to apply this quality of the prophet to the authors and redactors of Scripture, in all cases? Ricoeur certainly does not think so. He thinks extending the prophetic mode of revelation to all other forms of biblical discourse "leads to the idea of scripture as dictated, as something whispered in someone's ear."<sup>17</sup> Then revelation is taken as a synonym for this idea of a double author of the sacred texts, and any understanding of the texts that does not see the writers as a sort of metaphorical pen in God's hand is prematurely cut off. In Ricoeur's eyes, this is undesirable because this strict view of inspiration "is deprived of the enrichment it might receive from those forms of discourse which are less easily interpreted in terms of a voice behind a voice or of a double author of scripture."<sup>18</sup>

In other words, not every biblical author is writing for the voice of God in the same way that a prophet is speaking for the voice of God, and overemphasizing this prophetic form of revelation has adverse consequences on biblical interpretation. The other forms of biblical discourse are, in a manner of speaking, subsumed into this form of discourse in order, presumably, to retain the concept of an immovable authority or biblical inerrancy, but in so doing, their specificities lose their impact. For instance, when David is lamenting in Psalms 22, does it make sense to say that God directly told David to write those words? Or does it make more sense to interpret those verses as authentically coming from David's heart? In the context

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<sup>17</sup> Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 4.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 5.

of hymnic discourse especially, the supplications and praises of the authors almost lose all meaning if they simply wrote down what God told them to. More on the topic of inspiration will be discussed in the Interlude and Part 2, but this will suffice to introduce the aporia that comes from a divine dictation theory of inspiration.

A concrete example of this hermeneutical approach to interpreting prophetic discourse is in order. The aforementioned book titled *Thinking Biblically* gives multiple examples of biblical passages interpreted first by a biblical exegete by the name of Andre LaCocque, and then by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur. LaCocque makes use of the historical-critical method of exegesis, while Ricoeur draws on his philosophical expertise in hermeneutical theory. To cover prophetic discourse, they look at Ezekiel 37, verses 1 through 14. To recap, this is the familiar passage of Scripture about the dry bones, where Ezekiel questions whether or not they can live.

As LaCocque elaborates, the prophet is speaking to an Israel that has been exiled in Babylon, and the dry bones signify this death of the nation in strong terms. Furthermore, chapter 37 presents us “with a new formation of Israel, not a resumption of the past.”<sup>19</sup> This passage demonstrates the theme of the disruption of traditional history that characterizes prophetic discourse. Ezekiel is proclaiming not just a disruption of the past, but a complete separation from it. LaCocque says, “The death of the nation in Babylon is no mere chastisement; the exile is no eclipse, no parenthetical time, no transient night before morning comes...it is death, death without morrow.”<sup>20</sup> In a profound turn of events, Ezekiel does not deny or sidestep the death of Israel, but instead directly confronts it, leaving open the possibility that “the absoluteness of chaos might be transcended by the creative Word of the Beginning, which is also the Word of the

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<sup>19</sup> LaCocque, Andre; Ricoeur, Paul. *Thinking Biblically*, 146.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

End,” as LaCocque puts it.<sup>21</sup> The prophet always leaves room for hope, and as the vision goes, God does grant the dry bones life, signifying not the restoration of old Israel, but the birth of a new covenant.

In summary, the role of the prophet is to disrupt the tradition established by the foundational narrative, not necessarily to throw it away, but to ensure that the fullness of the promise given by the divine narrative is seen through to the end. Speaking with the voice of God, the prophet projects the possibility of destructive judgement, should the people continue to forsake their God-given path, but he also reminds them of the possibility of a brighter future, should “my people, which are called by my name...humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways...”<sup>22</sup>

However, not every biblical voice speaks with the voice of God. A prime example of this is the wisdom discourse, to which we now turn.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 147

<sup>22</sup> 2 Chronicles 7:14 (KJV)

## Chapter 2: Narrative and Wisdom

### *A Symbiotic Relationship*

I would propose that there are two main ways wisdom is conveyed. The first is the propositional wisdom that is written or spoken in an objective fashion, as if a professor were displaying it as notes on a presentation slide for students to write down. These sayings are those found in the wisdom literature of the Bible such as the Proverbs. Sometimes they describe human nature as it is with no evaluation, and sometimes they are instructions on how to handle a difficult situation. Other times they are warnings to avoid temptations. They are meant to be interpreted as practical advice, but they are not meant to be interpreted as God-given guarantees or logical consequences. For example, “Pride goeth before destruction, and an [sic] haughty spirit before a fall” (Pro 16:18 KJV) is a general maxim. Most people would not assume that there is some guarantee that a prideful person will experience destruction, but the idea is rather that this is what pride tends to lead to. As will be explained, the meaning of most of these propositions are more properly understood in a narrative context that demonstrates the proposition.

The second way to convey wisdom is by story or narrative. In the Bible, the book of Job can be categorized as this form of wisdom literature, but it is not the only instance. Parables are another, more direct, example of this form. In any case, the propositional wisdom is derived from the events of the narrative, or it is lived out by a character in the story. Ricoeur emphasizes this form because narrative wisdom has the benefits of being able to display the nuances of ethical dilemmas as well as giving a sense of resolution in situations where there may not be an easy

one. When there is not a clear answer to why something is the way it is, a story can at least provide, as Ricoeur says, that sense of pathos that manifests in guilt, suffering, and other such “limit-experiences.”<sup>23</sup> Life is difficult, and humans are not logical, straightforward creatures, so where the maxims of the proverbs fail, a well-crafted story can pick up and at least give the audience something to relate to and reflect on.

This chapter will describe how the understanding of wisdom literature in the Bible is enhanced by the use of narrative. The interaction between these genres is more symbiotic than that of prophecy and narrative. Biblical narratives do more than just recount a sequence of events; they contain sapiential elements that invite the reader to consider what lessons can be learned from the story. Also, the rich resources of the wisdom literature of the Bible are properly displayed in a narrative that puts those propositions into action. Furthermore, the wisdom-narrative polarity makes itself known in the consideration of time. Narrative concerns itself with the history of a sequence of events, but one could argue that the point of any narrative is to better inform us of how to live in the present. Similarly, wisdom draws on timeless proverbs and stories to affect the decisions of the present.

First, let us discuss further the necessity of narrative for understanding propositional wisdom. Wisdom means very little in a theoretical vacuum. Similarly to how physical motion is undetectable without a point of reference, wisdom is undetectable without a context in which such wisdom can be displayed. For example, take Proverbs 26:11, “As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his foolishness.” The contemplation of the meaning of this proverb necessarily leads to the construction of some kind of narrative that could properly display this proposition: The woman that always chooses the jerk, despite repeated betrayal, for instance, or the man that

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<sup>23</sup> Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” 11-12.

continues to go to the bar, despite being an alcoholic. There is a sequence of events that is established in the imagination of the reader as he or she tries to bring the meaning of the proverb to fruition. Then the followability of these events, or what brings the plot together, is the proverb. Thus, propositional wisdom begets narrative.

On the other hand, from a well-crafted narrative, rich propositional wisdom can be extracted. James Fodor develops this symbiotic relationship further in his book on Paul Ricoeur's influence on biblical hermeneutics. He draws on Israel's history as an example of a narrative that acquires "a universal meaning (a proper intelligibility) and become[s] paradigmatic, not only for the people of Israel, but for all people," thanks to this mediation between wisdom and narrative.<sup>24</sup> The narrative of Israel's constant wrestling with God becomes a pattern of general human behavior in relation to the divine; namely, humans' fleshly desires are in constant battle with the conscience God implanted in us. Furthermore, he explains,

The stories of Creation and Fall are good examples of how sapiential elements abide within, and thus modulate, the narrative...in other words, wisdom grasps as present paradox what narrative spells out in successive order; namely, as creatures we are good but as historical beings we are already sinful.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, narrative begets propositional wisdom. Therefore, we see that wisdom and narrative have a reciprocal relationship. That is, wisdom creates a narrative, but also narrative creates wisdom.

The wisdom discourse of the Bible plays a unique, yet vital role in the biblical polyphony, which is only made possible by the use of narrative. For those who experience deep suffering, the narratives of the wisdom literature provide a sense of, if not resolution, at least of

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<sup>24</sup> Fodor, James, *Christian Hermeneutics*, 232.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. An analysis of "Symbolism of Evil" by Ricoeur will be employed later to reveal some of these sapiential elements.

recourse. As Ricoeur puts it, “Wisdom does not teach us how to avoid suffering, or how to magically deny it, or how to dissimulate it under an illusion. It teaches us how to endure, how to suffer suffering.”<sup>26</sup> Ricoeur has a theory for how this integral characteristic of wisdom comes about. He uses the terms *ethos* and *cosmos* to refer to the sphere of human action and the sphere of the world, respectively. In its propositional, drier forms, wisdom comments on these two spheres, i.e., how to act morally and what the nature of the universe is. But when these two spheres clash, forming “limit experiences” that make God seem distant and silent (Why does God allow the prosperity of the wicked, or the suffering of the innocent?), a *pathos* of actively assumed suffering is produced.<sup>27</sup> This *pathos* can only be communicated through a narrative, and it is what permeates Job’s final response to God in Job 42:1-6. As Ricoeur eloquently puts,

His questions about justice are undoubtedly left without an answer. But by repenting, though not of sin, for he is righteous, but by repenting for his supposition that existence does not make sense, Job presupposes an unsuspected meaning which cannot be transcribed by speech or *logos* a human being may have at his disposal. This meaning has no other expression than the new quality which penitence confers on suffering.<sup>28</sup>

When it comes to wisdom literature in the Bible, the book of Job is critical to understand because the tragedy of suffering speaks to the heart of anyone. How does one make sense of senseless suffering? Does suffering always have a reason behind it? David J. H. Beldman analyzes the book of Job from a Ricoeurian perspective, which brings a helpful contribution to this discussion. He writes, “The prose narrative which frames all of this is essential because it functions to validate the event of Job’s suffering; in other words this is not some abstract

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<sup>26</sup> Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” 11.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 13.



intellectual exercise but is depicted as something real and authentic.”<sup>29</sup> The problem of pain is perhaps not best “resolved” through intellectual discourse (e.g. propositional wisdom, proverbs), but through an existential narrative that clashes the *ethos* with the *cosmos* and molds a piercing *pathos* out of its ashes. Due to the immanent nature of the problem of evil in a person’s day-to-day life, a proper biblical hermeneutic must consider this as a fundamental issue. Interpreting the Bible around the axis of narrative illumines the meaning embedded in this kind of wisdom discourse.

Even in non-wisdom discourse, wisdom can be derived from the content of the Bible. The Adamic myth is a great example of how sapiential elements pervade the narratives of biblical discourse, and Ricoeur’s analysis in “Symbolism of Evil” brings this fact to light. For example, “The ambiguity in man, created good and become evil, pervades all the registers of human life.”<sup>30</sup> Adam and Eve, when they were first created, had an innocence and goodness about them that reflected God’s good creation, but when they ate of the fruit of knowledge of good and evil, that innocence and goodness was tarnished. So it is in our lives. The pain a woman bears in childbirth stains what is in and of itself a wonderful act of procreation. The productivity a man feels after a day’s work is spoiled by the exhaustion it brings. “Thus the whole condition of man appears to be subjected to the rule of hardship; it is the *hardship* of being a man that which, in the striking brevity of the myth, makes manifest his fallen state.”<sup>31</sup> This is just one of the many nuggets of wisdom Ricoeur derives from this story.

Another way to establish a link between narrative and wisdom is to draw a parallel between the world created by a narrative and the symbolic-textual world formed by a proverb.

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<sup>29</sup> Beldman, David J. H., “Reading Job: Ricoeur’s Textual Theory and the Interpretation of Job,” (Master’s thesis, McMaster Divinity College, 2007). 92.

<sup>30</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967). 246.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 252.

According to Viljoen in his article, “Ricoeur points out that the re-descriptive nature of biblical texts, or the operation of parabolisation, is not limited to those texts that are characteristically narrative, but is also at work in other literary genres (Ricoeur 1981:51) and can thus be applied equally well to Proverbs.”<sup>32</sup> In this article, Viljoen analyzes a few specific Proverbs with this kind of Ricoerian hermeneutic. In particular, Proverbs 10:27 is analyzed, which reads:

The fear of the LORD prolongs days,

But the years of the wicked will be shortened. – Pro 10:27 (NKJV)

In reference to Proverbs 10:27, Viljoen says, “This proverb references a world in which Yahweh is a determining factor to be reckoned with... The symbolic world of Proverbs is a stable predictable world, one in which the outcome of attitudes and behaviours can be predicted (cf. Frydrych 2002:170).”<sup>33</sup> A narrative creates a world for the reader to temporarily inhabit, in order so that the reader may refigure her own world, and the text is what mediates these two worlds. In the proverbs, a similar bridge is built by the text, but between the symbolic-textual world of the proverb and the everyday life of the reader. By painting a world where the consequences of the choice between wisdom and folly invade the reader’s mental eye, the intent of the proverb is made clear.<sup>34</sup> The conveyance of wisdom in poetic form draws upon the benefits of narrative, constructing a world for the reader to inhabit, and is thus more effective.

Further elaboration on what a Ricoeurian hermeneutic applied would look like is warranted, and we can call on Viljoen again for assistance here. Using Reese’s four-pole schema of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic as a springboard, Viljoen formulates four questions that can be asked

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<sup>32</sup> Viljoen, A. & Venter, P.M., 2013, ‘An exploration of the symbolic world of Proverbs 10:1–15:33 with specific reference to “the fear of the Lord”’, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 69(1), Art. #2008, 6 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i1.2008>, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 5.

when attempting to interpret a biblical text, such as he demonstrates in Proverbs 14:2. Those questions are: (1) What does the text want to communicate to me – the reader – today? (2) Why is the text crafted as it is? What is the significance of the form of discourse? (3) What is the landscape of the world that unfolds as the text is read? How is that world? (4) What is the new being-in-the-world that the text invites me – the reader – to?<sup>35</sup>

Proverbs 14:2 reads:

He who walks in his uprightness fears the Lord,

But he who is perverse in his ways despises Him. – Pro 14:2 (NKJV)

Viljoen walks through the four questions he formulated to interpret this verse as follows.

The first question is formulated from the pole that Reese calls “Distanciation”, which “entails being conscious of the distinctive nature of written discourse”.<sup>36</sup> The distinctive nature of written discourse is that the author that once wrote it is not available to have dialogue with, hence the sense of “distance” between the reader and author. This frees the text from the restraints of the author’s original intentional horizon. As Ricoeur puts it, “In other words, thanks to writing, the world of the text can burst the world of the author.”<sup>37</sup> Note the word *can*; the original intent, audience, etc. of the author need not be ignored. However, the point is the reader has no obligation to avail herself of tools such as the historical-critical method to ascertain a meaningful interpretation of the text.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the ordinary reader of the bible may not have these resources at her disposal, in which case, this interpretation method is preferrable. This distanciation sets the reader up for allowing the text to speak to her world directly.

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<sup>35</sup> Viljoen, A., 2015, ‘The structuring considerations of a Ricoeurian hermeneutic employed in a reading of Proverbs 14:2’, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71(3), Art. #2849, 7 pages.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.2849>, 2-5.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>37</sup> Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” 22.

<sup>38</sup> Viljoen, A., “The structuring considerations of a Ricoeurian hermeneutic,” 3.

The second question addresses the form of discourse the text is in, and it is derived from Reese's second pole "Objectification." For this pole, Ricoeur is responding to a tendency of theological circles to reduce Scripture to its propositional content. Ricoeur says, "To uproot this prejudice we must convince ourselves that the literary genres of the Bible do not constitute a rhetorical facade which it would be possible to pull down in order to reveal some thought content that is indifferent to its literary vehicle."<sup>39</sup> In other words, the literary form of the text is crucial to its meaning. Viljoen applies this aspect of the Ricoeurian hermeneutic with Proverbs 14:2 by addressing its parallelism. This parallelism divides the symbolic-textual world into two spheres: one for the fearers of Yahweh who go on straight ways, and another for the despisers of him that go on wrong ways.<sup>40</sup>

The third question is derived from the third pole that Reese calls "Projection of a world." In this pole, the reader engages the world projected by the text. These symbolic-textual worlds, especially in the case of religious texts such as the bible, "point to a unique, transcendent reference...[that] are in touch with the fullness of reality."<sup>41</sup> Thus, the hermeneutical task of the reader, to engage this world and inhabit it, is conducted by answering the question "What is the landscape of the world that unfolds as the text is read? How is that world?" According to Viljoen, Proverbs 14:2 projects a world where the moral behavior of a person is represented by the path he or she walks. In this proverbial world, these two paths are: (1) in the fear of Yahweh going in straightness, and (2) despising Yahweh going in wrong ways. In this symbolic-textual world, these two paths are not abstractions, but rather concrete manifestations of a person's

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<sup>39</sup> Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 15.

<sup>40</sup> Viljoen, A., "The structuring considerations of a Ricoeurian hermeneutic," 4.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

conduct. Furthermore, the person's respect towards Yahweh, or lack thereof, has significant implications for the person's moral behavior.<sup>42</sup>

The final question comes from Reese's final pole of the Ricoeurian textual hermeneutic, "Appropriation," the self-understanding arising from a reading of the text. After recognizing the significance of the form of discourse and engaging the world of the text, the question most pertinent to any seeker of wisdom may be answered: How does this affect my life? Viljoen paraphrases Ricoeur's thought process, "Readers understand themselves before the text, before the world of the work, in order to let the work and its world expand the horizon of the readers' own self-understanding."<sup>43</sup> Regarding Proverbs 14:2, according to Viljoen, this proverb presents a reality where one of two choices can be made: to either fear the Lord, or not. Furthermore, this internal choice reflects on the outside, manifesting in one of the two ways described. For the fearer of the Lord, the way is good, and for the non-fearer, the way is bad. "When this redescribed view of reality is embraced by the reader it calls the contemporary reader to an existential moment of personal decision".<sup>44</sup> Note how this final step brings us back to answer the first question, namely, *what does the text want to communicate to me, the reader, today?* In doing so, we have completed a kind of Ricoeurian hermeneutical circle, as it were. This final step of applying the wisdom to one's life is how it becomes unfolded in a kind of narrative. As will be discussed further in Part Two, life tends to be viewed from a narrative perspective, so temporarily inhabiting the symbolic-textual world that the Proverb opens up manifests its lasting effects in a kind of narrative form.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

To summarize, narrative and wisdom go hand-in-hand; one begets the other. However, unlike in prophetic discourse, the voice of God is not heard; indeed, sometimes God seems silent, as in the story of Job. How does Job respond to this silence? He eventually speaks out; his despondency urges him to confront God in supplication. This form of discourse can also be found in David's writings in the book of Psalms, even though Psalms is not typically seen as wisdom literature. As we will see in the next chapter, hymnic discourse occupies the unique position of discourse that speaks directly to God.

### Chapter 3: Narrative and Hymns

#### *Communication with God*

For the purposes of this thesis, hymnic discourse refers to the form of discourse that speaks with God in the second person. As opposed to the first person discourse of the prophet—the “I” of God becomes the “I” of the prophet—and the third person discourse of narrative—God is that “He” that permeates the story—the psalmist or the church member speaks to God as “You” in hymns. Under this definition, hymnic discourse can take many forms, and is not limited to the colloquial understanding of the word “hymn” as “traditional song sung by a congregation.” For example, prayer, under this definition, is a form of hymnic discourse. This is how Ricoeur uses the term “hymnic discourse” in reference to the Bible, and he categorizes such discourse into three broad boxes. These are praise, supplication, and thanksgiving.<sup>45</sup> Praise focuses on honoring God for what He has done and for who He is. This kind of discourse celebrates the glory of God by recalling a narrative or by declaring the power of God as a sapiential fact. Supplication is the act of lamenting to God about the suffering of this life, and/or pleading with God to do something about it. Thanksgiving is thanking God for what He has done and for who He is. These three categories are by no means mutually exclusive; the Psalms demonstrate instances of all three of these within single chapters. What sets them apart is the intention when speaking to God.

As in the previous two chapters, developing a proper biblical hermeneutic recognizes the importance of the relationship between hymnic discourse and narrative. In fact, Fodor describes this dialectic as “the ultimate polarity within the biblical language, the polarity between narrative

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<sup>45</sup> Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” 14.

and hymnic discourse.”<sup>46</sup> This strong sentiment is justified for multiple reasons. For one, this form of discourse is not only found in the Psalms, but rather it pervades the whole biblical narrative. From Abraham pleading with God to spare Sodom for the righteous, to David lavishing the Lord with praise, to Job lamenting and repenting, to Moses recounting the grace of God in Deuteronomy, hymnic discourse can be found in abundance. Hymnic discourse, it would seem, plays a critical role in the biblical polyphony. In addition, hymnic discourse is what constitutes the way a believer speaks to God, so it is directly relevant to how a believer understands her narrative in relation to God (more on this aspect in Chapter 6).

In the cases of thanksgiving and praise, hymnic discourse does more than just retell a good story. Rather, the celebration of the narrative in the form of a hymn recontextualizes the narrative in a way that directly affects the soul of the narrative, infusing it with newfound purpose and meaning. As Ricoeur argues, “The praise addressed to God’s prodigious accomplishments in nature and history is not a movement of the heart which is added to narrative genre without effect on its nucleus. In fact, celebration elevates the story and turns it into an invocation.”<sup>47</sup> Praise and thanksgiving answer the question, “What has God done for us?” in a lively, dynamic way that cements the faith of the people in the God that saved them. The God that brought the people out in the past is the same God one can speak to today, in the form of praise, supplication, or thanksgiving. The relationship between narrative and hymns is thus a lively one, where narrative feeds on the present-mindedness a hymn fosters and hymn takes from the abundant doxological resources a narrative has to offer. As Fodor nicely puts it,

For just as recounting the ancient Deuteronomic creed constitutes in itself one aspect of celebration, so too singing songs of praise inescapably entails the recitation of salvation

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<sup>46</sup> Fodor, James, *Christian Hermeneutics*, 233.

<sup>47</sup> Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” 14.



history. Indeed, without a heart that sings the glory of God, perhaps we would not even have the creation story, and certainly not the deliverance story of the Exodus. The hymn includes narrative, just as narrative anchors praise.<sup>48</sup>

Ricoeur also makes an argument for supplication elevating the significance of the suffering a righteous man endures. He draws on the ending of the book of Job to prove his point, claiming that when accompanied by wisdom, “the knowledge of how to suffer is surpassed by the lyricism of supplication in the same way that narration is surpassed by the lyricism of praise.”<sup>49</sup> In each case, hymnic discourse is not simply a retelling of the facts in lyrical form; it heightens the original discourse’s value. Furthermore, hymnic discourse entails an act of giving back to God what has been bestowed, whether it be narrative, wisdom, or whatever else. In the process of shifting to this second-person form of discourse with God, the original discourse is made into an invocation, purifying it of any demand on the part of the seeking soul. This invocation “is addressed to God in the second person, without limiting itself to designating him in the third person as in narration, or to speaking in the first person in his name as in prophecy.”<sup>50</sup> However, Ricoeur is careful not to make this form of discourse the ultimate model of revelation, of which other forms like narrative and prophecy would only be subsidiaries. He notes that this I-Thou relation is mainly constituted in the psalm and “above all in the psalm of supplication.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, wisdom recognizes a God that sometimes seems to hide behind the course of history, whereas prophecy communicates in a sort of double first-person where God speaks through someone. Thus, revelation has multiple origins, and it can take on many forms.

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<sup>48</sup> Fodor, James, *Christian Hermeneutics*, 233.

<sup>49</sup> Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” 14.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

Hymnic discourse makes an interesting contribution to the understanding of biblical time, an important subject to Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory. In essence, the temporality of the hymns can be described as all time in the present. Vanhoozer contributes a helpful explanation of this temporal concept. Speaking of the Psalms, he explains them as a celebration of the temporality of the other biblical genres in the present. Thus, the past (or future) is brought forth to the present in hymn. As Vanhoozer explains, "It is the time of prayer and recitation, when the individual or the whole community recapitulates the specific temporalities of the narratives, the law and the prophets."<sup>52</sup> Various individuals or communities "appropriate" these various temporalities to their most relevant temporality, the present, by way of the hymn. Vanhoozer says, "The 'I' and 'we' of hymnic literature invite the reader to make the Psalms his own songs."<sup>53</sup> This is what makes a hymn that recounts the past so important to the tradition of a people such as Israel, and furthermore, what makes such a narrative still relevant to other bodies of believers today. The time of the present is conjoined with all time in hymnic discourse.

Now for an example of interpreting the Psalms from a narrative perspective, conducted by Robert E. Wallace. Wallace himself testifies to the adequacy of narrative theology when interpreting the Psalms, claiming that "a narrative impulse exists within the Psalter."<sup>54</sup> He argues that a sense of "plot," which provides a hermeneutical lens for the reader, comes from "the broad narrative impulse throughout the entire Psalter...combined with the narrative settings of the individual psalms and the semantic and thematic connections Book III shares with other portions of the Psalter and the Hebrew Bible."<sup>55</sup> In other words, the settings in which the psalms are

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<sup>52</sup> Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 204.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Wallace, Robert E., "The Narrative Effect of Book IV of the Hebrew Psalter," (PhD diss, Baylor University, 2006).

<sup>55</sup> Wallace, Robert E., "The Narrative Effect of Psalms 84–89," *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 11 (2011): 1-15, 4.

written or sung, along with the events and themes about which the psalms are sung, provide the components necessary to construe a plot from the Psalms.

In the case of Pss 84–89, the plot is somewhat disturbing, but also profound. The chapters leading up to this passage, chapters 73 to 83, which make up Book III of the Psalter, describe a setting where God seemingly does not make sense. Despite God’s promise to deliver justice, the wicked enemies of Israel continue to prosper. The holy mountain is in ruins (Ps 74), Jerusalem is destroyed (Ps 79), and there is no mention of God’s anointed. According to Wallace, “Book II is clearly an ‘exile’ book.”<sup>56</sup> Written in the context of the exile, the psalmists are attempting to make sense of God’s silence, and they hearken back to better days when God answered their prayers and acted as providence. In Wallace’s words, “Within that context, the hymns of celebration found in Pss 84-89 become ironic expressions of a grieving Israel desperately holding on to what brought hope in the past.”<sup>57</sup> These ironic expressions of grief will be delineated chapter by chapter below.

Chapter 84 is a good example of how a narrative hermeneutical lens can dramatically change the tone of a text. Ps 84 describes the delightfulness of the holy mountain, which, in isolation, sounds like a joyful expression of praise and thanksgiving. However, the canonical context of this Psalm is one where the Temple is destroyed, giving it a harsh ironic dimension. “Better is one day in your courts,” the psalm goes, yet the reader just read about the perpetual ruin of these courts. As Wallace puts it, “When read in isolation, this psalm is read as an expression of hope found in the presence of the divine in the temple. In canonical context, however, this psalm is not an expression of hope and adoration as much as an expression of

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 3.

longing.”<sup>58</sup> Ps 85 expresses a similar irony, looking forward to a restored land that is actually desolate and in need of restoring. In Ps 86, a distraught David calls on God as if God owes him mercy; the Davidic monarchy is called into question. Ps 87, similarly to Ps 84, ties an immeasurable hope to Jerusalem by expressing Zion as a metaphor for the divine presence, yet this divine presence seems to be missing, as is portrayed in Ps 88. An exilic reading of Chapter 88 is appropriate; the pervading theme of these chapters as seen from a narrative, canonical perspective, has been loss and grief. Ps 88 does away with the hopeful glances to the past and present, and instead confronts God directly, crying out in an emotional lament. Wallace writes, “In Ps 88 the water chaos that is afflicting the psalmist is directly connected to Yahweh. It is the divine who is ultimately responsible.”<sup>59</sup> Finally, Ps 89 is another plead for God to do something about their distress, “for who in the heaven can be compared unto the Lord? who among the sons of the mighty can be likened unto the Lord?”<sup>60</sup> The deliverance of the people from Egypt and covenant God established with David are invoked by the psalmist in an attempt to prove God’s duty to heal their situation. The psalmist claims David is the recipient of the faithfulness of God, but “those absolute claims are quickly refuted by the reality of history.”<sup>61</sup> The psalmist is confused and despondent because his understanding of Israel’s promised narrative has been thwarted by the harshness of reality. Once again, we see narrative discourse playing a major role in the construction of hymnic discourse, lending credence to the project of developing a biblical hermeneutic centered on narrative.

Let us summarize the relationship between narrative and hymnic discourse. Monumental events in the Bible, such as the covenant with Abraham and the Exodus, constitute the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>60</sup> Psalms 89:6 (KJV)

<sup>61</sup> Wallace, “The Narrative Effect of Psalms 84–89,” 14.

foundational narrative the people of Israel use to build their tradition. One aspect of this tradition is the hymns that arise from these events. Songs of praise and thanksgiving to God celebrate the grace and mercy of the God that enabled the pivotal events to take place, so the narrative works as an anchor that gives the hymn its weight. The expectation of the people is that the same God that delivered them out of Egypt will continue to deliver them out of their current problems, so the motivation for supplication is also fueled by the narrative. The re-enactment of these archetypal stories in the form of hymns boosts the faith of the people in the narratives themselves, which in turn boosts the motivation to participate in the hymns. Therefore, a positive cycle from narrative to hymnic discourse and back to narrative is established that keeps the faith of the people alive and vibrant.

## INTERLUDE

“All other genres of discourse in which the biblical faith has found expression must be brought together, not just in an enumeration that would juxtapose them, but in a living dialectic that will display their interferences with one another.”

- Paul Ricoeur, “Naming God,” 221.

Before continuing on to the second part, I would like to reaffirm this work’s thesis in a way that sets up for what is to come. As Ricoeur stated in the quote above, the biblical faith is expressed in many genres of discourse, of which we have discussed three: prophecy, wisdom, and hymns. For the sake of clarity and structure, I have chosen to discuss these in three separate chapters, but it would be a mistake to treat these genres as if they were mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the characteristics of each appear all throughout the Scripture. So, in response to Ricoeur from the above quote, how do we bring together these genres in a “living dialectic that will display their interferences with one another?” This thesis argues that the thread that ties all biblical modes of discourse together is narrative.

Imagine an orchestral band, consisting of three sections: strings, brass, and percussion. Each section, on its own, could construct a piece of music with its own unique qualities, and they would each sound splendid. However, putting all three sections together has the potential to convey a more complete, majestic sound. Listening to a good orchestra consisting of strings, brass, and percussion feels like more than just putting three pieces of a puzzle together. Rather, a brand-new sound can be heard, defying such an elementary explanation. The glistening sound of the strings, the bombastic voice of the brass, and the permeating presence of the percussion all interfere with one another, yet somehow they

produce something that rises above the sum of its parts. What connects these seemingly disjoint sounds together in a cohesive, beautiful manner? The composition.

The composition provides the story to be told, as well as the structure to tell it with. Indeed, the story is what engenders the structure. The composition places each section of the band in its proper place, allowing them to interact in a way that elevates the story. The composition ensures that every section serves a purpose, while highlighting what makes each section valuable on its own merit. Without the composition, the resulting noise is better called “chaos” than “music.”<sup>62</sup>

The Bible can be viewed in a similar way. Prophecy, wisdom, and hymns are like the different sections of an orchestral band. They each have unique characteristics that define their “sound,” but they all come together by way of the composition, the narrative. This is why Ricoeur refers to the “biblical polyphony;” he is referring to the multiple sounds of the Bible produced by the different genres. But to him, it is insufficient to consider them exclusively; one must harmonize them in a way that conveys a singular message. Using a biblical hermeneutic that treats narrative as the central axis of interpretation, around which all other modes of discourse revolve, accomplishes this. With this hermeneutical framework in mind, we can address how the different genres interact with one another, as well as how the characteristics of each appear in the other.

Wisdom seeks to explain. The advice of wisdom stems from its claim to universal knowledge. In other words, *ethos* comes from *cosmos*. This desire to explain means wisdom pulls in a direction of grasping a deep coherence of the world and its many contours.

However, any attempt at an ultimate closure proves premature, as demonstrated in literature

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<sup>62</sup> One can sometimes get a glimpse of this chaos before the actual live orchestral show starts, when every musician is getting his or her warmups done all at once.



like Ecclesiastes. Reliance on the maxims of tradition can lead one astray, resulting in the need for a prophetic voice. This prophetic voice can clarify or refine wisdom, or even produce new wisdom. For instance, Ezekiel's encounter with the dry bones reinforces the view that God has the final say, despite repeated failure. A similar interaction occurs between prophecy and the hymns. One purpose of hymnic discourse is to celebrate the glory of God as a community. Therefore, the hymns pull in a direction of reinforcing the milestones and traditions of the past because participating in a communal hymn brings the victories of the past to the present. Once again, this tradition must be disrupted by the voice of the prophet. However, the prophet also provides new material to base the hymns of praise and thanksgiving on. Thus, the narrative progresses and is celebrated.

It is important to understand that the Proverbs do not have the same authority as the prophets because God is not directly speaking through the sages. This does not mean the sage's wisdom is not valuable. On the contrary, without the maxims of the Proverbs, the events of the everyday would lose their coherence, and the sense of time would be polarized between the past and the future. Furthermore, as noted in Chapter 2, wisdom provides a sense of *pathos* for those limit-experiences like suffering and death that prophecy usually does not provide.

With *pathos* in mind, wisdom discourse seamlessly passes into hymnic discourse, the form of discourse in which God is directly spoken to. Note Job's words to God go from praise to supplication, and finally back to praise. Wisdom's ultimate expression is not one of propositions and maxims, but rather one of submission and deference to the ultimate authority. Wisdom's most profound expression is a hymnic expression. On the other hand, many of the Psalms are lamentations to God about supposedly unfulfilled promises and the

nonsense of reality. David laments the prosperity of the wicked because it defies his understanding of reality (as depicted in the Proverbs, for instance). Those who walk in the way of the Lord are supposed to prosper, and those who do not are supposed to suffer, not the other way around. Yet, as in Job, David comes to a similar conclusion: the Lord is my shepherd. So we see once again these two genres crisscrossing, elevating the biblical polyphony.

Now having reaffirmed narrative as the central axis of interpretation and clarified the interactions of the biblical polyphony, it is time to transition to Part 2. In order to bridge the gap from Part 1 to Part 2, a connection must be established between a hermeneutic of the Bible itself and a hermeneutic of the self. The subject of inspiration, the manner in which God interacted with the authors of Scripture to produce it, bridges this gap quite nicely. This is because a proper conception of inspiration will help form a better conception of revelation. A better conception of revelation, in turn, will give the believer a better conception of the self. After all, revelation, by definition, is how God reveals himself to us, so it would behoove us to better understand that, assuming God created us for a purpose.

This thesis contends that inspiration is best understood as being contingent on the mode of biblical discourse, perhaps even defined by it. In the case of prophetic discourse, for example, God necessarily speaks through the prophet, so it follows that whatever prophecy is written is “dictated” by God. In the case of hymnic discourse, however, this conception of inspiration falls apart very easily. This is because hymnic discourse, by its very nature, is a discourse between the writer and God. Therefore, envisioning David, for example, lamenting to God in Psalms 22 using exactly the words that God told him to say undermines the significance of the lament. How could David’s words to God have any real

meaning if David did not conceive of them himself? A better conception of inspiration, in this case, conceives David as being genuinely frustrated with God, with his words guided by the Holy Spirit in such a way that it leads David to the proper conclusion, resulting in an authentic piece of writing that is still worthy of being enshrined as the Word of God.

Wisdom discourse, similarly, is not best understood as being dictated by God's literal voice. As noted above, the authority of the sage is categorically different from that of the prophet. They do not both claim to speak *for* God. Claiming the words of the sage have the same assurance as the words of the prophet leads to confusion when the words of the sage do not come to pass. For example, "train up a child in the way that he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" is not a promise, as many distraught parents can attest. Inspiration, in this case, is better understood as the writer prayerfully reflecting on the ways of God and coming to conclusions himself.

In summary, inspiration, in these three modes of discourse, is better conceived as the direct speaking of God through a vessel in the case of prophetic discourse, the response of the Holy Spirit in conversation in the case of hymnic discourse, and the source of prayerful reflection in the case of wisdom discourse. The wonderful thing about these conceptions of inspiration is that they provide a more holistic account of revelation. Thus, the believer can find God in a multiplicity of settings. The overemphasis on the prophetic mode of discourse that molds the conception of God leaning over the author's shoulder, directly telling him what to write, leads to an unbalanced perspective of how God reveals Himself to His people. Believers paralyzed by indecision, constantly awaiting the next "message from God," are suffering from this unbalanced perspective. If God hasn't directly spoken, or revealed his plan in some obvious way, then for all intents and purposes, God isn't really

there. For those whose self-worth and direction depend on their understanding of God, this can be frustrating and demoralizing.

There is a better way to understand God and oneself. Just as one interprets the Bible differently depending on the mode of discourse, so too can one interpret the self depending on the mode of discourse. Similarly, just as narrative underpins the biblical polyphony, providing the thread that weaves it all together, so too the narrative of the self provides the context for all self-discoveries. Part 2 is about this understanding of the self, and how the lessons learned from Part 1 contribute.

## PART TWO

## Chapter 4: Narrative and Prophecy

### *Disruption of the Self*

In the Bible, prophecy serves as a means for God to communicate directly to His people. There were prophets, such as Jeremiah, Isaiah, Samuel, and so forth, who “rocked the boat,” so to speak, in order to grab Israel’s attention and remind them that there is a goal to reach. In the Christian’s life, there are people who fill a similar role. Most notably, the pastor of a Christian church serves as that “voice of God” that keeps the people on the straight and narrow path. He or she is like the captain of a ship. The congregation is the crew, and there is a destination in mind. When that destination is forgotten, or when the crew loses its vigilance, the captain should be there to revitalize the crew and stir a conviction for the original purpose. There is often a “tradition” that settles in any given congregation, and a pastor (or preacher) that is properly speaking for God will know when comfort in a tradition has morphed into a dangerous complacency that is holding the people back. Perfection will not be reached on this earth; there is always a higher mountain to climb on the way to heaven. Christians viewing their lives as a narrative will understand how the prophets of old disrupted the narrative by the voice of God is not so different from how their pastors and preachers constantly convict the congregation to continue.

To establish some support for this concept, several sources attest to the link between the preachers of today with the prophets of the past. For one, Paul Ricoeur sees the modern preacher’s duty as to be the mouthpiece of Christ’s teachings. In one essay, he claims, “We can speak of the seed of a narrative in the sense that the presupposition of all Christian preaching is the continuity and identity of the earthly Jesus and the Christ who speaks through the tongues of

the prophets in the community of faith.”<sup>63</sup> In other words, the presupposition of all Christian preaching is that Christ speaks through them as leaders of the church. Since Christ is God manifest in the flesh, it follows that God speaks through the preachers of the church, which is exactly the role of the prophet.

Mark Finney constructed a thesis that pertains to the discussion of prophecy and narrative. The major thrust of Finney’s thesis is how to develop a biblical homiletic based on the narrative of the Bible, and he refers repeatedly to the role of the prophet in order to fulfill that goal. Finney’s thesis is an excellent source of counsel on how to employ narrative in modern-day preaching. As for a direct tie to prophecy, Finney applies a concept constructed by Walter Brueggemann called “prophetic imagination.” Prophetic imagination, essentially, is a prophet’s aptitude for constructing or describing realities that do not stem from the real world.<sup>64</sup> It is a tool for prophets to confront whatever challenges the tradition of their time is facing. For example, as Finney explains, “The prophetic imagination is what compelled the Hebrew prophets to continually challenge the misguided paradigms of the dominant power structures in Israel.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, this specifies Ricoeur’s description of prophecy as a disruption of tradition; it specifies what is being disrupted. In Finney’s view, the dominant power structures of Israel perpetuated a misguided narrative that allowed the people to become complacent in their sin, and the prophets were meant to combat that. In general, the narratives formulated by the dominant power structures of a society engender the ideals and values of said society, thus, in Israel’s case, tilting the value structure of Israel away from scripture’s commandments.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, “From Proclamation to Narrative,” *The Journal of Religion* 64, no. 4 (1984): 501-12, 501.

<sup>64</sup> Brueggemann, Walter, “The Practice of Prophetic Imagination,” (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 25.

<sup>65</sup> Finney, Mark D, “Narrative, Preaching, and Formation,” (PhD diss, Fuller Theological Seminary, Center for Advanced Theological Study, Ann Arbor, 2017), 73.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Finney employs this “prophetic imagination” in the modern day by advising preachers to cultivate one with respect to both the narrative of the church and the narrative of the gospel. For example, a church that has submitted to the biblical view of God may be inclined to view their experience as being a narrative where God is the author, thus establishing an effective image of the proper relationship between Creator and created. In addition, the story of Jesus’ sacrifice can represent a powerful allegory for the believer’s life, since the believer is also, in a sense, a child of God.<sup>67</sup> Whatever the specific case, the task of the preacher is to use the prophetic imagination to construct a narrative for the audience to identify with.

Finney also establishes an important point that sets the backdrop for how people interpret their own lives, that is, in terms of narrative. “*Creating narratives is a primary way that humans make meaning from their experiences and thereby render a coherent portrait of reality.*” Paul Ricoeur establishes this is largely in response to the challenges presented by living in a timebound existence.”<sup>68</sup> Since people already see their lives as individual narratives, people can more easily identify themselves as being part of a larger narrative. With this in mind, the larger relevance of preaching to prophecy and narrative becomes much clearer. People frame their lives in terms of a narrative, so the act of a sermon, which is essentially tasked with challenging that narrative, should feel like a sort of confrontation between narratives. James K. A. Smith describes a “Storytelling Church” as one where “Each week the worshipping community is confronted by the narrative of a God who makes a covenant with his people, who is faithful to his promises, and who acts in history to effect a relationship with his people.”<sup>69</sup> This aligns with

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<sup>67</sup> “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.” – Romans 12:1 (NKJV) What better example of a preacher than Paul the apostle?

<sup>68</sup> Finney, Mark, “Narrative, Preaching, and Formation,” 73. (italics added)

<sup>69</sup> Smith, K. A. James, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), 76.



the prophet's confrontation of the people's tradition. Since the preacher puts on the role of the prophet, which speaks with the voice of God, should there be any conflict that arises in this confrontation of narratives, the duty of the saint is to reconcile the conflict.

For an example of how modern-day prophetic discourse does not necessarily have to manifest in the form of a preacher standing in front of a pulpit, we can look to Søren Kierkegaard, the famed philosopher. Iben Damgaard discusses the possibility of Søren Kierkegaard playing the role of the prophet in his work "What Christ Judges of Official Christianity." Damgaard's characterization of the prophet is as follows, "It is characteristic for the figure of the prophet to appear as an individual in critical confrontation with the religious ideas and practices of his contemporaries. The prophet is summoned by God to challenge his contemporaries and call on them to turn around and change their ways of life."<sup>70</sup> Damgaard continues, claiming that Kierkegaard, using several passages of the gospels that record Jesus' rebukes of the Pharisees, "...parallels the hypocrisy of the biblical scribes and Pharisees that Christ opposes in the gospel text with the hypocrisy of the representatives of the nineteenth century Danish church."<sup>71</sup> Kierkegaard is employing many of the functions of a biblical prophet in his writings. In like manner of the prophet that Ricoeur describes, Kierkegaard is disrupting the tradition of what Christianity meant to the people of his time, exposing their flaws and weaknesses. He even invokes a thought experiment of Jesus entering a church of the day, forcing the audience to reflect on Christianity both in terms of its communal and personal functions. Damgaard writes, "He notes that if the reader [of Kierkegaard] knows Christianity only from 'the Sunday babble' in church, where Christ has been trivialized into a 'sentimental figure, pure Mr.

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<sup>70</sup> Damgaard, Iben, 2018, "Through hermeneutics of suspicion to a rediscovery of faith." *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology*, 72:2, 198-216, DOI: [10.1080/0039338X.2018.1451774](https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2018.1451774), 208.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 207.

Goodman’, then he suspects that the reader will be shocked. She will find Kierkegaard’s representation of Christ ‘the most atrocious blasphemy’.”<sup>72</sup> Interestingly, Kierkegaard emphatically denied that he was putting on the role of the prophet, claiming instead to be an outsider to the Christianity of the time.<sup>73</sup> Ironically, this further cemented his role as a prophet being to disrupt the traditional narrative and call the audience to change course, lest dire consequences be faced. Ricoeur apparently, according to Damgaard, did not fit Kierkegaard in with the modern prophetic preacher.<sup>74</sup> However, that does not exclude the possibility of Kierkegaard fulfilling the role of a prophet in modern times.

The broader point is that prophetic discourse, that is, the voice of God speaking through someone (or something) else, need not take one specific form in order to speak to someone’s heart. The preacher may be the most common form of discourse the believer contends with, but there are other ways this type of clash can manifest. Whenever one’s conception of her narrative is challenged, there is a confrontation between narratives that takes place in the person’s mind. This confrontation must find resolution, either by submitting to the challenge, or remaining steadfast on the current path. The believer seeking the voice of God from one specific mouth may be looking in the wrong place, while the non-believer who is not seeking the “voice of God,” per se, may feel its weight as a ton of bricks when disaster strikes. In either case, a chasm is formed between what one believed to be secure and what would actually provide security. This chasm may require a Kierkegaardian “leap of faith” to traverse, but such is the choice of any who views her life as a narrative.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 208.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 210.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 204.

## Chapter 5: Narrative and Wisdom

### *The Hermeneutic Cycle of the Self*

Wisdom discourse, in a sense, has the most straightforward correspondence to a hermeneutic of the self since, presumably, the motivation to learn wisdom comes from the motivation to gain a better understanding of the world and of the self. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, should the reader be willing and open to the symbolic-textual world that the wisdom discourse creates, the reader will find and obtain an interpretation that can be transformed into deeper understanding or meaningful action. Especially in limit cases such as suffering and death, which many grapple with when coming to terms with reality, wisdom can aid the reader's sense of self greatly. However, if one considers the question *why* wisdom is so effective for guiding an interpretation of the self, the role of narrative becomes key. Furthermore, the insights of Ricoeur, with regard to metaphor and narrative, will prove just as useful for interpreting the self as they are for interpreting the text.

First, recall a concept that was introduced in Chapter 4: a person interprets her life as a narrative. Birth is the beginning of the story, death is the end (debatable), and everything in between is the middle. There are characters, settings, events, emotions, and they are all weaved together by a plot, becoming a narrative. What links everything together is the person whose life is narrativized. Thus, she can form a natural connection between another narrative and her own. The "creative imagination" employed for the purpose of interpreting a textual world in terms of a narrative, like when interpreting a Proverb, is the same creative imagination used when framing one's life as a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. This is why the application of a proverb even makes sense in the first place; the reader imagines herself as "acting out" the

proverb, or at the very least, implementing the proverb into a schema of the world that will eventually manifest into action.

The parables, a form of wisdom discourse hitherto unmentioned, are an excellent example because the meaning of the parable necessarily conveys a message for the reader to incorporate into her life somehow. Ricoeur sums this up well, “the parable has a ‘point,’ one signified by the plot itself, and which may be easily converted into a proverb (just as a proverb may become the ‘point’ of a parable if the proverb is given a plot).”<sup>75</sup> Wisdom is, in a manner of speaking, wrapped up in a narrative in the form of a parable, and then unwrapped in a narrative in the form of our lives. Vanhoozer also comments on the interpretation of parables, mostly in elaboration of Ricoeur’s account. According to Vanhoozer, Ricoeur thought the best way to interpret the parables was as “metaphorical narratives.” The ordinariness of the stories in tandem with the extraordinary conclusions evokes a sense of “extravagance” that Ricoeur says “bursts a literal reading.” That is, in Vanhoozer’s words, “...the parables are not about what happens in first-century Palestine but rather about ‘limit’ or religious human experience, for instance, an invitation without limit, a forgiveness without limit.” These two experiences specifically refer to the parables of the host looking for guests in the streets and the father providing a feast for his prodigal son, respectively.

Thus, the world composed by the parable manifests not only as a story in the mind of the reader, but also eventually as a story in the actual life of the reader. According to Ricoeur, “The referent, we could say, of the parable...is human experience, conceived as the experience of the whole man and of all men...”<sup>76</sup> This is crucial to Ricoeur’s hermeneutical theory, even in non-theological hermeneutical domains. This is how we leap from simply interpreting the Bible to

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<sup>75</sup> Ricoeur, “Naming God,” 174.

<sup>76</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Semeia*, 4 (1975), 27-148, 34.

interpreting the self. His core argument is that all interpretation is self-interpretation, and this need not apply only to texts. The following Ricoeur quote is lengthy, but it encapsulates his thought well:

The purpose of all interpretation is to conquer a remoteness, a distance between the past cultural epoch to which the text belongs and the interpreter himself. By overcoming this distance, by making himself contemporary with the text, the exegete can appropriate its meaning to himself...It is thus the growth of his own understanding of himself that he pursues through his understanding of the other. Every hermeneutics is thus, explicitly or implicitly, self-understanding by means of understanding others.<sup>77</sup>

This understanding of interpretation informs the task of wisdom. Wisdom seeks to explain and understand, but what does it mean to live wisely? To put it succinctly, living wisely means to live the hermeneutical circle. Recall from Chapter 2 the cyclical relationship wisdom discourse has with narrative, i.e., wisdom begets narrative while narrative begets wisdom. The same process occurs in one's life. One's life is a walking narrative, and that narrative will encounter other narratives, whether it be through a text, a relationship, an event, or even just a conversation.<sup>78</sup> Just as biblical wisdom discourse opens up a world of possibility for the reader to inhabit, having a conversation with a friend opens up a world of possibility that one can temporarily inhabit. Likewise, just as interacting with the world of the biblical text impresses upon the reader a call to action, so too a conversation invites the conversationalists to rethink their ways of life. This way of thinking about wisdom also coincides with the conventional

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<sup>77</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 16-17.

<sup>78</sup> I am aware that this sentence wields the word "narrative" with imprecision. Strictly speaking, a narrative is a form of discourse that is spoken from a third person, so describing one's life as a narrative only makes sense in recollection or reminiscence. However, if the reader will bear with me, I think the point will still get across.

understanding of wisdom. When thinking of a wise person, one may call to mind someone who constantly draws on past experiences to better inform his or her decisions. Furthermore, the sage is usually not hesitant to pass this accumulated knowledge and experience down to those with eager ears. The sage is constantly aware of the living hermeneutical circle, and he or she actively plays every part: author, text, and audience. Since the sage is always seeking to understand others in order to better understand himself, there is a component of openness that is integral to the sage's character.

Interestingly, the task of living wisely is a constant one since the task of interpretation never ends. This leads us to consider more deeply the temporal quality of wisdom discourse. The reliable Fodor can help illuminate Ricoeur's understanding of this unique characteristic of biblical wisdom, as he says, "Although wisdom is not interested in history in the way that historical narrative is, it is nevertheless interested in time."<sup>79</sup> Fodor (along with Vanhoozer) deems the term "immemorial" as the most suitable for describing its temporal quality.<sup>80</sup> "Timeless" might be an alternatively suitable word. Indeed, the Proverbs have an "out-of-time" quality that seems to surpass any notion of memory or history. The story of Job also has a similar feeling (at least in my opinion). In any case, Fodor notes, "just as the rich resources of wisdom can only be displayed within the context of narrative, so too the significance of the immemorial can only come to light in relation with the everyday. Indeed, the proverbs uniquely conjoin the everyday and the immemorial."<sup>81</sup> This interesting juxtaposition is reflected in the life of one seeking wisdom. On one hand, the sage lives the way she does because of the accumulated knowledge she has acquired over time and the thought she has given to the future. On the other

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<sup>79</sup> Fodor, James, *Christian Hermeneutics*, 232.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 233 and Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 203.

<sup>81</sup> Fodor, James, *Christian Hermeneutics*, 233.

hand, she does not exactly live as if the whole of human history leads up to every moment; that is, she knows how to “live in the moment.” This back-and-forth between the realms of “reflection” and “action” greatly concerned the existentialist philosophers like Kierkegaard and Sartre,<sup>82</sup> and it has to do with this interaction between the two extremes of time, the everyday and the timeless, that the wisdom discourse encompasses. Fodor again contributes nicely to this discussion, “Everyday time, in other words, does not recount itself precisely because it is the time of *every* day. And yet, it is through the everyday that wisdom makes the immemorial appear; that is, what is ageless and has always subsisted.”<sup>83</sup>

If I may be so bold, I would like to interject another temporal descriptor into the discussion for the purpose of further contemplation: the “instant.” One may view the opposite of immemorial as the everyday, but in my opinion, that end of the spectrum belongs to the instant. The everyday carries a connotation of normalcy and uneventfulness, but this and the immemorial fail to account for limit-situations such as those found in the book of Job. Wisdom not only addresses the harmony between the immemorial and the everyday, but also the clash between the immemorial and the instant. The knowledge of the immemorial, the understanding of the universe, etc., are all insufficient to resolve the suffering or the decision of the moment. No matter what reflection, conversation, or study one has undergone, one will always find oneself back in the realm of action, the time of the instant. It is here where sensations are experienced and decisions are made. Hence, we have the preacher’s call to live in the moment in Ecclesiastes, as well as the cries of agony heard in Job.

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<sup>82</sup> For instance, see Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Present Age: On The Death of Rebellion*, trans. Alexander Du (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2010) and Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (United States: New Directions, 2013).

<sup>83</sup> Fodor, James, *Christian Hermeneutics*, 233.

After reading Chapter 4, one may understandably wonder why God has been seldom mentioned in this chapter, especially in a work on the Bible. However, this actually illustrates another key aspect of wisdom discourse that can also apply to the life of the believer. As wisdom literature demonstrates, God does not always make His presence known in an ostensive way that reassures the believer. Oftentimes God is silent; the decision, or the experience, is left up to us. As noted in the Interlude, God reveals Himself differently in different modes of discourse, and that conception of revelation applies to personal life as well. When God is not responding, that is when the believer will find out whether she truly believes or not. Truly understanding the world of the text that the Bible proposes sufficiently informs the believer of how to understand the world around her, and therefore, how to live in it.



## Chapter 6: Narrative and Hymns

### *Community and the Self*

The essence of hymnic discourse is communication with God. In contrast to the preceding modes of discourse, wherein God speaks through someone in prophetic discourse and God is either in the background or absent in wisdom discourse, hymnic discourse occupies the unique role wherein the believer speaks to God. Due to this vague definition, in a practical sense, hymnic discourse can take several forms, some of which will be discussed below. For instance, the act of prayer constitutes a major mode of hymnic discourse; it is the most direct form of communication with God that believers have. On the other hand, the practice of congregational praise and worship constitutes another major mode of hymnic discourse; the congregation acts as a communal body of believers in communication with the divine. This practice is so integral to the Christian experience that it has its own term, liturgy, and there is a whole host of literature concerning just that. When viewed with a narrative lens, inspired by the works of Ricoeur, these various facets of hymnic discourse conjoin harmoniously, and the believer is able to see his or her life in a joyful, communal context where God is always listening to His people.

First, let us address hymnic discourse on the individual level. Once again, the basis of the arguments in this chapter is the assumption that people view their lives in terms of a narrative. To believe that one's life can be interpreted this way leads to the question of what the purpose of the narrative is. Without delving too deeply into existential philosophical territory, it is safe to assume that a believer would find such purpose externally. In other words, someone else, namely God, bestows that purpose.

Recall Ricoeur's classification of hymnic discourse into praise, supplication, and thanksgiving.<sup>84</sup> Praise keeps the believer in her place by ensuring that God is the exalted one. There is no one higher than Him, and He created us, so He is the author of our story. This is the continual sacrifice of autonomy that Christians must make in order to be called a disciple of Christ, since we have our desires and a particular way we may want our narratives to play out. C.S. Lewis describes this conflict well in his famed work *Mere Christianity*, describing humans as "obstinate toy soldiers" who want to stay toy soldiers instead of allowing their creator to transform them into flesh. He elaborates, "The natural life in each of us is something self-centred [sic], something that wants to be petted and admired, to take advantage of other lives, to exploit the whole universe. And especially it wants to be left to itself..."<sup>85</sup> To combat this egocentrism, the purpose of praise, on a personal level, is to keep the believer's narrative oriented in the same direction as the creator.<sup>86</sup>

However, the Christian God is not one that will ignore the earnest cries of His people. Supplication is how one establishes that closeness of relationship that God desires with His children. When the path is lost, or the surroundings become too dark, a cry of supplication will be heard by God, and somehow, He will respond. Many of the Psalms of David were written in times of obscurity and despondency; the purpose of his suffering was not clear at all. What saw him through were his supplications to the author of his narrative. He asked, and he received.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 14.

<sup>85</sup> Lewis, C.S., *Mere Christianity*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 178.

<sup>86</sup> As a side note, this makes for an interesting case against the atheistic existentialist way of life. What is there to communicate with for the source of purpose, if not a creator? What can the unbeliever call on as a source of inspiration, or thank for the pleasures of life? Thanking oneself does not seem to cut it, and neither does thanking some abstract conception of "humanity" or "freedom". Indeed, hymnic discourse is difficult to incorporate into a hermeneutic of the self without some notion of the divine.

<sup>87</sup> It is also worth noting how David's lamentations are almost always bracketed with praise. The proper orientation of one's narrative axis always accompanies the supplication of the earnest believer. Hence, Jesus' famous words "Ask and ye shall receive..." can be correctly interpreted and applied.

Ricoeur emphasizes the importance of supplication, “And without the supplications in the psalms concerning suffering, would the plaint of the righteous also find the path to invocation, even if it must lead to contestation and recrimination? Through supplication, the righteous man’s protestations of innocence have as their opposite a Thou who may respond to his lamentation.”<sup>88</sup> In other words, even the negative, desperate emotions are necessary when communicating with God. God is not a stoic brick wall that one desperately pounds on to no avail; He is an understanding Father that wants to address the concerns of His children, even though the Father knows what is best.

Finally, no matter how our narratives play out, there is always room for thanksgiving. Every Christian has a story of what God has delivered them from or kept them out of, and expressing that gratitude keeps our lives in proper perspective. The power of the testimony comes from how it solidifies the fact that one’s narrative has an upward trajectory, reinforcing one’s faith in the author of the narrative. Ricoeur adds, “In fact, celebration elevates the story and turns it into an invocation.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, giving thanks has a direct impact on the narrative itself because it casts the narrative in a positive light. Sometimes, it even inspires the creation of the narrative in the first place. As Fodor suggests, “For just as recounting the ancient Deuteronomic creed constitutes in itself one aspect of celebration, so too singing songs of praise inescapably entails the recitation of salvation history. Indeed, without a heart that sings the glory of God, perhaps we would not even have the creation story, and certainly not the deliverance story of the Exodus.”<sup>90</sup> Perhaps this is why testimonials are so effective as a means of communicating one’s faith in God, and why they are so celebrated in a congregation.

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<sup>88</sup> Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” 14.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Fodor, James. *Christian Hermeneutics*, 233.

The consideration of testimonials provides a nice transition to a discussion of hymnic discourse in a communal setting. This is where the hymn finds its most joyous, encouraging expression; after all, humans are notoriously social creatures, and there is no shortage of biblical support on the value of a community for fostering a proper Christian faith. Since Ricoeur's thoughts are (unfortunately) sparse on this particular aspect, we can avail ourselves of the insights of second-hand scholars to inform this discussion.

Expanding on Ricoeur's essays concerning how the hymnic discourse of the Bible creates a world of the text that a reader interprets from, Claire Jones fills in what she perceives to be a gap in Ricoeur's discussion, namely, the act of participating in Christian worship and the communal implications of Ricoeur's approach to interpreting the hymns. Speaking of liturgical practices like the Lord's Prayer and hymns based on the psalms, Jones says,

"In these moments, the congregation not only interprets, but recites the text. By assuming it, internalising it, and declaring it, the congregation allows the liturgical text to become their ownmost expression of faith. More than merely deciding on commitment to a text, the speakers of the liturgy collapse the distinction between call and listener, themselves speaking (reciting) what they have heard as if it were their own."<sup>91</sup>

Ricoeur does comment on the liturgical setting in his work *Figuring the Sacred*, specifically with regards to how they recount the narrative that brought the community to the present. He writes, "The reenactment of the narratives in the cultic situation and their recounting through the psalms of praise, of lamentation, and of penitence complete the complex intertwining between narrative and nonnarrative modes of discourse. The whole range of modes can thus be seen as distributed

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<sup>91</sup> Jones, Claire Taylor. "Christian Listening and The Ethical Community of Liturgical Text," *Literature and Theology*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2013, pp. 227–239, 237.

between the two poles of storytelling and praising.”<sup>92</sup> In other words, Ricoeur sees the liturgical expression of faith as representative of the ultimate biblical polarity, narrative and hymn. Thus, Ricoeur sees the congregation’s expression of faith as evidence for the proper biblical hermeneutic.

The communal recitation of texts in the form of hymn also brings to mind important considerations of time, noted by Vanhoozer and Fodor. Vanhoozer writes, “The time of the Psalms is the time of today and of all times. It is the time of prayer and recitation, when the individual or the whole community recapitulates the specific temporalities of the narratives, the law and the prophets.”<sup>93</sup> Fodor puts it another way, “That is, hymns and psalms are always looking for a new festive ‘now’ where their initial illocutionary forces can be reactualized. Hymnic time is the time of actualization—today and at all times—where the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ uttered in the psalm signify empty places to be occupied by anyone who can in worship realize the event anew.”<sup>94</sup> In other words, when the congregation sings a familiar Psalm, it is reviving the spirit of the narrative established by that Psalm all those years ago, and the congregation is choosing to inhabit that spirit in the present. Thus, the time of the hymn is both that of the present and that of eternity; the hymn always has the potential to be revitalized.<sup>95</sup>

Jones also emphasizes the role liturgy has in reinforcing the community of a church, elaborating on the sensorial feelings a Christian worshipper undergoes, but also produces, when reciting a text or singing or praying along with the congregation, addressing yet another gap in

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<sup>92</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*. (United States: Fortress Press, 1995), 245.

<sup>93</sup> Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 204.

<sup>94</sup> Fodor, James. *Christian Hermeneutics*, 233-4.

<sup>95</sup> Note that, once again, a parallel can be drawn between the act of interpretation and conduct of the believer. Just as Ricoeur talks of the process of “refiguration”, wherein a reader is changed as a result of temporarily inhabiting the symbolic-textual world opened up by the text, the process of “revitalization” of a hymn involves a similar process of making the Psalm one’s own.

Ricoeur's work.<sup>96</sup> She describes instances of a believer "standing, sitting, kneeling, singing, and reciting" as all being examples of how a believer contributes to the liturgical setting that moves them. The preparation beforehand by, for instance, the music team, also contributes to this atmosphere. She says, "This situation of communal presence and shared ritual performance also initiates a heightened mode of affectedness by the other person. The relationship and responsibility to other people is foregrounded by the immediate physical presence of other performing bodies."<sup>97</sup> Once again, we see the theme of communication between parties, the principal distinction of hymnic discourse, make its appearance in the liturgical setting. In the end, the shared experience of worship by the community solidifies the ethical commitment that a proper hermeneutic of the Bible based on narrative demands. When people unite under one purpose, or one narrative, that commitment is much easier to maintain.

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<sup>96</sup> Jones, Claire, "Christian Listening," 237. To be fair, she is drawing on Ricoeur's notion of passivity developed in *Oneself as Another*, but the implications for sensorial experience are most definitely Jones' own contribution.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 238.

## Conclusion

Let us retrace the project of this thesis. Informed by the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, the objective was to construct a hermeneutic of the Bible centered on the axis of narrative. The three main genres discussed—prophecy, wisdom, and hymns—can be seen as genres that revolve around the axis of narrative. Perhaps an apt metaphor would be narrative as the star around which the planets “prophecy”, “wisdom”, and “hymn” revolve. The “gravity” of narrative pulls all the biblical genres in its direction, but the “planets” have gravities in their own right that keep them in from being completely sucked in. The reader is like the pilot of a spaceship in this literary solar system. She travels from genre to genre, discovering the specificities and sceneries of each, but she is always traveling along the pull of the central narrative. Without that pull, the whole system would be thrown into disarray. The pull of narrative is not always obvious in some genres (some stray further from it than others), but if the reader simply looks in its direction, she can see its light emanating throughout the system.

In the genre of prophecy, the theme of the disruption of tradition emerges. Whether in the form of a prophet foretelling the doom of the people (Chapter 1), or in the form of a modern-day preacher convicting the hearts of his saints (Chapter 4), the prophetic genre demarcates a boundary between where the hearers are and where they need to be. These two narratives clash. The voice of God manifests most directly in this form of discourse since the prophet literally speaks for God in a sort of double first-person. However, God does not always reveal himself in this manner, so for the sake of a more holistic hermeneutic, the reader should not dwell on it.

In the genre of wisdom, a symbiotic relationship with narrative emerges, although sometimes it appears furthest from the main thread of the narrative. Propositional wisdom,

although often derived from narrative or informing narrative, is not its most profound form. Instead, wisdom literature finds its most profound expression when it is providing a vessel of expression for limit-experiences like suffering, guilt, and death (Chapter 2). In addition, the temporal quality of wisdom allows it to be lived out in the everyday, granting the believer a sense of congruence and relationship with God that can be experienced even in the darkest moments (Chapter 5). The voice of God often feels the most distant in this form of discourse, but wisdom also has the most relevance to the believer's everyday experience.

In the genre of hymns, the theme of communication with God emerges. In fact, this is the definition of hymnic discourse, and in Ricoeur's account, it is expressed in the forms of praise, supplication, and thanksgiving. In the Psalms, the writers express their praises and concerns to God, and the narrative context of their lyrics illuminates their meaning (Chapter 3). Furthermore, the hymns find their greatest expression in the community, whether among the Israelites who are celebrating their deliverance from captivity in Egypt, or among the modern-day church congregation celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Chapter 6). The believer can learn to form a more personal relationship with God by communicating with Him directly, both individually and within a community.

Much has been said about narrative, but a central question remains: What *is* the biblical narrative? At its core, it is a story about God and humanity. God created the world that humans inhabit, and the Bible unfolds the history of God interacting with His creation. God created the world with an order in mind, but He gave humans the capacity to choose whether to follow that order or not. Humanity, granted with the gift (curse?) of autonomy, has since struggled with the choice to pursue its own desires or to submit to the order that God desires. This tendency to stray



from God's way is called sin, and it has both mortal and eternal consequences.<sup>98</sup> These consequences are made apparent in the various genres. However, God loves humanity, and His will is that none should perish, but that all should come to repentance. In order to both fulfill His demands of justice and grant mercy to those who have gone astray, He laid down His life in the form of the Son, Jesus Christ, God-become-flesh. Christ served as the substitution for humanity, paying the penalty of sin so that humans would not have to. This is the ultimate act of grace that humans can choose to accept before the final days come to pass.

It is appropriate that the major work of Paul Ricoeur that permeates this thesis is "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation", for if there was one main takeaway I would hope the reader would gather from this thesis, it would be that revelation comes in many forms. God does not often reveal Himself in a cataclysmic event with a voice that shatters the eardrums and sweeps the feet. God can show up in the text of a profound piece of literature, in the camaraderie of a joyful festival, or even in the normalcy of a casual conversation. The diversity of the forms of discourse in the Bible reinforce the idea that no two relationships with God will look the same. On the other hand, the unity of the forms of discourse in a central narrative reinforce the idea that every relationship with God has the same thread that weaves us all together. To recall the idea of conversation in the introduction, perhaps the proliferation of interpretations based on different perspectives is not something that should be shunned, but should rather be embraced and engaged. Let us continue the conversation, and perhaps one day we can all invoke the name of our Creator in a hymn that celebrates our deliverance from the captivity of our sinful nature.

To unity in diversity.

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<sup>98</sup> "For the wages of sin is death..." Romans 6:23 (KJV)

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