

The Bible in 5 Acts

Eugene Peterson writes, *“To understand the Bible you must get to know its characters, understand its setting, and follow its plot. The climax and ultimate resolution will make sense only if you’ve followed the earlier parts as a story. Learn to feel the tension and wrestle with its major conflict.”*

NT Wright suggests this outline:

Let me offer you a possible model, which is not in fact simply an illustration but actually corresponds, as I shall argue, to some important features of the biblical story, which is that which God has given to his people as the means of his exercising his authority. Suppose there exists a Shakespeare play whose fifth act had been lost. The first four acts provide, let us suppose, such a wealth of characterization, such a crescendo of excitement within the plot, that it is generally agreed that the play ought to be staged. Nevertheless, it is felt inappropriate actually to write a fifth act once and for all: it would freeze the play into one form, and commit Shakespeare as it were to being prospectively responsible for work not in fact his own. Better, it might be felt, to give the key parts to highly trained, sensitive and experienced Shakespearian actors, who would immerse themselves in the first four acts, and in the language and culture of Shakespeare and his time, and who would then be told to work out a fifth act for themselves.

Consider the result. The first four acts, existing as they did, would be the undoubted ‘authority’ for the task in hand. That is, anyone could properly object to the new improvisation on the grounds that this or that character was now behaving inconsistently, or that this or that sub-plot or theme, adumbrated earlier, had not reached its proper resolution. This ‘authority’ of the first four acts would not consist in an implicit command that the actors should repeat the earlier parts of the play over and over again. It would consist in the fact of an as yet unfinished drama, which contained its own impetus, its own forward movement, which demanded to be concluded in the proper manner but which required of the actors a responsible entering in to the story as it stood, in order first to understand how the threads could appropriately be drawn together, and then to put that understanding into effect by speaking and acting with both innovation and consistency.

This model could and perhaps should be adapted further; it offers in fact quite a range of possibilities. Among the detailed moves available within this model is the possibility of seeing the five acts as follows: (1) Creation; (2) Fall; (3) Israel; (4) Jesus. The New Testament would then form the first scene in the fifth act, giving hints as well (Rom 8; 1 Cor 15; parts of the Apocalypse) of how the play is supposed to end. The church would then live under the ‘authority’ of the extant story, being required to offer something between an improvisation and an actual performance of the final act. Appeal could always be made to the inconsistency of what was being offered with a major theme or characterization in the earlier material. Such an appeal—and such an offering!—would of course require sensitivity of a high order to the whole nature of the story and to the ways in which it would be (of course) inappropriate simply to repeat verbatim passages from earlier sections. Such sensitivity (cashing out the model in terms of church life) is precisely what one would have expected to be required; did we ever imagine that the application of biblical authority ought to be something that could be done by a well-programmed computer?

Here is the story of the Bible as a drama in five acts:

Act 1: Creation

Key: God reveals his desire for people and provides the setting for all the action that follows.

Genesis 1: 31

Act 2: The Fall

Key: Introduces the struggle that dominates the rest of the story.

Genesis 3:23-24

Act 3: Israel

Key: This era ends tragically, with God apparently absent, the hope of promise remains.

Genesis 12:1-3

Act 4: Jesus

Key: Four centuries later, Jesus' arrival is introduced with the claim that God is keeping His promise.

Luke 3:31-33

Act 5: The New People of God

Key: God wants the victory of Jesus to spread to all nations of the world.

Acts 1:8