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**THE RETURN OF THE
KINGDOM**

A Biblical Theology of
God's Reign

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Chapter One

THE BIG PICTURE

THE BIBLE'S BOOKENDS

ALTHOUGH THE BIBLE IS a collection of books, it is remarkable that it constitutes a coherent story. In fact, there are signs of this in its various collections.¹ Even in the early church there was the idea of a plotline to the biblical story: the analogy of faith. Irenaeus spoke of how heretics would rearrange the Scriptures to suit their needs and thus create the image of a fox or dog instead of a king.² But one way to make sense of a book is to study its beginning and its end. The beginning sets the stage and introduces major themes, and the end provides closure for the story. In the Bible the first few chapters provide an introduction not only to the book but to the world, and the last two chapters provide a conclusion for both. So in a sense in this book the world and the story are intimately woven together; some scholars would say that the Bible contains the true story of the whole world.³

¹W. Edward Glenny and Darian R. Lockett, eds., *Canon Formation: Tracing the Role of Sub-collections in the Biblical Canon* (London: T&T Clark, 2023).

²Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1:8.

³Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The True Story of the Whole World: Finding Your Place in the Biblical Drama* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009).

In the first chapters there is a world that is created by a transcendent God, a world of life and beauty, wild and wonderful, and in it human beings are placed as rulers to have obedient dominion over the creation (Gen 1:26-28). They are God's image bearers in the earth. As those image bearers they are priest-like to represent God to the rest of his creation, and to represent creation to God. They have a mediatorial role.

At the end of the Bible, Jesus, the Ruler of the kings of the earth, by his salvation has constituted Christians to be a kingdom, to be priests for God, to reign on the earth (Rev 1:6; 5:10). When the new heavens and new earth finally arrive, Christians reign with Christ, and like the high priest in the ancient temple, they each have the divine name on their foreheads (Rev 22:3-5). The last chapters of the Christian Bible emphasize the beginning to show not only the repetition of the beginning but the superiority of the ending. In fact, the end is not just a return to the beginning but a greater and more wonderful new start. Several scholars have highlighted some of the correspondences between the beginning of the story in Genesis 1-3 and its culmination in Revelation 21-22.⁴ Yet, a dire situation occupies the middle and throws into relief the fundamental difference between the beginning and the end. The end not only forcefully echoes the beginning but resolves the peril in between.

Table 1.1. The biblical story from beginning to end

BEGINNING GENESIS 1-2	IN BETWEEN GENESIS 3- REVELATION 20	END REVELATION 21-22
Creation of heavens and earth (Gen 1:1)	Sin, death, oppression	New creation of heavens and earth (Rev 21:1)
Creation of seas (Gen 1:2, 9-10)	Seas are often wild and unruly (cf. Ps 93)	No sea (Rev 21:1)
No human death (Gen 1:31; 2:17)	Death pervades	No death (Rev 21:4)
No pain and tears (Gen 1:1-2:25)	Pain and tears	No pain and tears (Rev 21:4)

⁴W. J. Dumbrell, *The End of the Beginning: Revelation 21-22 and the Old Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001); Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 169.

BEGINNING GENESIS 1-2	IN BETWEEN GENESIS 3- REVELATION 20	END REVELATION 21-22
Creation of sun and moon (Gen 1:14-19)	Presence of sun and moon	No sun and moon (Rev 21:23)
All is darkness (Gen 1:2) and then darkness is restricted (Gen 1:3-5)	Darkness (restricted) and spiritual darkness pervades	No darkness (Rev 21:25)
River of life with one tree of life (Gen 2:8-14)	Tabernacle/temple (in which there is water and garden imagery)	River of life with trees of life (Rev 22:1-4)
No curse (Gen 2:17)	Curse everywhere (except tabernacle/temple)	No curse (Rev 22:3)
No sin (Gen 2:17)	Sin everywhere (except tabernacle/temple)	No sin
Divine rule (Gen 1-2)	No divine rule except in tabernacle/temple and in covenants	Divine rule (no temple)
Humans as divine image bearers and as co-rulers (Gen 1:26-28)	Humans as distorted image bearers, redeemed to image God	Humans as image bearers and as co-rulers (Rev 22:4)

There is thus a description of the old creation, the heavens and the earth at the beginning and a new creation of the heavens and earth at the end. At the beginning humans rule as the image of God, and at the end they rule as well. The exact phrase “image of God” is not used of humans in Revelation 22:4 but they are described as having the name of God on their foreheads, which means that they in effect reflect the character of God, and they reign forever.⁵ There is no sin and death at the beginning and end, no pain and tears. The rule of God over the universe, which began in Genesis, finally returns to earth through his imagers but in a more glorious manner.

But it is clear that in the major part of the book—the great “in between”—something drastic has happened—a horrific disaster. This world collapsed

⁵They also represent the high priest for he was the only one who wore the name of God on his forehead (Ex 28:36-38).

downward into a place of darkness and death. Some parts of the Bible refer to this period as an epoch of death and sin (Eccles 1–12; Rom 5:12-17). No longer the place where everything is very good (Gen 1:31), this world has become filled with violence (Gen 6:5-7, 11-12; 8:21). Human beings, once alive with the Spirit of God, are now dead in trespasses and sins, inspired by a dark Lord, who holds them captive to evil lusts and desires (Eph 2:1-3).

CREATION, FALL, RESTORATION

Many scholars use a *U* shape representing creation, fall, and restoration,⁶ or in similar terms as a grand rescue project,⁷ to diagram the message of the Bible.



Figure 1.1. The traditionally understood *U*-shaped message of the Bible

In the words of F. Buechner, the novelist, “God creates the world; the world gets lost; God seeks to restore the world to the glory for which he created it.”⁸ Thus “eschatology is like protology,” the end like the beginning.⁹ The second world, however, at the end is superior to the first creation as the second has

⁶Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 190-219.

⁷Sandra L. Richter, *The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008).

⁸Frederick Buechner, *The Clown in the Belfry: Writings on Faith and Fiction* (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 1992), 44.

⁹Jon D. Levenson, “The Temple and the World,” *The Journal of Religion* 64 (1984): 298.

no sea, no darkness, and has many trees of life as opposed to only one—and significantly, there is no tree of knowledge of good and evil. It is a grander creation—better than the original. So rather than a *U* shape, the message of the Bible should be drawn as a checkmark, with the second line higher than the first.



Figure 1.2. The superiority of the restoration in the message of the Bible

One of the crucial points in these depictions of the beginning and the end is that in the first world before the collapse, humans were made to rule the world *on God's behalf*. Thus, this was a place of divine kingship. It was the place where the kingdom of God was to be prominent. And at the end humans are ruling *with God* forever and ever.

Moreover, the “in between” exhibits clear adumbrations of the beginning and the end. For example, the tabernacle and temple, designed to be the location of God's rule, were miniature worlds in contracted space and were meant to reflect the cosmos.¹⁰ A similar universal thrust is also found in the call of Abraham. Through his seed the entire world would one day be blessed and restored. The covenants God makes with the people of Israel, the seed of Abraham, establish a holy nation and a priestly kingdom, offering a glimpse of the future for the entire world, a world again brought under God's rule.

¹⁰See, e.g., the parallelism between the creation of the world in Genesis 1:1–2:3 and the creation of the tabernacle in Exodus 25–31, 35–40. Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of The Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 102–3.

Thus, there is in the “in between” the beginning of the end, the pathway from tragedy to glorious destiny. That pathway marked through the Bible is not straight ahead but more like a long winding road that goes forward, curving off to the side, tracking backward, zigzagging in another direction before advancing again.

There is no better place to start reading a book than at the beginning. The beginning of a story often lays out the key framework for understanding the book. The key players, the key scenes, the key elements of the plot—all essential for understanding the development of the story—are found here. It is certainly the case with the Bible. Here are introduced God and his image, and an anti-God/anti-human enemy, key players in the biblical narrative. The stage on which this drama is played is the earth.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think the impact on your understanding of Scripture is by not reading it as a story, with a beginning, a middle, and an end?
2. Jesus criticized some of the religious leaders of his time for treating all the details of the law (tithing the smallest herbs, justice, mercy, and faith) all on the same level. How can an understanding of the complete Story—the big picture—help rectify this error?

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