

BIBLE, WORLDVIEW, AND THE
MISSION OF EVERY
CHRISTIAN



THE
GOSPEL of
OUR KING



BRUCE RILEY ASHFORD &
HEATH A. THOMAS

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author of *The Mission of God*

“In *The Gospel of Our King*, Ashford and Thomas introduce the Christian worldview while also attending to Christian action. In the first half of the book they take a story approach to review the grand narrative of Scripture in order to define and describe the Christian worldview. The second half of the book explicates the real-life difference that the good news of the gospel and a Christian worldview make in the day-to-day life of a believer. Fitting for those unfamiliar with the jargon of biblical and theological studies, this book will enjoy a wide readership. If you are looking for an effective survey

of the whole biblical narrative that connects directly to the gospel message and spills forth naturally into Christian living in the twenty-first century, this book is for you.”

—**Douglas S. Huffman**, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University

“*The Gospel of Our King* is a sheer delight. This is what happens when you bring together close attention to the Bible as a whole, worldview, and mission, just as they should be, with the overarching focus on the glory of God. Ashford and Thomas wear their considerable academic abilities in Bible, theology, and mission lightly in this creative, accessible, and eminently practical work. This is a book that we urgently need today, and my hope is that it will receive the wide reception it deserves. Take and read . . . and buy extra copies for friends!”

—**Craig G. Bartholomew**, director, Kirby Laing Institute
for Christian Ethics, Cambridge

“This is a wonderful book. Ashford and Thomas take us to the heart of the Christian faith: the biblical story centered in Jesus and the kingdom as the true story of the whole world, the mission of God’s people to embody that good news in all of life, and a missionary encounter with the idolatrous story of our Western culture. Their writing is engaging and the idols they challenge are timely, making this a book full of insight for faithful Christian living today. May this book find a wide readership for the sake of God’s kingdom.”

—**Michael W. Goheen**, Missional Training Center, Surge Network of
Churches–Phoenix, and Covenant Theological Seminary

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For Craig G. Bartholomew,
friend, scholar, encourager, co-conspirator
who lives *for the King*

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INTRODUCTION

The renowned poet Wendell Berry asks a very good question: What are people for?¹ His response is stimulating, but let's focus on his question for a moment. For what purpose do you and I live on this earth? His is not really a question of action first and foremost, as if he is trying to answer the question, "What do people *do*?" Rather, Berry's question is first one of purpose. Only after we understand the *purpose* of people can we begin to explore responsible human *action* in our world.

Have you ever considered Berry's question? If not, you should. It has occupied theologians and philosophers since the dawn of time, and our guess is that it has crossed your mind as well. The way the question formed in your thoughts may not have been, "Why are *we* here?" but more pointed, "Why am *I* here?" Both "I" and "we" questions are vital, and this book will help you, the reader, explore each of them.

We do provide a robust answer to Berry's question in this book. Our answer—to be concise to the extreme—is that the world exists, you and I exist, *for the King*. This answer draws us to identify both the purpose of humanity and what counts as responsible action in the world.

No doubt "for the King" is a strange idea. After all, living for a king sounds, well, *old*. People in Western society do not live under the authority of kings or queens today—at least not as they once did. Royal figureheads might occupy ceremonial positions in a country, but they are not thought to hold real power. Real power is invested in other political offices: president, prime minister, minister of parliament, or congressperson.

1. Wendell Berry, *What Are People For? Essays* (New York: North Point, 1990), see esp. 123–25.

But the King we speak of is no figurehead. The King we speak of is more than a symbol. The King we discuss in this book *does* hold real power. More to the point, this King holds the entirety of the universe together, imbuing it with wonder and significance. And knowing and loving this King enables us to discover the wonder and purpose of life and how to live well in the world. So if we want to come to grips with life, its purpose, and meaningful action in our world, we must get to know this King.

Biblical Story

The Bible tells the story of the King. It reveals that the King is God and tells the story of his actions in regard to the world. It is a true story. From it, we can come to know and love the King and find purpose for our lives. We can discover how to live responsibly in our world, all *for the King*.

The first four chapters of this book trace the Bible's main storyline. While the Bible is not composed exactly like the stories one might find in world literature, it does, in fact, tell the mysterious and powerful story of God's intentions for the world and his interactions with it.²

In our modern world, many overlook the overarching story the Bible tells. We have seen this especially in the churches, universities, and seminaries we have served. Because of the Bible's inherent complexity and how it has been used (and abused) throughout history, readers associate the Bible with many things other than a comprehensive narrative. A few of the categories that some (and maybe you!) use to understand the Bible are the following:

- Literature: a collection of random literary genres, tales, and songs
- Ethics: a collection of moral lessons from which we can learn
- Doctrine: a compilation of truths or principles that we can apply
- History: a collection of facts about people who lived a long time ago

Each of these touches on truth. Of course, the Bible contains a multifaceted set of literary genres, each drawing its readers to experience the awesomeness of God and his dealings with the world. And it is certainly true that the Bible provides ethical norms that reveal God's virtues and values and how humanity

2. For a recent discussion on how the Bible has been understood as a story, or *narrative*, with strengths and weaknesses, see Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, "Story and Biblical Theology," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew, Mary Healy, Karl Möller, and Robin Parry, SAHS 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 144–71.

should relate to him. It is surely accurate to insist that the Bible teaches truths about God and the world in the form of doctrine. And we affirm that the Bible gives an accurate historical presentation of the patriarchs and matriarchs, the people called Israel, the life and ministry of Jesus, and the early church. Still, each of these categories finds its fit within the big story of the Bible.

We will see this reality in the chapters ahead. But for now, consider how the Bible presents God and Jesus within a universal story. And consider how early Christian interpreters understood Jesus in light of Scripture's story rather than some other idea.

God in the Biblical Story

When Scripture describes God, it does so on the basis of what God has said and done. In other words, the one true and living God is a personal being rather than an impersonal force. He *speaks and acts* within the world rather than existing as an abstraction. God is an actor, the *primary* actor, in a world-encompassing and true story.

Note God's self-description in Exodus 3:14–15. After God calls Moses to lead the people of Israel, Moses is confused about how to describe God to the people, so Moses asks God how to describe God to them. God's response to Moses is enlightening:

God replies to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you." God also says to Moses, "Say this to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name forever; this is how I am to be remembered in every generation.

God begins by telling Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." Then he continues to identify himself by recalling his relationship to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Instead of describing himself with abstractions, he does so in a concrete and vivid fashion by placing himself at the center of a story. So we can rightly say the God of Scripture is a "storied" God. Scripture discloses who he is and what he has done.

Jesus in the Biblical Story

In his exceptional work *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer identifies Jesus as the "center" of Scripture. Bonhoeffer says, "He [Jesus] is the centre and strength of the Bible, of the Church, and of theology, but also of humanity, of reason, of justice, and of culture. Everything must return to Him; it is only under

His protection that it can live.”³ For Bonhoeffer, Jesus is the central reality revealed in Scripture; he is the one who gives life and meaning to everything else. We will explore this fully in the chapters on redemption in this volume.

Bonhoeffer’s concept of Jesus as the “center” of Scripture helps us to see that Jesus fulfills all the major symbols and stories of the Old Testament. Jesus is the prism through which the bright light of the Old Testament is broken into its full color. It is not that the colors of the light were absent prior to Jesus but that they were, in different ways, concealed. But in Jesus the full spectrum of color in Scripture emerges. N. T. Wright summarizes Jesus’s centrality in the Bible: “Jesus intended to bring the story of Israel to its god-ordained climax, in and through his own work. His prophetic praxis was designed to challenge his contemporaries to abandon their agendas, including those agendas which appeared to be sanctioned in, or even demanded by, the Torah and the Prophets. He summoned them to follow him in a way of being the people of [God] which was, according to him, the true though surprising fulfilment of the whole scriptural story.”⁴

In other words, Jesus sits at the center of the biblical narrative that discloses God and his world, and he invites us to participate with him by following him. Jesus’s life and ministry culminate in his crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and promise to return one day to set the world aright. In his own words, he describes his relationship to Scripture by saying, “Don’t think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to abolish but to fulfill” (Matt. 5:17). But if it is true that Jesus fulfills the totality of the symbols and stories that went before him, then it follows that we must understand the biblical narrative in order to understand Jesus.

Christian Interpretation of the Biblical Story

It is no wonder that early Christian interpreters understood the Savior in light of the biblical storyline. Two of the best examples of this form of reading come from the works of Irenaeus and Augustine. In *Against Heresies*, one of Christianity’s most significant early writings, Irenaeus (ca. AD 202) refutes those who are misreading Scripture by demonstrating that they don’t interpret the Bible’s story correctly, namely, in light of Jesus. Famously, he chides those with whom he disagrees by saying that they take little bits of the Bible and read them how they want, without any reference to the Bible’s overarching story, which reveals Jesus. Similarly, in *City of God*, one of the greatest Christian writings of all time, Augustine (ca. AD 354–430) refutes

3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. N. H. Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 56.

4. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 473.

the Roman despisers of Christianity, and he does so primarily by showing that the Bible’s narrative trumps Rome’s founding narrative and any other narrative that claims to be the true story of the whole world.

Considering Israel’s God, Jesus’s presentation of himself in light of Israel’s Scriptures, and early Christian interpretation, we argue that it is vital to read the Bible with an eye toward discerning its overarching story. But how does this story proceed?

A Brief Overview of the Story

The story begins at the beginning, with God’s creation of the world. We will explore this first plot movement in close detail in chapter 1. God created the world and declared it good. He created humanity and called us to be religious, social, and cultural beings. If we would live according to his good design, we would flourish under his good rule. At the time of creation, the first couple—Adam and Eve—flourished as they lived in right relationship with God, with each other, and with the rest of creation.

In a dark twist of the narrative, however, the first couple rebel against their Maker, a rebellion we will explore in chapter 2. Adam and Eve commit treason against the King. As a result, every dimension of human life becomes corrupted and misdirected. We experience a broken relationship with God, with our fellow humans, and with God’s good creation. That is why we often feel listless and directionless in life; we have been disconnected from our source of life—God—because of our sin. Theologians call this development “the fall.”

Fortunately, the story does not end there. In response to humanity’s rebellion, God could have destroyed the world. But instead of scrapping what he has made, God promises to redeem and restore, a promise we will explore in chapters 3 and 4. He promises to heal what has been corrupted, redirect what has been misdirected, fix what has been broken. So he sets his redemptive and restorative plan into motion. He calls forth a people for himself—Israel—so that people could be a light to the other nations, illumining the path of righteousness so the nations could walk in that path and flourish under God’s cosmic reign. Through Israel, God provides the world a messiah who will set the world aright. This messiah is his Son, Jesus:

For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16–17)

Because God loved our broken and sinful world, he sent Jesus, his very own Son, “to save the world through him.”

What does it mean that the “world” might be saved through Jesus? Scripture teaches that one day Christ will return to renew and restore his good creation. He will save sinners *and* he will save the created order so that one day worshipers from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (Rev. 5:9–10) will live with him eternally in a restored heavens and earth, the same heavens and earth he created in Scripture’s first plot movement (21:1–4).

Worldview and the Biblical Story

The first four chapters of this book are devoted to articulating the Bible’s overarching story, or *narrative*, in more depth. From the story of Scripture, basic beliefs about God, the world, and appropriate human action in the world coalesce into what can be understood as a *worldview*. For now, we define worldview as follows:

A set of basic beliefs that are embedded in a shared narrative of the world and rooted in a religious commitment that shapes and directs the lives of individuals and communities.

All human beings navigate the world and operate within it based on some sort of worldview that shapes their lives, even if that worldview is never fully realized or reflected on. As we have lived in Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and because we have worked in dozens of countries around the globe, we have witnessed several worldviews at work. Some worldviews are more dominant and actively compete with the Christian worldview. In our experience, the following worldviews are the most dominant:

- Islamic Theism: in which God is a monochrome uniformity rather than a triunity
- Deism: in which God exists but does not interact personally with the world
- Naturalism: in which there is no God and humans rule their own lives
- Nihilism: a type of naturalism in which life is meaningless; there is no absolute truth, goodness, or beauty
- Existentialism: a type of naturalism that goes beyond nihilism in which humans assert themselves in the world, creating their own truth, goodness, beauty, and meaning

- **Monistic Pantheism:** in which, instead of God, there is an impersonal, one-world soul⁵

Each of these worldviews exerts a significant shaping influence on the lives of those who fall under their sway. Even when a person is not consciously able to articulate it, one's worldview shapes basic desires and intuitions, impacts how one sees the world, and influences how one speaks and acts.

Gospel and the Biblical Story

Worldview provides a framework to respond to significant questions humans share, like, What has gone wrong in the world? and, What is being done to set things right? Both find robust answer in the good news of Jesus Christ, which is the *gospel*.

Christians often use the term *gospel*, but do we really know what it is and what it means? As we see it, the gospel is the announcement that God's kingdom arrived in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, who is King and Savior, in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. The gospel calls for belief, trust, and repentance; God promises that those who heed this call will live with him eternally in the new heavens and earth. Another, and briefer, way we summarize it is to say that the gospel is the announcement that Jesus the King died and rose again to save us *from* our sins and *for* renewed life in him.

We will argue that a proper understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ arises directly from the biblical story. If we try to describe the gospel apart from the biblical story, our description will be deficient at best and misleading at worst. Trying to describe the gospel as a logical syllogism is not wrong. In fact, doing so can be helpful. But if the gospel is reduced to nothing but a logical syllogism, it loses much of its meaning.

From this summary, you will notice that, just as the Christian worldview makes sense only with reference to the biblical narrative, so the gospel is comprehensible only in light of the biblical story. Chapter 5 is devoted to an exposition of the Christian worldview and gospel in light of the biblical story. Having reflected on story, worldview, and gospel, we are then prepared for the last four chapters of this book, which reflect on the *mission* God has given to us, his people.

5. For an introduction to worldviews, see James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, 5th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009); Tawa J. Anderson, W. Michael Clark, and David K. Naugle, *An Introduction to Christian Worldview: Pursuing God's Perspective in a Pluralistic Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017).

Mission and the Biblical Story

The final four chapters of this book will help us understand the Christian mission. We can begin to answer the question What are people *for*? in a robust manner through these chapters. In them, we draw on the biblical story in order to grasp the holistic nature of our *mission* as God's people.

If we ignore any one part of the biblical storyline, we will end up with a mission that is incomplete at best and harmful at worst. In fact, we think that people are often tempted to think about mission in ways that ignore or underemphasize the beginning and end of the biblical narrative—creation and new creation. Our exposition of the Christian mission draws on all four plot movements (creation, fall, redemption, new creation).

To help bring order and clarity to the Christian mission, we have divided our discussion of it into four aspects:

Theological

Social

Cultural

Global

As you read the final four chapters, you will notice that these four aspects overlap with one another quite a bit. They are not airtight categories but heuristic devices that help us think about the Christian mission in all its multifaceted glory.

First, we show how the Christian mission is *theological*. By this, we mean that the Christian mission centers on the God of Jesus Christ. The Bible calls us to love God with all our hearts, and in biblical terms, the heart is the central organizer of our lives. But precisely because true religion is personal, it can never be merely private; because it is heartfelt, it radiates outward into everything we do. When we love God with all our heart, that love shapes the way we approach every relationship and activity in life. Our affection for God overflows in our words and deeds. It fuels the mission. In our secular age, the theological nature of our mission is especially challenging.

Then we expose the way in which the Christian mission is thoroughly *social*. By that, we mean that genuine Christian mission involves interaction with other people made in the image of God. Our interaction with them is itself part of the Christian mission. When one person speaks to another person about the good news that Jesus is Lord and Savior, that conversation is social. When the inner life of a local church is marked by Christian love and obedience and that church becomes a window into which the world can

peer to see Christ, it is bearing witness to Christ in a social manner. When the members of a church engage in a ministry to help single mothers who are financially destitute, their ministry is social. So the Christian mission is social in diverse ways.

Following a discussion of the social aspect of mission, we argue that the Christian mission is deeply and pervasively cultural. *Culture* is anything that humans produce when they interact with one another and with God's creation. When we cultivate the ground (grain, vegetables, livestock), produce artifacts (clothes, housing, cars), build institutions (governments, businesses, schools), form worldviews (theism, pantheism, atheism), participate in religious communities (Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, atheist), and speak languages (English, Mandarin, Arabic), we produce culture. At the same time, our cultural context shapes us and affects who we are, what we think and do, and how we feel. Everything we say and do is cultural, so as Christians, we should work hard to ensure that our cultural doings point to Christ.

We conclude these chapters by talking about the *global* scope of the Christian mission. Immediately after Christ's resurrection, he commanded his followers to take the gospel to the nations. And in fact, the entire biblical storyline is consummated with international worship in a new heavens and earth. So global mission is near to God's heart and is central to the Christian mission. We want to preach the gospel and plant churches among every known people group and every known language on earth. When we do so, those global Christian communities will be able to live out the Christian mission—theologically, socially, and culturally—among their own people and extend it outward—globally—to other peoples.

After our journey through the biblical story, we will gain a deeper understanding of the Christian worldview, the centrality of the gospel, and the scope of the Christian mission. We will also be able to give an answer to Wendell Berry's question about purpose: we exist . . . *for the King*.