

The Role of Story in the Creation and Life of Man

Leah Ginion

A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Spring 2023

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

Pamela Miller, MFA, MA
Thesis Chair

Doug Miller, MFA
Committee Member

Christopher Nelson, MFA
Assistant Honors Director

Date

Abstract

Story was created by God as a vehicle for the revelation and glorification of Himself. Man, made in the image of God, was created as an innate storyteller. The world was created through story, and story is how it progresses and is sustained. As such, story is the foundation of all culture and the most natural and effective method of human communication. Research points to all of man's stories being derivatives of the Great Story: the metanarrative of Scripture. Exploring man's relationship with story reveals his place within the metanarrative and ultimately provides evidence for the existence and active presence of God, the Divine Author.

The Role of Story in the Creation and Life of Man

Once upon a time. A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. These simple few phrases hold the power to tingle ears and excite minds into anticipation of a riveting, inspiring, and entertaining story. The draw to story is innate to man. It is the underlying foundation of all his communication, culture, and understanding. This knack for story is not an accidental by-product of human evolution, but rather an artfully designed and powerful entity created by God for the revelation and glorification of Himself and restored relationship with man. God is weaving together one Grand Story that shapes the life and purpose of mankind, ultimately leading to man's redemption. It is the true reality of the universe, of man's existence. It is the greatest story ever told.

These bold claims beg the question, "what is story?" According to story researcher Daniel Taylor, story is "the telling of the significant actions of characters over time" (Taylor, 2001, p. 15). His emphasis is that there is no story without a storyteller, that facts and events do not take shape into plot and meaningful coherence without someone weaving them together. A story consists not just of random and inconsequential elements, but of things worth telling, things that matter. What matters? Taylor argues "anything that reveals or explores our humanity" (Taylor, 2001, p. 17). Some stories are better than others, some more exciting or engaging or interesting. But there is no such thing as an insignificant story. Every story reveals or investigates a truth about man and reality. This is the very nature of what a story is; therefore, a story without meaning is not a story at all.

As such, stories must include characters. Stories cannot exist in a vacuum. There must be some person or thing that is experiencing the events that unfold within the plot. Something happening to no one is nothing at all. A story must flow through its characters. Whether man or

creature, “no matter how furry or many-legged or leafy or otherworldly,” all characters “are in the final analysis human” (Taylor, 2001, p. 18). Story is the ultimate form of personification and embodiment. It is the experiencing of a character’s values and choices and consequences.

The connection between man and story is that man’s very life is a story. What is a life if not a character living out significant actions over time? Birth, existence, and death are not a life any more than they are a story. The story, the life, is in the conflicts and obstacles, the love and the laughter, the hope and the heartache. Man is drawn to story because he is a living, breathing story. It is how he lives, how he communicates, how he understands. It is how reality exists. It is how it was created to be.

Story is the Foundation for Culture and Communication

Human society and culture are inseparable from story. Scholar John Niles states it plainly, “oral narrative is and for a long time has been the chief basis of culture” (Niles, 2010, p. 3). Without narrative, plot, and character, there is no communication, discovery, or connection. Stories are “how humans naturally perceive, process, think, and learn” (Haven, 2007, p. 103). They are “the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 1). In order to convey any coherence and understanding, communication must include some element of storytelling. Thus, story is the underlying essence and vehicle of meaning for science, mathematics, sports, entertainment, politics, humanities, news, and all else. If humanity must communicate within story, then the culture and society they build must also be dependent upon it. From caves in the hills of ancient China to chemistry labs in modern Texas, story is the basis for human thought, expression, and comprehension.

The concept and creation of language, both verbal and written, is a monument to man’s cultivation of storytelling. The two are “inseparably intertwined” (Haven, 2007, p. 7). Language

depends on story for meaning and purpose; it was “created to express stories” (Haven, 2007, p. 7). The very letters and sounds that fill man’s mouth and page were born from a longing to share experiences, emotions, and ideas. What else is communication? What else is story? Written language was created out of reverence for story, as a means to immortalize it.

Story as the Center of Arts and Entertainment

Art is saturated in story, whether in a painting, poem, symphony, or sculpture. The art of a culture encapsulates its worldview, its values, its struggles, and its victories. Crowds flock to museums and historic landmarks because of the stories they tell of a people who once lived. People pay thousands of dollars a year for art, to be entertained by actors, musicians, and comedians. Entertainment is an activity to delight and enlighten, which audiences pursue out of their intrinsic need to discover and deliberate life’s purpose and meaning (Oliver & Raney, 2011; Zillmann & Bryant, 1994). The entertainment industry employs and rewards those with the greatest ability to story-tell within their respective art form. These artists build and release tension; they cause surprise and create curiosity. These dramatic arcs are the core of storytelling (Eber, 2021). Art is one of the most obvious and recognized forms of story within a culture, with film and literature being its most explicit form. But story is not bound to such a narrow category. It is the lifeblood of all entertainment, from the silver screen to the football field (Rutledge, 2020).

The \$500 billion-dollar global sports industry captivates the hearts of every nation, with enormous fanbases going to great lengths to watch their favorite teams (Gough, 2022). A stadium ticket earns fans the coveted right to experience a tantalizing and unpredictable game unfold before their very eyes. Every sport in itself is a different telling of rising and falling action, an action-packed display of the struggle for triumph. This is story. Sports network ESPN

evidenced this through their promotional campaign for the 2022 college football season titled, “The Greatest Story Ever Played” (Manzo, 2022). These sports, these stories cause fans to devotedly latch onto teams and players, cheering them on in victory and weeping with them in loss. This is what the reader does for a book’s protagonist, what the audience does for a movie’s hero. The love of the game is not for the sport itself, but for the story the sport tells.

Story in Education and the Sciences

If story is the foundation of communication, it must have a place within education. To communicate is to transfer knowledge, which is the means of survival (Bucher, 2018). Story in education is most clearly seen in parenting, a mother raising her child to be a wise and kind member of society. It is how she passes on her wisdom, morals, beliefs, vision, and dreams (Haven, 2007, p. 13). As a mother reads book after book to her toddler, they hear tales of superheroes and dragons, princesses and wizards, all faced with adversity and difficult choices. They are presented with right and wrong, loyalty and betrayal, perseverance and resignation. These stories help children learn the ways of the world and their role within it. Thus, story “continues to fulfill its ancient function of binding society by reinforcing a set of common values and strengthening the ties of common culture” (Gottschall, 2013, p. 138). Children understand, absorb, and personalize the lessons that the characters in their stories learn and the consequences that their actions yield (Haven, 2007, p. 113). Without fairy tales and comic books, children are ill-equipped to enter into the world and interact with its inhabitants. Stories make foreign environments knowable and differing perspectives understandable.

Beyond the home, stories also play a prominent role within formal education. Storytelling belongs in the instruction and communication of all disciplines, not just the humanities. Studies done with preschoolers suggested that early storytelling activity leads to improved math skills,

garnering the conclusion that learning story structure develops the brain's ability for logical and analytical thinking (O'Neill et al., 2004). Researchers have proven that in comparison to traditional academic writing, story structure is "more effective for teaching theorems, facts, concepts, and tacit information all across the curriculum and the spectrum of human communications" (Haven, 2007, p. 101). Science and math are not excluded from the influence of story. Numbers and lab results rely upon story to hold any significance or meaning. Data is incomprehensible and futile without being placed into a greater context. Data and storytelling are a team, working in harmony to build ideas and communicate values (Eber, 2021). Story not only builds connection and emotion but also allows for analysis and application. Story is not bound to fiction. It touches every aspect of the human life.

Story as the Basis for Religion and Social Connection

Among language, art, and education, religion is another cornerstone of culture. Religion, simply put, is the story of how man arrived on earth and the purpose behind his existence. Every religion offers its own take on the how and the why, but each seeks to answer those questions. It is within these stories that entire groups of people find their values, lifestyle, morals, beliefs, worldview, and identity (Geertz, 1973). Whole cultures and people groups are built around religion. Countless paintings, songs, books, articles of clothing, architecture, and scientific discoveries have been made in the name of religion. These too, are stories. Whether atheist or Muslim, Christian or Buddhist, each belief system has its own story in which its followers choose to participate and belong. These stories permeate the core of who these individuals are and the society in which they reside.

A society full of individuals defined by stories operates in a congruous manner. Catching up with a friend in a coffee shop is exchanging stories about jobs, kids, spouses, dreams, and

struggles. The most engaging and addicting conversations at parties most often revolve around gossip, drama, and the latest cultural moments. One finds their place within the societal ladder by juxtaposing their story to that of their peers. This is how connections are made and friendships are formed. American folklorist Richard Bauman gives a comprehensive description of the role story plays in society:

When one looks to the social practices by which social life is accomplished, one finds—with surprising frequency— people telling stories to each other, as a means of giving cognitive and emotional coherence to experience, constructing and negotiating social identity; investing the experiential landscape with moral significance in a way that can be brought to bear on human behavior; generating, interpreting, and transforming the work experience; and a host of other reasons. (Bauman & Bauman, 1986, p. 113)

Story is the vessel for meaningful social interaction. There is great significance to this fact. It gives revelation not just to human society and communication, but a look into humanity itself.

Bauman goes on to say,

Narrative here is not merely the reflection of culture, or the external charter of social institutions, or the cognitive arena for sorting out the logic of cultural codes, but is constitutive of social life in the act of storytelling... In exploring the social nexus of oral storytelling we explore one of the most fundamental and potent foundations of our existence as social beings. (Bauman & Bauman, 1986, p. 114)

Man's very sociality stems from his storytelling. Man cannot help but create and tell stories.

Man's craving for both story and community is demonstrated in the tremendous popularity of social media. Instagram photos and Facebook albums give glimpses into the inner lives of friends, coworkers, classmates, strangers, and celebrities. The photos capture moments

of joy, resilience, success, and love. They tell of heroes and daily lives, of struggle and overcoming. Part of the addictive draw of social media is its easy and instant access to the stories of the masses. Movies and books provide entertainment, but fiction cannot captivate to the same extent as the genuine stories of real human beings. Instagram's hugely successful "stories" feature highlights this, allowing users to share casual, candid moments. Stories quickly became one of the app's most utilized and enjoyed features, with over 500 million people utilizing it daily, accounting for 86.6% of Instagram users (Blagojević, 2023). The same candid sharing capability is seen across Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter (Georgakopoulou, 2022, pp. 1-2). The term "stories" here is not accidental, but a specific and appropriate label that "evokes positive associations to do with the power of stories" (Georgakopoulou, 2022, pp. 1-2). Tech giants know the impact and draw of stories. The genius of social media is its ability to harness "the widely recognized power of storytelling for presenting ourselves, making sense of our experience and connecting with others" (Georgakopoulou, 2022, pp. 1-2). Social media takes advantage of human psychology. Connection and communication are what every person innately desires, and story is the best method for doing so.

The Human Brain is Hardwired for Story

As the underlying framework of human communication, storytelling is also the most effective method of communication. Information is best understood when presented in a story format. Scholars and professionals champion the view that "stories belong as the bedrock of management, leadership, education, outreach, and general communication efforts," because of their indisputable power and effect on their hearers. (Haven, 2007, p. viii). They have this power because humans are physically hardwired for story. Such is evidenced in story's ingrained, universal presence in all societies and cultures.

Societies are created by and comprised of individuals with intricately structured brains. These brains respond to story. Information received in story form is most easily preserved and indexed by the brain, as memories themselves are story-based (Stahl, 2010, p. 163). Story's connection to the senses and emotions allows for a variety of paths for the brain to access the desired information, which augments memory retention and recall. Jonathan Gottschall determines that "the constant firing of our neurons in response to fictional stimuli strengthens and refines the neural pathways that lead to skillful navigation of life's problems" (Gottschall, 2013, p. 67). The brain knows that it benefits from story. "We are attracted to fiction not because of an evolutionary glitch, but because fiction is, on the whole, good for us" (Gottschall, 2013, p. 67). The brain's response to story is not accidental or inconsequential, but intentional for holistic benefit.

As such, the human brain physically rewards and responds to stories. A storyteller can cause the release of dopamine, oxytocin, and endorphins in their audience, enabling desirable effects such as increased focus, motivation, memory, generosity, bonding, creativity, and relaxation (Phillips, 2017). It is these chemical responses that enable story to be the driving force for community and connection. Business leader and storytelling professional Karen Eber says that "the very act of telling a story makes people trust you more" (Eber, 2021, 4:27). Trust is built from empathy, which is the natural, neurological response to a meaningful and relatable story.

Strangers become friends upon sharing personal experiences and stories of heartbreak, loss, joy, and triumph. It is indeed storytelling's superpower, its "capacity to elicit profound, emotional experiences through the development of empathetic connections" (Bucher, 2018, Case Study: Baobab VR Studios, para. 4). It is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine any kind of

human relationship absent of storytelling. From a cashier's casual "How is your day going?" to a best friend's divulging of past heartache to a spouse's sharing of dreams for the future, human connection is founded upon story.

The brain does not just best understand other people by hearing their stories, but it also processes and understands its own experiences through story. With all the stimuli, activity, and information accumulated in a day, let alone in a lifetime, "we make sense of the world through narratives" (Bucher, 2018, "Interview with Jonathan Krusell," para. 17). Narrative is a reality at the neurological level. Kendall Haven states,

Results from a dozen prominent cognitive scientists and developmental psychologists have confirmed that human minds do rely on stories and on story architecture as the primary roadmap for understanding, making sense of, remembering, and planning our lives—as well as the countless experiences and narratives we encounter along the way. Lives are like stories because we think in story terms, make sense of our experiences in story terms, and plan our lives in story terms. (Haven, 2007, p. vii)

Haven continues by making the claim that the human brain was long ago evolutionarily formed to operate and think in specific story terms, calling story "a basic principle of mind" (Haven, 2007, pp. ix-v). Man's development of meaning from experiences is complex and nuanced, but story's role within that process cannot be overlooked. To put it simply, "the human mind was shaped for story, so that it could be shaped by story" (Gottschall, 2013, p. 55). This is the tale of human history. Growth, achievement, and understanding are all seen through the experience and living of story.

Story Brings Societal Change

Stating the fact that there are 350 million starving children in the world, though true, is rare to prompt a response. Sharing the story of Rosalinda, the six-year-old girl begging for pennies on street corners in order to purchase a morsel of bread, is significantly more likely to compel a person to action. Facts do not motivate or inspire. It is stories that connect the brain to the heart and the listener to the person. Hearers develop a greater understanding and appreciation for hardships they have never faced and contexts they have never experienced because stories help “you see something that you can no longer unsee, leaving you changed, because stories actually do leave you changed” (Eber, 2021, 8:03).

In the sense of social justice and political action, stories not only leave people internally changed but have the capacity to create tangible societal change. Statistics and hot-button issues develop into the faces of real people with real lives, for “when we tell stories from our specific location in socio-material-economic-ecological-affective spaces, we create presents, pasts, futures and possibly change” (Macgilchrist, 2021, p. 399). Man operates within a restricted, biased, and egocentric perspective by instinctual default. What brings him out of his own confines and “makes [him] more aware of others (and of their needs) is a feeling of recognition, and with it, commitment, that stories can convey more masterfully than any other form of argument” (Ritivoi, 2016, p. 52). Story is a unifying force; it is “how we as a society stay whole” (Bucher, 2018, “Interview with Tai Crosby,” para. 3). Chants and picket signs deepen chasms. Stories build bridges. Stories allow differing parties and people to understand and empathize with each other as well as imagine, plan, and create a better story.

Story as Effective Persuasion in Marketing

Perhaps the most persuasive evidence for the impact of story on humanity and culture comes from its prevalence in the marketing realm. No one better understands how humans

communicate and are motivated than those whose profession is just that; communicating the message of a brand or product and motivating the audience to become loyal, paying customers. Unsurprisingly, marketers' most effective tactic is storytelling. Storytelling has been renowned as "the new strategic imperative of business," "an irresistibly powerful strategic business tool," and an "essential element of company success" by Forbes, Harvard Business Review, and CRM Magazine, respectively (Quesenbery, 2019, p. 13). The ads that overwhelmingly gain the most views, likes, shares, and overall recognition are those that follow a narrative story structure (Quesenbery, 2019, p. 13). To understand man's story brain is to unlock a brilliant and effective business strategy.

Stories allow brands to relate and resonate with people, creating a connection and a desire to be a part of the company's vision. Producer and VR Artist Angela Haddad says, "ultimately, the fashion industry is not just selling you clothes, they're selling you dreams and they're selling you a story... the clothes are just a part of it" (Bucher, 2018, "Interview with Angela Haddad," para. 6). The premise remains the same across every industry. Products are never just products; they are a glimpse and an invitation into a greater story to participate in. Marketing professor Kevin Quesenbery asserts that this effective storytelling framework is "deeply rooted in our culture and evident in the Bible as a practice for effective marketing" (Quesenbery, 2019, p. 5). Quesenbery's observation of the Bible's universal storytelling framework and its use for daily human activity opens the door for Scripture to inform countless disciplines, cultural practices, and societal engagements.

Story is the Basis of Creation

The composition of human culture, communication, and psychology is evidence that story is how the world is sustained and progresses. The Christian worldview not only affirms this

reality but is based upon its fact (Branson, 2022). Evolutionist scholar Johnathan Gottschall sees the same truth from a secular perspective:

Story — sacred and profane — is perhaps the main cohering force in human life. A society is composed of fractious people with different personalities, goals, and agendas. What connects us beyond our kinship ties? Story... Story is the counterforce to social disorder, the tendency of things to fall apart. Story is the center without which the rest cannot hold. (Gottschall, 2013, p. 138)

Scripture adds just one factor to the concept; story is also how the world was created. Created by God and through His Son, who is called The Word. God, then, as Creator of story, is revealed through humanity's dependence upon it. Story then becomes not only the crux of human communication and culture, but also evidence for God, the Divine Creator.

Jesus Is The Word and Is the Story

The Gospel of John opens with the famous lines, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2016, John 1:1-3). These verses, as well as the first chapter of Hebrews, mark Jesus as present and active during Creation, at which God spoke and everything came to be (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2016, Gen. 1). The importance of The Word being the agent of creation cannot be overemphasized. God's “once upon a time” is “in the beginning” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2016, Gen. 1:1-3). The Word begins the story (Edwards, 2013, p. 3).

The Word also continues the story. All the scholars crediting the sustaining of human life and culture to story are correct. Yet, they miss the integral piece of the puzzle, the cornerstone.

That story is Jesus. The writer of Hebrews states that “He upholds the universe by the word of His power” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2016, Heb. 1:3). Paul writes in Colossians that “He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2016, Col. 1:17). Jesus is the thread that holds the fabric of the universe together, the engine from which all things run. This, then, is why story is so crucial to the foundation of humanity, culture, and society. It all stems from Jesus: The Word, the source of story.

Story in the Imago Dei

Man is not a storyteller by accident. God uniquely and specifically gave humanity the trait. When God “created man in His own image,” He bestowed His creative and storytelling ability upon Adam (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2016, Gen. 1:27). As such, “the dynamic and effective Word has been planted in us” (Schori, 2017, p. 529). No other creature has the desire or capacity for story. The fact that storytelling is exclusive to the human race draws the conclusion that storytelling is an aspect of the Imago Dei, the image of God. It is something that God gave to man and not to the rest of creation. All creatures communicate, and all of creation knows and responds to the seasons and signals of nature, but none other than man pass parables and tales to their young. Communications theorist Walter R. Fisher goes as far as distinguishing humanity from evolution’s hominids by its storytelling ability, coining the term “homo narrans” (Fisher, 1984, p. 6). John D. Niles adopts the term and expands on the uniqueness of the human trait.

Only human beings possess this almost incredible cosmoplastic power, or world-making ability. This is a fact too easily taken for granted. Even more than the use of language in and of itself or other systems of symbol management, storytelling is an ability that defines the human species as such... Through storytelling, an otherwise unexceptional

biological species has become a much more interesting thing, Homo narrans: that hominid who not only has succeeded in negotiating the world of nature, finding enough food and shelter to survive, but also has learned to inhabit mental worlds that pertain to times that are not present and places that are the stuff of dreams. It is through such symbolic mental activities that people have gained the ability to create themselves as human beings and thereby transform the world of nature into shapes not known before. (Niles, 2010, p. 3)

Both Niles and Fisher speak from a secular worldview and yet still consider storytelling imperative to the definition of what it means to be human. Christianity, yet again, not only affirms this view but supports it wholeheartedly. Only with the variation that humanity did not develop a storytelling ability over millions of years, evolving from hominid to hominid, but was gifted it upon creation from God the Divine Author and Creator.

The existence of universal story structure within all cultures of all history is further evidence of story being an inherent human trait, and not something developed or nurtured. Not all tribes and cultures have written language or structured laws, but all tell stories (Haven, 2007, p. 4). Such is integral to what it means to be human, for “to be a person is to have a story to tell” (Dinesen, n.d.). God breathed life into man, and with that breath, man tells His story.

The Greatest Story: The Grand Narrative of Scripture

The start of the story of man is the continuation of God telling the story of Himself. The Creation story is familiar to many: Adam and Eve, a serpent, and a forbidden fruit. Genesis 3 shares the details of how man rebelled against God and brought sin into the world, forever separating man from God’s presence. What once was a perfect, right relationship is now

irreparably broken. The rest of Scripture tells of how God pursues man in his sinfulness and comes to deliver him from eternal death and damnation.

The Bible consists of 66 books written by some forty authors over a span of 1,500 years and holds dozens upon dozens of accounts of different people's lives. And yet, it all tells one story. This is the metanarrative of Scripture: "the overarching story that incorporates all the characters, events, and ideas contained within this complex collection of historical records, laws, poems, instructions, letters, sayings, songs, and sermons into one comprehensive plot" (Short, 2012, p. 115). That one plot is "the One Story of God's incomprehensible, outrageous acts of redemption, the stories of a God gathering a people for his name" (Fields, 2012, p. 43). God began this story in Genesis and He continues to tell it today.

This grand story arches over all time and space, wrapping up each and every life in its tale. It is God's great plan of redemption for all mankind, so therefore, all mankind must be involved in it. This story is written in man's DNA; it is instinctive. Consciously or not, every soul knows this story and yearns for its resolution. Such is seen in the stories that man tells, as "all our human stories of heroes, monsters, journeys, and sacrifice give voice to our universal quest for identity, purpose, and deliverance. Instead of competing with God's story, these stories gesture toward it" (Fields, 2012, p. 40). God set forth the universal story structure in the fabric of reality, and man lives it out while he creates his own versions (Fields, 2012, p. 40).

While clearly, there are countless stories out in the world, each with unique characters and original plots, they all hold the same threads. Whether with a great tragedy or a fairy tale ending, every story finds its roots in the narrative structure and themes of Scripture. Even the most gruesome and perverted stories have a home within the metanarrative; it does not neglect the presence of sin and evil. On the contrary, it gives the explanation for evil's source and

effects, as well as its solution. Every story ever told is a derivative of the metanarrative. All heroes are shadows of Jesus, the ultimate protagonist, and all villains are avatars of Satan, the ultimate antagonist. The cliché conflict of good versus evil originated in the heavens and continues in man's heart. His stories reflect his struggle.

God's Story as the True Reality that Gives Man Meaning

This story is true. By definition, Jesus, The Word, is "the way, the truth, and the life" (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2016, John 14:6). It is through the revelation of God in Christ and through Scripture that man can know and understand reality as it really is, God as He really is. Knowledge and acceptance of this truth, The Truth, is the way that leads to life, and life abundantly (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2016, John 10:10). God brings everything full circle by revealing this life and truth in the form of a story. He then uses this story to bring man to Himself, to display His glory, and to tell of His redeeming work.

Experiencing this story brings man to a humble and contrite heart, realizing his unworthy and sinful state. God ultimately utilizes this for repentance and sanctification, as "the stories that matter not only reveal to us our hopes and desires, but it also brings to life our own sins and insecurities" (Branson, 2022, p. 47). Living within God's story allows man to walk in the true light of reality, seeing things as they really are (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2016, John 12:46). Seeing the reality of God confronts man with the reality of his sin. This is on purpose and is for man's good, as the reality of God includes man's deliverance from his sin.

God's Story Gives Man a Purpose

Man has a place within this great story. He has a role to play. Living out this role is where man finds his meaning, purpose, and identity. Apart from God's story, there is no significant sense of self-purpose. The metanarrative of Scripture is the "story which provides the

true context for our understanding of the meaning of our lives” (Fields, 2012, p. 40).

Understanding the work that God has done, the story that He is telling, calls man to action. God’s story “presents a view of the world that invites, challenges, and commands a certain way of life.

The Bible’s big story offers an understanding of the world that compels participation in it”

(Short, 2012, p. 115). With so great a story playing out, once informed, man cannot simply sit on the sidelines.

God has given all believers a high calling, honor, and responsibility in the Great Commission; Jesus’ command to his followers to make disciples of all nations, baptize them by the Holy Spirit, and teach them to live according to the Word of God (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2016, Matt. 28:19-20). The work is not done until every ear has heard of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Living Word who came to earth to die for the sins of men (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2016, Matt. 24:14; 1 Peter 2:24). Regardless of talents, abilities, ethnicity, education, age, or gender, this is the work that God has given to His people. A mundane nine-to-five may feel draining and insipid. Another day in the rat race may make life seem aimless and meaningless. Such is not so for he who has been found in Christ, he who has found his place in the Great Story.

God’s Story Gives Man an Identity

The realization of purpose is the realization of personhood. God’s story gives man not only a role but an identity. All other stories point to this truth. Identity is “acquired through the mediation of narrative and thus is a function of fiction” (Niles, 2010, p. 3). It is the notorious trait of man to search out his identity, analyzing books, movies, and characters to find a reflection of his true self. The evidence of such is seen in the prevalence of personality tests and BuzzFeed quizzes. These light-hearted amusements belie a deeper truth; “we want to know who we are”

(Branson, 2022, p. 21). The simple, silly quizzes cast the smallest shred of light onto the path of self-discovery. “These quizzes provid[e] some sort of affirmation to different character traits. It’s one thing to see yourself as confident, creative, humble, or shy. It’s another to see yourself compared to Harry Potter, The Rock, or Katniss Everdeen” (Branson, 2022, p. 21). These characters allow man to connect to something greater than himself. Even the existential search of self is only meaningfully and satisfactorily answered in the form of a story.

One of the powers of story is the creation and exploration of character to create connection and relation. Writer James Branson describes the function of story in man’s search for self.

An unforgettable story captures the essence of humanity and it distills, communicates, and clarifies it, bringing what we are and what we should be into focus. We learn to see and act in the manner of the heroes of the stories that captivate us. These stories call to capacities that lie deep within our nature but might still never develop without that call. We are dormant adventurers, lovers, leaders, artists, and rebels, but need to discover that we are all those things by seeing the reflection of such patterns in dramatic and literary form. (Branson, 2022, p. 47)

Man craves the revelation of his own self in the stories he tells and consumes. It is not an accident that the answer he longs for is found in the story of Scripture. The matter that identity and story are so closely intertwined also relates to Imago Dei. Identity and the struggle thereof are distinctly human traits; no other creature wrestles with its purpose or meaning. God created man to live within His story. This is his only true reality and identity. All other stories point to this, but all other stories will fall short of providing a complete and true identity apart from the

Word of God. It is only His Word that gives life (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2016, John 14:6).

Story as the Intentional Vessel of Communication

The power of the Word of God partially lies in it being a story. All the aforementioned effective benefits of storytelling and the hardwiring of man's brain are not accidental, but rather created by God for His glorious purposes. He created story as a tool by which He teaches, grows, sanctifies, and communicates with man. Daniel Taylor states that "the Bible does not simply contain stories; it reflects God's choice of the form of story as the primary means by which to tell us about himself and how to be in right relationship with him" (Taylor, 2008, 5:45). Since the "story-shapedness of Scripture corresponds to the story-shapedness of human experience," man is formed when juxtaposing his story with God's (Goldingjay, 1997, p. 6). It is "when we find ourselves in the plotline of God's story of redemption, God's story becomes a part of our own and we are transformed" (Triplett, 2016, p. 313). Life transformation doesn't come from a set of laws; it comes from experiencing and living out a story: God's story. Story leads to the discovery of truth, and that journey is what makes the knowledge of the truth personal, real, and transformational (Triplett, 2016, p. 312).

God did not just give a list of rules to follow or state facts about Himself. Instead, He narrates the lives of wise and foolish men, He pens epic poems and songs, He tells parables, and He prophesies of the future. Christianity is "a religion of the word... grounded not in human instinct or conjecture, but in the self-disclosure of God through covenant, prophecy, and their written attestations" (Edwards, 2013, p. 1). God's story is the very basis of Christianity. Scripture "communicates facts and figures, concepts and beliefs, but in a way that involves readers, motivates them to pay attention, and creates a common perspective that is personal and

relevant” (Quesenbery, 2019, p. 6). The Bible is a mystifying and extraordinary work of literature, poetry, law, letters, and prophecy, and it all serves the divine purpose of revealing God to man. He comes to man in the way he most easily understands, in the way that touches his heart. He comes as a story.

God Revealed to Man Through Story and Through The Word

God revealed Himself to man not just in the form of the written word of Scripture, but through the incarnation of the Word. Jesus, Son of God, stepped down from heaven and came to earth as a baby. Fully man and fully God, He “became flesh and dwelt among us” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2016, Col. 2:9; John 1:14). He came so that man may see and know God the Father, of whom He is the radiance of His glory and “the exact imprint of His nature” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2016, John 14: 7; Heb. 1:3). God unknowable, God infinite, God incomprehensible became a man so that all men may understand Him.

This Jesus, this perfect and complete image of the invisible God, is the One called the Word (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2016, Col. 1:15; John 1:1). He is the story of Himself, presented in tangible human terms. He is “the walking Logos, not only the prophet but the proclamation” (Edwards, 2013, p. 30). This is why man was physically, emotionally, and spiritually formed by and for story; so that God could reveal Himself to him for the restoration of relationship with Him. All along, it had always been for and about Jesus. God had been preparing the way for the coming Savior from the very words, “In the beginning” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2016, Gen. 1:1). From before Adam and Eve ever sinned, God was already putting into motion His Grand Story for all of humanity’s redemption and restored relationship with Him.

Story as the Means of Fulfillment of Man’s Role Within God’s Story

Ultimately, it is the use of story that will bring about the resolution of the Great Story. Man's role in the Great Commission in bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth will be fulfilled by the very telling of God's story. God's Word is living and active, and it His Word, not man's, that pierces the heart. Recounting the stories of Scripture, from the parting of the Red Sea to the raising of Lazarus, is the very power of God. The metanarrative is seen in each of the individual stories of Scripture; they each have the power to convict and transform hearts. The focus needs to be on the actual telling of God's story, not just telling about God's story (Triplett, 2016, p. 314). By doing so and teaching others to follow suit, the Great Commission will be fulfilled. As the falling action of the metanarrative, its fulfillment will usher in the resolution: Jesus returning to earth to bring justice. Satan will be defeated once and for all "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2016, Rev. 12:11). The final saga, the epic conquering of the evil one. This, too, is accomplished by story. God is omnipotent, and He chooses to work by story.

Conclusion

In the words of the author C.S. Lewis, "In the story of Christ, all the other stories have somehow come true" (Fields, 2012, p. 40). What are man's stories if not a search and desire for hope? Jesus is man's greatest hope. Fictional worlds and dreams of lavish perfection cannot compare to that which is the extraordinary reality of Christ. He is exceedingly and abundantly better than man's most daring story could ever imagine (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2016, Eph. 3:21). He is the righter of wrongs, the provider for the hungry, the deliverer of the captive. He brings salvation now to those who would accept Him, and He promises to bring full justice and redemption when He returns. Scripture gives a spoiler for how the story will end, when God's plan for redemption is complete.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

And He who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.”

Also He said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” And He said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2016, Rev. 21:3-6a)

From the beginning to the end, it has all been Jesus. The Garden of Eden, wandering in the desert, the crucifixion, the early church, the return of Christ. Exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution. This is God’s story of deliverance. Humanity is completely dependent upon this story, whether man knows it or not. The power, influence, and intricate design of the metanarrative is seen in every human culture across all history. Every story ever told is a retelling, just a piece, of the story that God has been telling since before time began. As renowned author Mitch Albom puts it, “the world is full of stories, but the stories are all one” (Albom, 2008, p. 113). And that one story is the greatest ever told.

References

- Albom, M. (2008). *The five people you meet in heaven*. Klett Sprachen.
- Bauman, R., & Bauman, D. P. O. F. a. a. R. (1986). *Story, performance, and event: Contextual studies of oral narrative*. Cambridge University Press.
- Blagojević, I. (2023). *Instagram Stories Stats & Facts for 2023*. 99 Firms. Retrieved March 25, 2023, from <https://99firms.com/blog/instagram-stories-statistics/#gref>
- Boylorn, R. M. (2021). Visual voices and aural (auto)ethnographies: The personal, political, and polysemic value of storytelling and/in communication. *Review of Communication*, 21(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2021.1905870>
- Branson, J. D. (2022). *Imago Dei: Identity, story, and who we are in Christ* (thesis). *Digital Commons @ George Fox University*. Retrieved 2023, from <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/443/>.
- Bucher, J. K. (2018). *Storytelling for virtual reality: Methods and principles for crafting immersive narratives*. O'Reilly. Routledge. Retrieved 2022, from <https://learning.oreilly.com/library/view/storytelling-for-virtual/9781351809245/?ar=>.
- Dinesen, I. (n.d.). *To be a person is to have a story to tell*. - quote. All Author. Retrieved January 30, 2023, from <https://allauthor.com/quotes/59791/>
- Divinyi, J. E. (1995). Storytelling: an enjoyable and effective therapeutic tool. *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal*, 17(1), 27–37. Retrieved January 31, 2022, from doi.org/10.1007/BF02249302.
- Eber, K. (2021). *How your brain responds to stories -- and why they're crucial for leaders*. TED. TEDxPurdueU. Retrieved 2022, from

https://www.ted.com/talks/karen_eber_how_your_brain_responds_to_stories_and_why_they_re_crucial_for_leaders?language=en.

Edwards, M. J. (2013). *Image, word and God in the early Christian centuries*. Routledge.

English Standard Bible. (2016). Crossway Bibles. (Original work published 2001)

Fields, L. L. (2012). The gospel is more than a story. *Christianity Today*, 56, 38–43. Retrieved

January 31, 2022, from

search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=33h&AN=384241&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Fisher, W. R. (1984). Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument. *Communication Monographs*, 51(1), 1–22.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758409390180>

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. Basic Books.

Georgakopoulou, A. (2022). Co-opting small stories on social media: A narrative analysis of the directive of authenticity. *Poetics Today*, 43(2), 265–286.

<https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-9642609>

Gergen, K. J. (2006). *Narration, identity and historical consciousness*. Berghahn Books.

Goldingjay, J. (1997). Biblical story and the way it shapes our story. *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association*, (27), 5–15. Retrieved 2023.

Gottschall, J. (2013). *The storytelling animal: How stories make us human*. Mariner Books.

Gough, C. (2022, September 22). Sports industry revenue worldwide in 2021, with a forecast for 2022 and 2026. Statista. Retrieved February 28, 2023, from

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/370560/worldwide-sports-market-revenue/>

- Guber, P. (2011). The inside story. *Psychology Today*, 44(2), 78–85. Retrieved January 31, 2022, from search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rlh&AN=58733214&site=ehost-live&scope=site.
- Guppy, S., & Barnes, J. (2000). Julian Barnes, The art of fiction No. 165. *The Paris Review*. other.
- Haven, K. (2007). *Story proof: The science behind the startling power of story*. Libraries Unlimited. Retrieved 2023.
- Macgilchrist, F. (2021). When discourse analysts tell stories: what do we 'do' when we use narrative as a resource to critically analyze discourse? *Critical Discourse Studies*, 18(3), 387–403. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2020.1802767>
- Manzo, J. R. (2022, August 29). *ESPN releases 'The greatest story ever played' creative for 2022 college football season*. ESPN Press Room U.S. Retrieved January 30, 2023, from <https://espnpressroom.com/us/press-releases/2022/08/espn-releases-greatest-story-ever-played-creative-for-2022-college-football-season/>
- Niles, J. D. (2010). *Homo narrans: The poetics and anthropology of oral literature*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Oliver, M. B., & Raney, A. A. (2011). Entertainment as pleasurable and meaningful: Identifying hedonic and eudaimonic motivations for entertainment consumption. *Journal of Communication*, 61(5), 984–1004. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01585.x>
- O'Neill, D. K., Pearce, M. J., & Pick, J. L. (2004). Preschool children's narratives and performance on the Peabody Individualized Achievement Test – Revised: Evidence of a relation between early narrative and later mathematical ability. *First Language*, 24(2), 149–183. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142723704043529>

Phillips, D. J. P. (2017). *The magical science of storytelling*. Youtube. TEDx Talks. Retrieved 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nj-hdQMa3uA>.

Polkinghorne. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. State University of New York Press.

Quesenbery, K. A. (2019). Story telling, the Bible, and marketing : an ancient framework for modern practice. (Dialogue). *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*, 22(1), 5–17. Retrieved January 31, 2022, from search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=33h&AN=430570&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Ritivoi, A. D. (2016). Reading stories, reading (others') lives: Empathy, intersubjectivity, and narrative understanding. *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, 8(1), 51. <https://doi.org/10.5250/storyworlds.8.1.0051>

Rutledge, D. P. (2020, March 20). The power of storytelling: Why entertainment is important. Medium. Retrieved April 20, 2023, from <https://pamelarutledge.medium.com/the-power-of-storytelling-why-entertainment-is-important-9cabf9c1e7f7>

Schori, K. J. (2017). Creation and the effective word: holy storytelling, creation, and God's mission. *Anglican Theological Review*, 99(3), 519–529. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000332861709900306>

Short, S. W. (2012). Formed by story: The metanarrative of the Bible as doctrine. *Christian Education Journal*, 9, s110–23. Retrieved January 31, 2022, from search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=33h&AN=438731&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Stahl, J. (2010). Telling our stories well: Creating memorable images and shaping our identity.

Missiology: An International Review, 38(2), 161–171.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/009182961003800207>

Taylor, D. (2001). *Tell me a story*. Bog Walk Press.

Taylor, D. (2008, September 27). *The life-shaping power of story: God's and ours* [Conference presentation]. Desiring God 2008 National Conference, Minneapolis, MN, United States.

<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-life-shaping-power-of-story-gods-and-ours>.

Triplett, S. (2016). God's transforming story: How the metanarrative of Scripture can change lives. *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 52(3), 308–16. Retrieved January 31, 2022, from search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=33h&AN=18254&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Zillmann, D., & Bryant, J. (1994). Entertainment as media effect. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (pp. 437–461). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.