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Dramatic Enactment of Christian Faith
A Review Essay

The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story

Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic

2004, 252 pp. paper, \$19.99

**Theology and the Drama of History, Cambridge Studies in
Christian Doctrine series**

Ben Quash

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

2005, xiv, 235 pp. hardcover, \$75.00

**The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to
Christian Theology**

Kevin J. Vanhoozer

Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press

2005, 488 pp. paper, \$39.95

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When Hans Frei published *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* in 1974, he described a situation which had become all too familiar to students of theology at the time. Historical criticism had held sway in biblical studies for many years, and it had determined the major options for reading the Bible. Whether conservative or liberal, scholars asked “what really happened” and tried to defend the Bible’s truth and unity with intellectual resources (such as history and philosophy) that were general studies not specifically related to the Bible itself. In this situation, Frei called for a shift in thinking, allowing the Bible itself to determine the proper approach for interpretation. He argued for a “narrative” reading of scripture that was suited to the kind of literature that the Bible itself is, as well as to the way that the community of ordinary Christians read it as scripture that witnesses to and enables them to encounter God.

Frei’s book broke ground for attention to narrative in biblical and theological study that has flourished since then in a variety of ways. Not only is there a “school” of thought (sometimes known as the “Yale” school) that develops Frei’s ideas theologically, but biblical scholarship now includes literary criticism among its tools. It is quite common to find books on the Bible that focus on particular narratives, and even preaching has been influenced by emphasis on narrative. Clearly, the ground that Frei broke has proved fertile.

Recently, though, even the category “narrative” has seemed to some to be too narrow for adequate biblical and theological understanding. In its place, “drama” is coming to the fore as the most promising way to characterize the Bible and theology because it not only deals in story, but also enactment. Drama not only creates a world and engages us in it imaginatively, as does narrative, but it also gives us a role to play in the ongoing proclamation and living out of the Christian faith. Three recent books show how drama is being employed to interpret what Christian faith is about and to connect the past with the way that faith is lived out today.

The least technical of these three books is *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, by Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen. The two authors bring together strengths in different fields (biblical studies and missiology) to provide for first year university students an

account of the overarching story that the Bible tells. The stated goals of the book are, first, to present the true nature of Scripture as God's story, and second, to help students find their place in that story by articulating and sharing the biblical worldview. Though these goals are both important to the authors, the first receives the most emphasis in this book. The primary task is to show that the Bible does in fact tell a unified story, thus providing the groundwork for the second goal.

The prologue to the book sets out a brief account of the problem that the book is trying to address. The authors describe how human beings are always trying to connect discrete events into a "big story" in order to make sense of life. We all have our individual personal stories, but each personal story needs some "grand narrative" that serves to show how one's own story fits into the whole "world." The conviction of these authors is that the Bible tells the true story of the world, so it is the only reliable guide for understanding our lives. Other competing stories (coming from culture, for instance) present alternative "foundational" stories, but these competing stories provide competing values from their different worldviews and living by them leads to finding a false meaning for life. The authors want their readers to understand the Bible's "big story" so that they can choose the right story in which to understand their lives.

Because it is not obvious that the Bible tells a single story, the authors mostly direct their attention to outlining it. They compare the Bible to a cathedral with many rooms and entrances, large and complicated enough that it is hard to get a sense of the whole. Finding the main entrance is important for proper orientation, and the authors suggest that the main entrance to the Bible's story comes from two themes that work together throughout the Bible: covenant and kingdom. From Genesis to Revelation, these two themes serve to provide the structure that holds all the discrete materials in the Bible together.

Despite the priority of the word "drama" in the title, this book is more about story than it is enactment. The main way that the authors acknowledge or use drama is by dividing the story of the Bible into six acts (with an interlude). The notes do not reveal serious engagement with studies about drama, and while the role that people today play in the story is certainly recognized as important, it is not developed. The emphasis is on tracing the history of Israel, Jesus Christ, and the early church in such a way as to see how the pieces fit together. For first year university students who may not have a strong biblical background, this task may be valuable. For others who know the history and who have come to appreciate the complexity of the biblical materials, it will seem simplistic.

While this first book concentrates on the Bible, the second uses drama

to help us understand history. In *Theology and the Drama of History*, Ben Quash proposes a critical appropriation of Hans von Balthasar's theodramatics. The goal is to present a method that sees human actions, events, and contexts in relation to God's purpose. Von Balthasar criticized conceptualities (especially Hegel's) that tried to tie up the indeterminacy of history in a tidy system. Both God's freedom and human freedom require instead a description of history that allows for interaction and openness to new responses through time. Drama provides a way of conceiving history that allows for involvement of the characters which are invested in the action, attention to the particular circumstances and events that affect particular lives, social interaction, and anticipation of how events will play out.

To develop this comparison between drama and history, Quash turns to ancient Greek forms of poetic style to show how each offers a different perspective on what is taking place. Epic style, represented by the chorus, provided a detached observation and commentary on the action that was taking place in an ancient play. Lyric style, in contrast, was used for characters who were highly involved emotionally. The objectivity of epic and the subjectivity of lyric both provide important viewpoints, but drama takes place when an involved character and the overarching structure of the context interact, so that the "big picture" does not lose sight of the personal impact of events and the involved character is engaged with more than her or his own immediate experience. Just so, to be a historical person means dramatic engagement between objective reality and subjective experience. Human beings in history find themselves in a world that already exists and is moving in a certain direction, but they also shape that world through their imaginative, personal participation. History is in this sense dramatic, and it is *theodramatic* when the involved human beings are directed by and respond to the Holy Spirit's activity in the world. It is the task of theology to display this particular perspective on the drama of history.

A large portion of Quash's book is given to analysis of von Balthasar's work and to two particular thinkers, Hegel and Barth, who influenced it. Despite von Balthasar's desire to offer an alternative to totalizing systematic thinking, Quash shows how the Roman Catholic theologian himself prioritized epic structure when he encouraged receptivity, acceptance, and obedience (after the model of Mary) as the proper form of the Church. As a corrective to this tendency, Quash uses Gerard Manley Hopkins's *The Wreck of the Deutschland* to show how the proper response, even to painful events, is, not simply acceptance, but an active searching for God's presence *in* the event rather than outside it in some explanatory framework. A response that looks honestly at the pain and for God's presence can become a witness that may help others respond appropriately (dramatically) in

their own situations, neither mired in their own experience nor explaining away the experience in an objective commentary, but reading God's revelation in the event that affects them deeply.

Many of the features of drama that Quash finds valuable—temporality, followability, complexity, interaction, anticipation—are also features of narrative. Quash seems to prefer drama to narrative as a suggestive analogy for history because he often relates narrative to epic, which closes off rather than opens up possibilities. It is not clear to me that narrative necessarily becomes epic in the way that he describes it, but drama does add an element of enactment that is not usually associated with narrative. His use of Greek drama to illumine the givenness and openness of history can be a valuable way of helping theology to think about the place of the human in the world. His understanding that both God and human beings are free to interact with each other encourages activity and witness that seeks to know and enact God's purpose.

In *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer brings together concerns about Scripture and theology that have been treated separately in the first two books. With 457 pages in its main body, this book includes a complex argument that covers (among other things) the nature of Scripture, the nature of truth, the role of doctrine in the church, the task of theology, appropriate Christian living, and even the role of pastors and bishops in the church. This ambitious project works within the framework of the Scripture principle as it was developed by Protestant orthodox theologians, but it recasts the understanding of Scripture within that framework. Vanhoozer claims that the character of the Bible is dramatic, by which he means it brings together both word and deed to show, rather than tell, us how to live in light of God's presence, speech, and action in the world. Doctrine is also dramatic, in that it provides direction for how Christians of subsequent generations can and should find their place in the drama of the Bible. We have a role to play in the ongoing work of God. The Bible provides the script by which we act, but that script allows improvisation as we enact it in different "theaters" for different "audiences." With Scripture as the norm and doctrine as the guide, Christians can be confident that their enactment of the faith in their own time and place is both truthful and fitting.

As Vanhoozer constructs his canonical-linguistic approach to theology, he seems most concerned to distinguish it from two alternatives, a simply propositional understanding of Scripture and the cultural-linguistic approach that was developed by the "Yale" school of narrative theologians, with George Lindbeck as the prime example. Regarding the former, Vanhoozer skillfully redevelops the Protestant orthodox doctrine of

Scripture so that he is able to affirm its major points (such as the unique role of Scripture as norm, its unique inspiration, its sufficiency, clarity, authority, etc.) without adopting its emphasis on true assertions. He achieves this feat by shifting attention to truthfulness as fitting enactment. God used just these words to say what God wanted to say, but these words chosen by God serve the purpose of prompting us to a certain kind of life. Regarding the latter, Vanhoozer recognizes that his concern for enactment means he has to pay attention to the community as well as Scripture, but he rejects Lindbeck's way of doing so because in his view Lindbeck has made the community the norm for Christian faith rather than the Bible. His term "canonical-linguistic" refers to the central role of Scripture as norm, even as it also recognizes the importance of the church as linguistic community in and through which we improvise how to play our roles.

As he develops his constructive proposal, Vanhoozer turns not to ancient Greek drama, as does Quash, but to contemporary studies of drama. The word "improvise," for example, may seem to imply freedom to do anything, but Vanhoozer shows how actual improvisation in theater relies on thorough knowledge of character, following certain "rules" of interaction, and paying attention to the goal of the performance. Christian improvisation, then, cannot take place without deep understanding of the drama that has already taken place in the Bible or without the guidance that doctrine can give. Vanhoozer uses theoretical analysis of drama to good effect, especially in reconceiving the atonement. He employs technical dramatic language coming from improvisation to describe how God responds to, uses, and transforms the crucifixion into the central reconciling event of history.

Vanhoozer argues, as Frei once did about narrative, that drama fits the character of the Bible and so it makes sense to turn to theory of drama to understand Christian faith. The categories that come from drama, though, are utilized in such a complicated way that they are not always clear. For instance, dramas need directors, but the Holy Spirit, doctrine, and even bishops and pastors all direct. Even if humans serve as "assistant directors," another problem emerges. Pastors, for instance, turn out to be both assistant directors and players. Doctrine both gives direction and advises directors (as dramaturge). Script and improvisation are sometimes in tension because performances with scripted dialogue are quite different from performances without scripted dialogue. Vanhoozer admits that any analogy has its limits, but the difficulty of applying dramatic categories consistently raises quite a few questions about those limits that he does not address.

Furthermore, Vanhoozer, especially in the second half of his book, draws from many other analogies besides drama. If the idea is that the character of the Bible itself supports drama as the superior comparison, then it seems odd that numerous other comparisons (narrative, grammar, music, games, maps) make their way back into the discussion. At one point, Vanhoozer develops the idea of the Bible as an atlas, containing different maps to help us find our way. He connects the “direction” that a map gives to the “direction” that is needed in drama, but most maps by themselves (for instance, without a highlighted route) do not supply direction. What they do is provide a description of the territory that can be used to find one’s way to many different places on it. Dramatic direction is different from the orientation that a map provides, and the need to make drama the central image results in a forced comparison.

This abundance of mixed metaphors in Vanhoozer’s work calls to my mind an observation Stephen Toulmin once made about models in science. Scientists use models to explain the phenomena they observe, and those models open up avenues of discovery that can provide further understanding. Treating the models as actual depictions of the phenomena, though, is very misleading and can result (especially for a layperson) in misunderstanding. Theologians do well to keep in mind that the metaphors we use to understand the Bible can also be misleading. The Bible is not any more a stage production than it is a novel. Quash and Vanhoozer treat narrative as a genre of literature that is finally limited (and perhaps unsuited) for displaying features of the Bible, theology, and history that help Christians live their faith, but drama as a genre will also fall short. While theologians use drama as a welcome new model to explore enactment, we should be careful not to treat it as another general study into which Christian faith needs to be fit (the problem that Frei warned about initially). The fact that Quash and Vanhoozer explain and use drama in very different ways underscores its suggestive, rather than definitive, character.

To my way of thinking, both narrative and drama as specific genres come into existence because they represent something deep in human life, that is, a way of thinking (for instance, connecting events or ideas into an understandable whole) and acting (for instance, concretizing or embodying something that has been imagined) that we employ across many different kinds of human endeavors. That is why so many different metaphors can be used to illumine what the Bible or theology is like. Rather than play these illuminating comparisons off each other so that one seems better or more central than another, we would do well to see how they support each other to help us understand the fullness and complexity of Christian faith.

As a woman, I cannot help but have another concern. It is one thing to

recognize the need for fitting enactment in new situations; it is another to face hindrances to enactment that arise from past performances in the Bible or history. These books stress faithful creativity, but they do not pay much attention to how hard it can sometimes be to take one's place in the ongoing drama. To his credit, Vanhoozer does discuss how revised understandings of the past are possible and how the Holy Spirit may lead us into "new truths" that need not contradict the old. What I continue to wonder is the extent to which in his understanding "just these words" that God assured would be written down by the apostles can be understood differently. What actually happens when the words "women should be silent in the churches" provide the script for thinking about women's preaching, especially as ordained ministers? Does the category "improvisation" allow us to enact the opposite of what is said? This question has relevance for many issues beyond those specific to women and may provide a sort of test for the fruitfulness of this approach. It remains to be seen whether drama is helpful for working through problems such as these, or whether commitments quite apart from drama will determine how those questions are answered.