

Can You Tell the Whole Story of the Bible? ¹

The Bible tells a big story. There are so many details and characters. For this reason, people have a hard time keeping story straight. For many, the Bible seems like a random collection of stories that somehow loosely tie together in the person of Christ. It's something of a mystery exactly how one part of the Bible fits with another. That's the work of theologians (so one might say).

Ask yourself a question. Could you retell the grand story of Scripture in a coherent way that makes sense of the whole Bible? Let me adjust the question. In the story that you would tell, does Israel play a prominent part, or does it function more as scenery on the way to the cross?

We tend to skip from the Garden to the cross. We can be a bit uncomfortable with the Old Testament, not knowing its relevance to us today. Sadly, it often becomes nothing more than the material from which we teach children about God before they "graduate" to Paul as adults. Sure, we may mention the Law, the need for sacrifice, and predictions from the prophets. However, our comments tend to be general and quick.

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Can They...



What about those with whom we minister? Are they able to tell the whole story from beginning to end in a coherent way? Can they make sense of the various themes and motifs so as to tell one grand story? If our people can discuss soteriology, ecclesiology, and other topics of systematic theology but they can't recount the grand biblical narrative (including the various aspects of Israel's history), then perhaps we are aiming too low?

If they/we are better at systematic theology (abstracted and topic focused) than biblical theology (focused on exegesis in context), then they/we are falling into a dangerous trap? Our assumptions and traditions will subtly consume our regard for Scripture. We will assume theological conclusions prior to interpreting the passage in its own context. This is how we get syncretism. As I have mentioned in [Saving God's Face](#) and in [another article](#), there are at least two kinds of syncretism—cultural syncretism and theological syncretism. The former leaves Scripture; the latter limits Scripture.

**Biblical
Theology is not
based on
Evangelistic
Methods**

However, good evangelism comes out of good biblical theology. We should not reverse the process—moving *from* a specific methods or presentation *to* a biblical theology. In that situation, our favorite formulation will end up biasing our reading of Scripture, blinding us to themes not already included in our evangelistic method.

We need to develop tools that help us go the other direction—*from* biblical theology *to* evangelistic presentations. This just seems to me to make a lot of sense. To paraphrase C. S. Lewis: put second things first, we lose the first and second things. Put first things first, we get first and second things thrown in.

**We need a
model
that...**

Gives a structure for understanding the entire biblical narrative, balancing the various themes and doctrines. It needs to take seriously themes related to honor-shame while not making it difficult to incorporate other motifs.

1

Provides a [context for interpretation](#). After all, [context is king](#).

2

Offers a framework for evangelism.

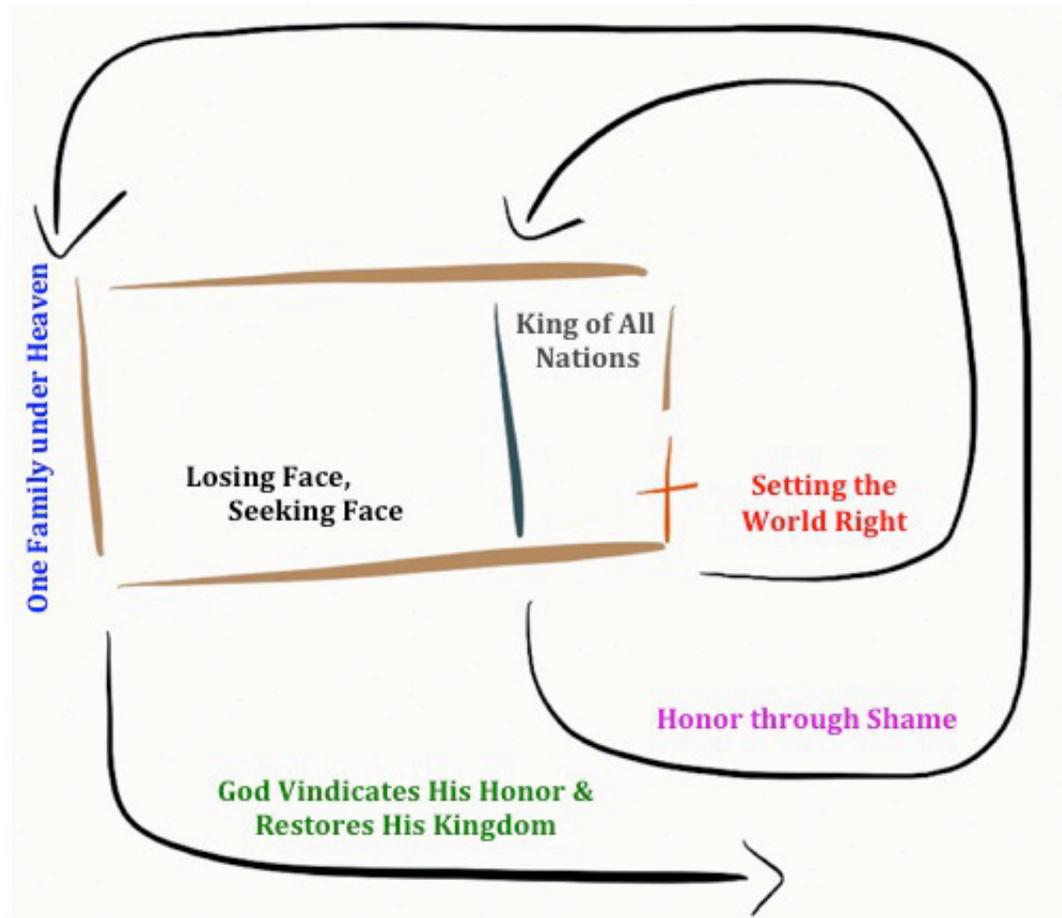
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I did not say that every detail must be shared in any given EV conversation. However, it does assist us in balancing our rendering of the story. We need help for those evangelistic conversations that last more than 2-3 minutes. (I've been asked a thousand times, "What would you say if you only had 2-3 minutes?" My point is simply that we should not aim so low.)

Lends itself to being easily reproduced across various settings.

4

Six Stages of the Biblical Story



The following is only a concise summary of the narrative for each point. These brief comments are certainly not exhaustive of all that can and should be said concerning that section of the story. For now, I simply want to capture its essence for the sake of explaining how to understand the graph and its six stages.

A Brief Summary of Each Movement

1. 天下一家: One Family Under Heaven

The Creator God is Father and King over the human family.

Being made in God's image, humanity should reflect the glory of the heavenly Father. He created the world to be his kingdom. In the beginning, there was harmony in creation. Humans were set apart from the rest of creation. In the "cultural mandate," the Father-King gave them a special vocation—to rule the world on God's behalf (cf. Gen 1–2; Ps 104).

2. 丢脸争面: Losing Face, Seeking Face

him. Humans have forsaken their father and betrayed the world's true king. As a result, people have lost true and lasting face (脸), that which marks us as being fully human. Sadly, people seek to regain an inferior kind of face (面子), one that is fleeting and superficial. Consequently, human relationships are also fractured. The world is now full of shame. Humanity is all enslaved to sin, that is, the disgraceful ambitions and actions that characterize this cursed world (cf. Genesis 3, 4, 11).

All people have defamed God's name and broken relationship with

3. 万民之王: King of All Nations

made a covenant with Abraham, promising that all nations would be blessed through Abraham's offspring. From Abraham came the nation of Israel, whom God planned to use as a means of blessing the whole world. He rescued them from an oppressive nation and gave them a law, which was meant to teach them what it meant to be a righteous people. God intended to use Israel to show himself as the King of all nations. However, Israel repeated the error of her earliest ancestors. They rejected the one true God as King. Instead of enjoying God's blessing, they fell under a curse. Therefore, because they choose to worship created things rather than the Creator, God sent them into exile. Their sin put them to shame; yet God never forgot his promise to Abraham.

God takes the initiative to restore harmony to the world. He graciously

4. 拨乱反正: Setting the World Right

vindicate the Father's honor and set the world right. He would defeat God's enemies, becoming the king (Christ) over Israel and the world. Jesus was the offspring promised to Abraham (and David). In life, Christ perfectly honored his Heavenly Father, confronting the world's evil, whether demons, disease, death, or other dominions. For this reason, his people killed him. As Israel's king, Christ was able in death to bear Israel's curse upon himself. Because he is also the true king of the world, he represents true humanity. Therefore, Christ resurrection from the dead signifies his victory over sin and death. He became the means through which all nations would be blessed.

God sent Jesus into the world to

5. 以辱为荣: Honor through Shame

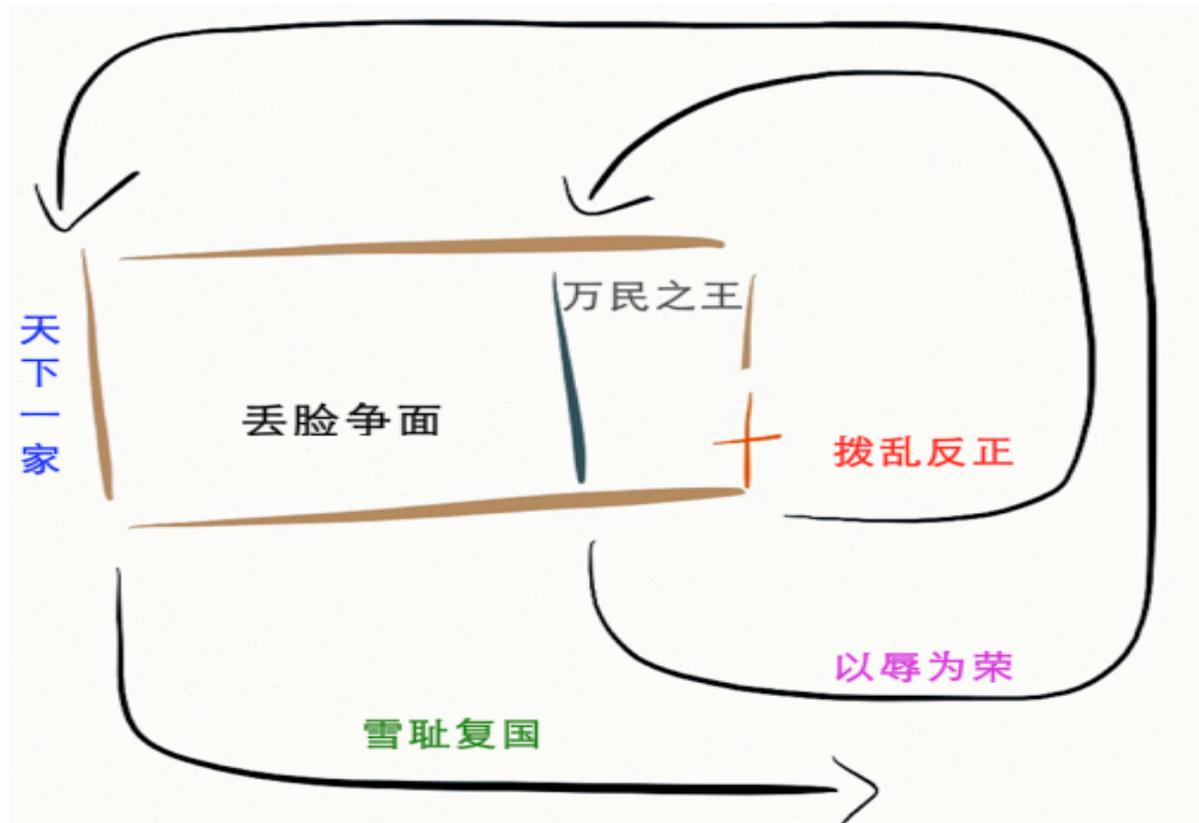
sends his Spirit to his adopted children, those who have repented of their shameful disloyalty. No longer afraid of death, God's people go into the world announcing the coming of the world's true king—Jesus Christ—sent from the Creator. Although God's children live in the world, they are not of the world. This means that God has radically changed how they see life. What the world regards as disgraceful, the Father sees as honorable (for example, the cross). Christians understand that they—like Christ—must endure shame on the way to glory.

All who honor Christ are set free from slavery of sin. The Father

6. 雪耻复国: God Vindicates His Honor & Restores His Kingdom

Ultimately, God as King will judge the world, ridding it of corruption. In so doing, God's glory will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea. His children will also be glorified with resurrected bodies. The one true God will create a new heaven and new earth. The nations are reconciled with the Father and each other. God keeps his promises. Harmony is restored to creation.

WHY THESE NAMES FOR THE STAGES?



In order to help people remember the big movements within the biblical narrative, it is helpful to give them “verbal hangers,” which capture the key idea of the period. The best theological contextualization occurs when our presentations highlight the prominent themes that overlap Scripture and the culture.

1. 天下一家 (tiānxià yī jiā): One Family Under Heaven
2. 丢脸争面 (diūliǎn zhēngmiàn): Losing Face, Seeking Face
3. 万民之王 (wànmín zhī wáng): King of All Nations
4. 拨乱反正 (bō luàn fǎn zhèng): Setting the World Right
5. 以辱为荣 (yǐ rǔ wéi róng): Honor through Shame
6. 雪耻复国 (xuěchǐ fùguó): God Vindicates His Honor & Restores His Kingdom

A few themes reappear in the section titles, such as family, kingship, honor and shame. The titles themselves attempt to convey the magisterial and cosmic scope of the Bible: “under heaven,” “all nations,” “king,” “world,” “kingdom.” In other words, we’re not talking about some local mythology about one particular deity among others.

The interweaving of themes helps create coherency and maintains balance to the story. We do not want to present the grand story of Scripture in a half-baked way. Splicing together seeming disparate pieces will only confuse our listeners . . . not to mention ourselves.

In addition, the blending of the themes within the titles keeps us from veering off track and overemphasizing one motif over against another. We need to recognize afresh that the various images in the Bible are intermingled. Thus, we do well to demonstrate their interrelationship as best we can within our own retelling of the Story.

For now, I simply give an outline that summarizes the grand biblical narrative. In order to clearly and concisely summarize the big story of the Bible, we ourselves have to

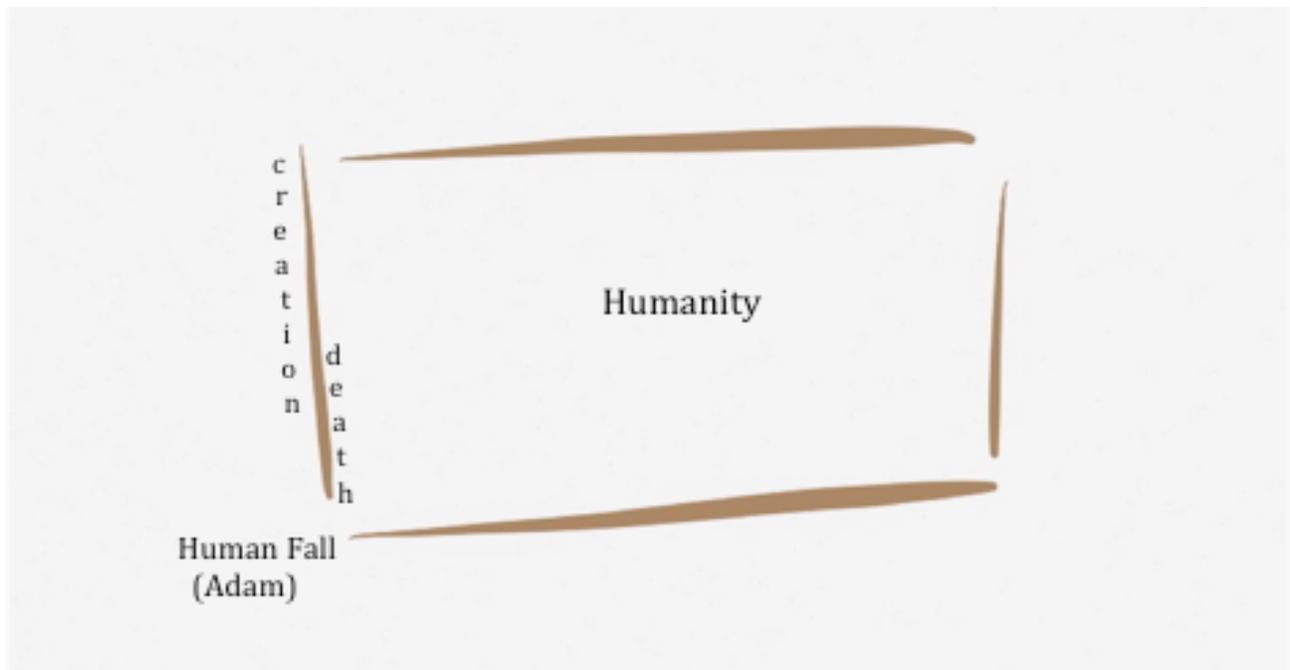
- (1) be able to remember it, and . . .**
- (2) understand how the parts relate to each other.**

Whether you like or don’t like the 6 points I have suggested, I think these principles are important to any model of biblical theology.

How Do We Do “Theology from a Box”?

This section explains step by step how to tell the whole story of the Bible. From the beginning, my aim has been to develop a model that is coherent, reproducible, faithful to Scripture, and balances a variety of biblical themes. Accordingly, I take seriously the theme of honor-shame in the Bible.

天下一家： One Family Under Heaven



The Bible starts with creation. The Creator God is Father and King over the human family. Being made in God’s image, humanity should to reflect the glory of the heavenly Father. He created the world to be his kingdom. In the beginning, there was harmony in creation. Humans were set apart from the rest of creation. In the “cultural mandate,” the Father-King gave them a special vocation—to rule the world on God’s behalf.

A few words about the box

*The picture above represents the fallen human world, enslaved to sin (representing by the box).

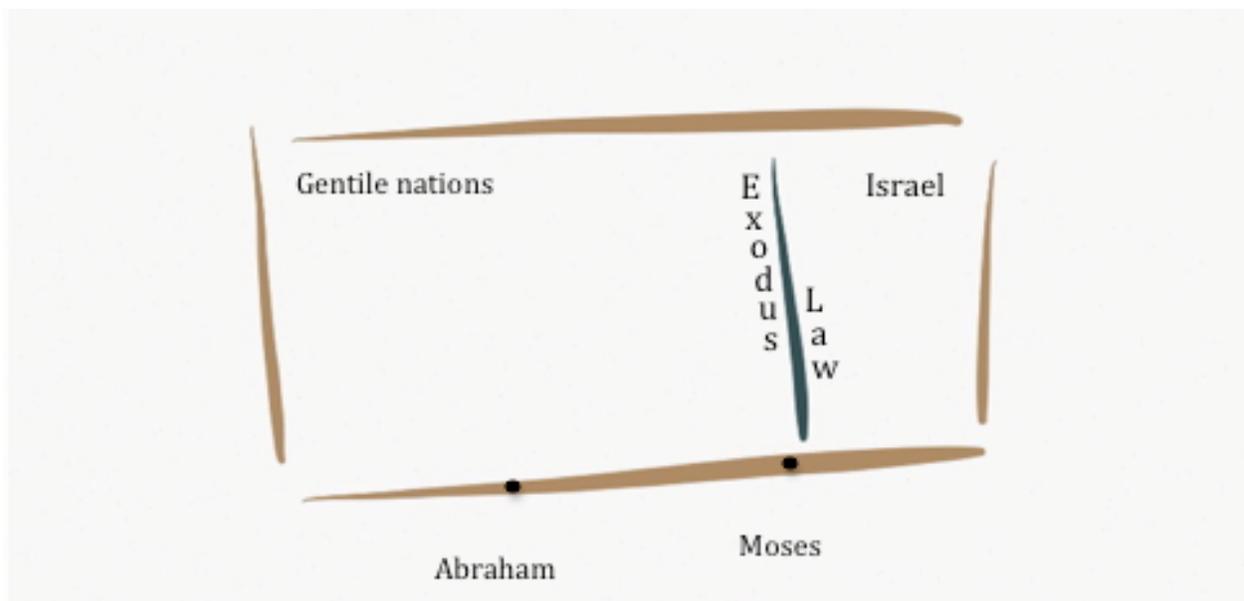
The bottom line of the box represents a time line. At the bottom left corner is Adam. Along the way, we will add Abraham, Moses, and others. A time line helps us track the sequence of events. In this way, no matter where one opens the Bible, the reader can where he or she is in the overall story. Stories by nature have a flow; they are not abstractions. One reason for beginning with this simple picture is that anyone can draw a rectangle (depicting the world as a box whose bottom side is a time line).

丢脸争面: Losing Face, Seeking Face

All people have defamed God's name and broken relationship with him. Humans have forsaken their father and betrayed the world's true king. As a result, people have lost true and lasting face (脸), that which marks us as being fully human. Sadly, people seek to regain a kind of face (面子) that is fleeting and superficial. Consequently, human relationships are also fractured. The world is now full of shame. Humanity is all enslaved to sin, the disgraceful ambitions and actions that characterize this cursed world.

With the fall of the human family, people became enslaved to sin. Because sin is our master (cf. Rom 6), the world is like a box that confines and imprisons us. Inside the world (box) is death, curse, and shame.

万民之王: The King of All Nations



What is Israel's role within the biblical story?

God established Israel for the sake of the nations. God made a covenant with Abraham, promising that through his offspring, all nations would be blessed. (As a significant side note, Paul explicitly calls this promise "the gospel" in Gal 3:8). Israel is God's strategy to overcome the curse and death ushered in by the failure of humanity beginning with Adam.

In time, God rescues Abraham's descendants, who have become a nation called Israel, who are slaves in Egypt. God uses Moses to lead through on an exodus from Egypt, through the Red Sea, on their way to the Promised Land (Canaan). At Mount Sinai, God formally establishes a covenant with Israel, giving them a Law through which the Creator would reveal himself as the king not only of Israel but also of all nations. He even identifies a particular line of kings through whom he would send a king to rule over all then nations (cf. 2 Sam 7; 1 Chron 17). As a Father to a son, so God would be to this promised king. In this way, Israel is God's strategy and solution for the problem that confronts all nations.

A fundamental problem remains in this picture. Israel remains firmly within the box of this world. Although God has chosen to be a father and king to Abraham's offspring, they repeated many of the same struggles and failures that plague humanity as a whole. In many respects, Israel is a microcosm of the world.

According to Mosaic covenant, Israel falls under a curse for disobeying God's Law. Just as sin brought death to all men, so Israel's rebellion brought exile to the nation. In some sense, God's covenant with Abraham (then Moses) creates two kinds of people—Jews and Gentiles. From another perspective, all people are alike—falling short of the glory of God, enslaved to sin and death. How was God to both curse Israel yet bring a blessing to and through them?

Why and How the Model Explains Israel

In some respect, this section is most pivotal to developing and depicting the grand biblical narrative. For one thing, the Israel story is overwhelmingly under explained in gospel presentations. Second, the role of Israel is one of the most debated points within many people's theology. Israel is the subject of endless conjecture. The speculation confuses many Christians, who eventually set much of the Old Testament aside as mere background to the New Testament.

The challenge we face is to avoid two extremes. On the one end, we don't want to make too much of Israel (i.e. some expressions of dispensationalism). On the other hand, we must not overlook the essential role that Israel plays in the gospel story. Our understanding of Israel will establish a framework through which we interpret the rest of the Bible..

Telling the Story with a Picture

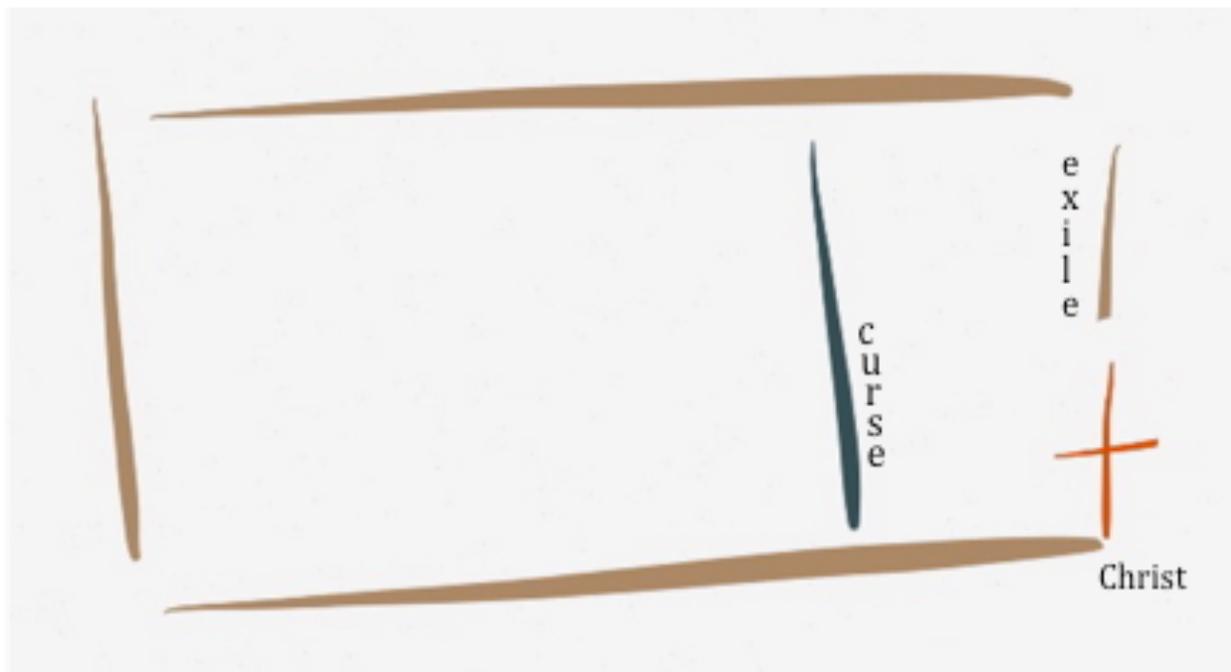
Visually speaking, notice that theological parallels (or "types") are built into the model. The smaller box typologically or symbolically correlates to the larger box (in which all humans live).

Israel's story echoes the creation story. Israel's exodus recalls the creation narrative. God divides the water from the land, bringing order/freedom out of chaos/slavery. From this, he created a royal people who were to reflect him as sons to a father. Although these people were supposed to inherent the world/land, their blessing turned into a curse. They forsook their vocation in the world. Death and expulsion from the Garden (Gen 3) finds its parallel in the Exile from the Promised Land.

拨乱反正: Jesus Sets the World Right

How are we to understand Christ within the grand narrative of Scripture? After all, Jesus himself said that all Scripture was about him (cf. Luke 24:27, 44–48).

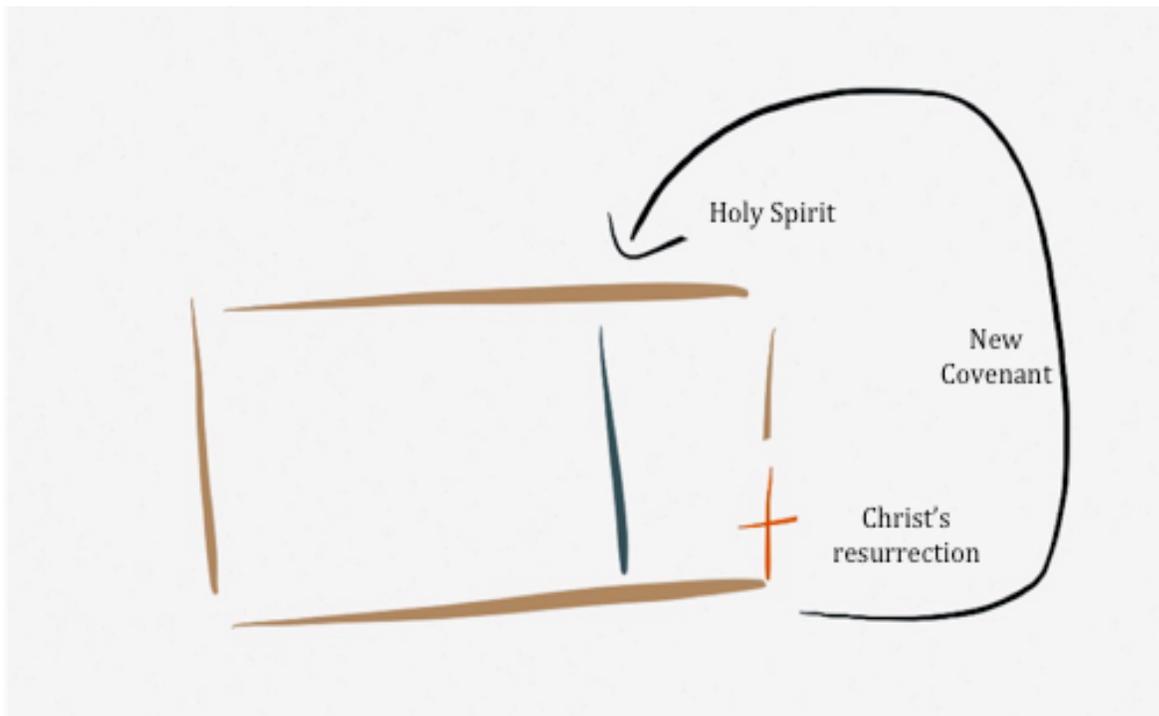
Previously, I said that the box represents the world enslaved to sin. The bottom line/side of the box is a time line of biblical history. The smaller box on the right signifies Israel within the world.



Thus far, the model has readied us for Christ's arrival. Put simply, Jesus came to set the world right. Jesus is the promised royal seed of Abraham and David (hence the name "Christ").

Jesus was born under the Law, yet he was not subject to the enslaving power of sin and death. In fact, he honored God the Father when he exposed evil, shame and corrupted powers in the world. Nevertheless, his own people rejected the promised king, whom God sent to reconcile the human family. They executed him by nailing him to a cross, enduring the shame of sinful men. According to God's covenant with Israel, anyone who hung dead on a tree would be cursed.

Because Jesus is king, he represents Israel and thus is able to take away her curse.



In life and in death, Christ perfectly honored his heavenly Father. Therefore, God vindicated Christ by raising him from the dead. The resurrection announces the defeat of God's enemies. At the cross, Jesus condemned sin, humanity's oppressive slave master (cf. Rom 8:3). The resurrection indicates that God accepts Jesus' sacrifice as recompense, securing our redemption. God's people are no longer set apart by the Mosaic Law, bound by its demands and curse. Jesus' blood establishes a new covenant (Jer 31; Ezek 36; Heb 8, 10; Luke 22).

How to Read the Picture

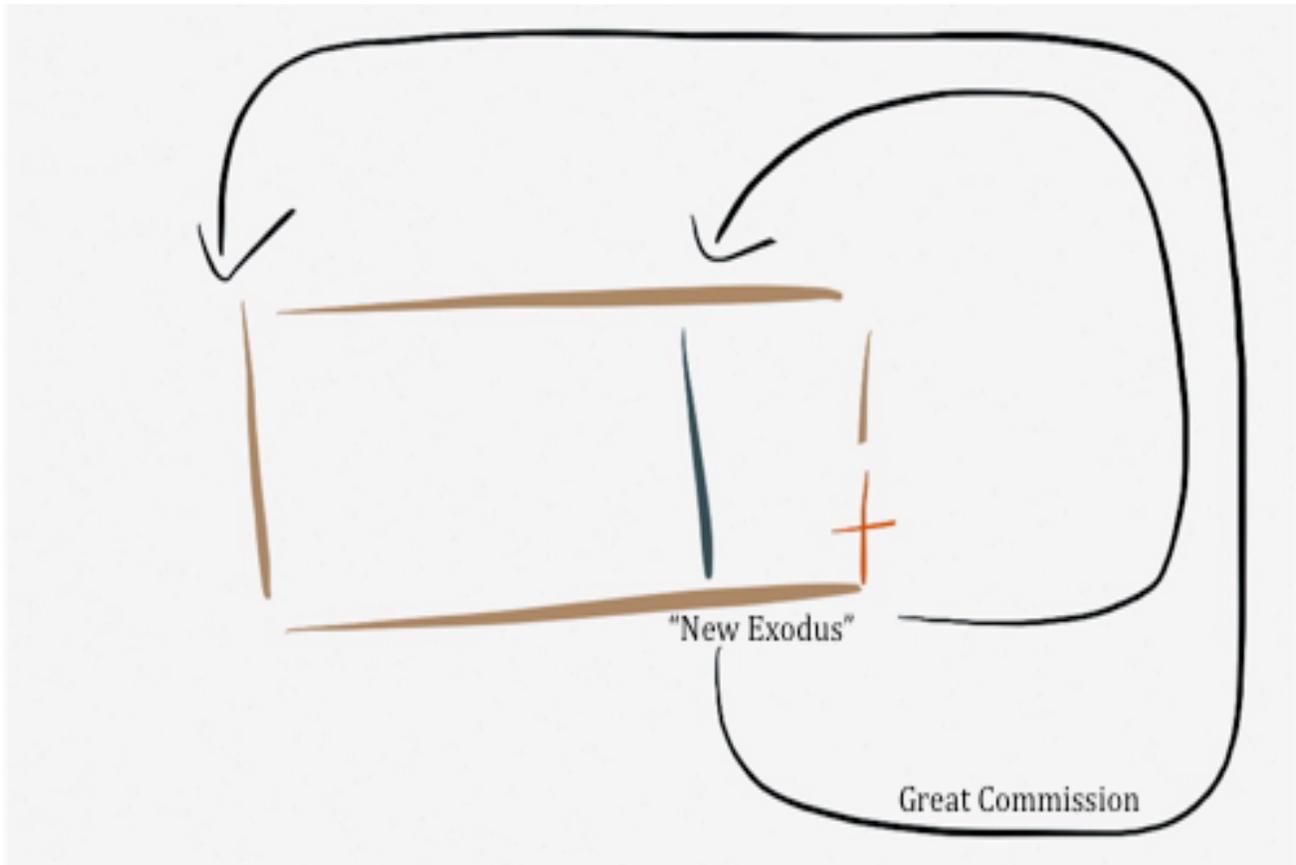
Notice the cross at the center of the graphic is the turning point. From here, we see on the time line that God's people break free from the confines of slavery (inside the box). This is the result of Christ's resurrection, which initiates the restoration of Israel. Note the line circles back to the box, at the place where the original "exodus" occurred.

Keep in mind that God always promised to reunite Israel (cf. Ezek 37:21–22). This is why Jesus in Matt 10:5–6 says, "These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (cf. Matt 15:24). In the next section of the story, we will see how God's blessing now extends to the nations.

The Holy Spirit now leads Christ's followers. God reconstitutes his people around Jesus' 12 disciples, who symbolize the restored Israel. This freedom signals a return from exile for God's people. Perhaps, one might call Christ's salvation a "new exodus."

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以辱为荣: Honored through Shame



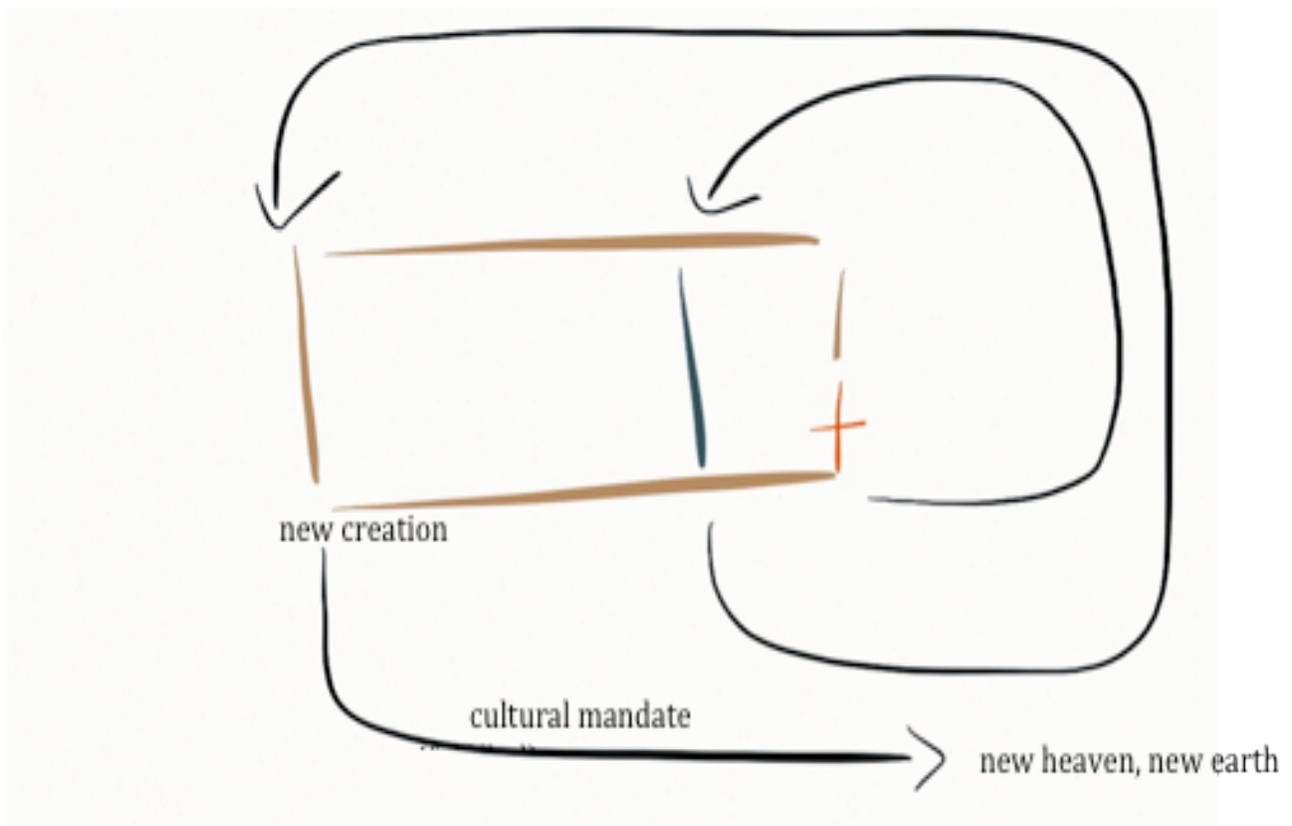
Jesus overturns the world's understanding of honor and shame. When people give their loyalty to Christ, they have died and are raised with him. They share in his honor and shame. Although not of the world, they are to live in it. In a sense, they become aliens and exiles within the world.

As the true image of God, Christ manifests the divine glory. As a man, he represents all humanity (being "the last Adam," 1 Cor 15:45). As Abraham's offspring, Jesus entered the world to fulfill Israel's vocation and bless all nations. How?

Christ commissions his people to go into the world. Some have called this the "Great Commission." The Church proclaims to all that Jesus is the king who defeats evil, whether sin, social powers, demons, and death. The nations have betrayed the King of kings, colonizing his world. Yet, God offers pardon because Jesus has paid humanity's debt.

In this way, Christ now gathers the nations to himself.

雪耻复国： God Vindicates His Honor & Restores His Kingdom



He avenges humanity's shameful rebellion and thus vindicates his honor. He fully establishes his kingdom in the world. When all nations recognize Christ as King, humanity is restored. In this way, humanity completes its original mission: to represent God in the world. Some have called this "the cultural mandate."

This future hope is nothing less than a new creation. God will bring about a new heaven and new earth. When Jesus returns to the world, he will judge his enemies and glorify his people. They will receive resurrected bodies. Humanity will be reconciled with itself and with nature. For all eternity, the human family—"a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages"—will worship our Father and King.

The Picture Shapes the Story

The lines that come out from the box not only represent the sequence of events following the cross; in addition, they represent humanity's newfound freedom. However, this freedom is used for the sake of the world's salvation. Christ's followers do not seek to glorify God in the world. Their mission is not to escape the world. Hence, the lines loop back to the world.

Notice that a new world (represented by a partial circle) is beginning to form. In Christ, there is "new creation." When God's children are revealed from amid all the nations, only then will the creation be freed from its bondage to decay.

Ideally, we can share the biblical story orally and visually. In other words, what people see in a model will reinforce what they hear with their ears.

Biblical theology is the foundation of all theology and ministry.

We must not let biblical story be confined by systematic theology, tradition, or ministry methods. Therefore, I've designed the model with a number of key features.

1

Sequence

The time line (i.e. the bottom side of the rectangle) shows the sequence of events within the biblical story. To some degree, this reduces a bit of abstraction inherent to this or any other model. The Story controls the picture rather than the other way around.

2

Balance

The model allows people to talk about a number of themes in a balanced way. Some presentations so heavily favor one theme (for example, the sacrificial motif) that it would nearly be impossible to speak coherently about other themes like kingship, creation, covenant, or honor-shame.

3

Typology

Built into the model are visual parallels that reflect thematic parallels within the biblical narrative.

For example, one easily sees how salvation can be likened to a “new exodus” and “new creation.” Likewise, Israel is situated within the world such that it acts both as a microcosm for the world yet also as the means of its blessing. Just as death rules over those within the world/box, so the curse befalls those under the Law. Also, notice that the “Great Commission” is placed in near parallel to the “Cultural Mandate.” I agree with Greg Beale and others that the former is the means of fulfillment to the latter (cf. Col 1).

4

Imagery

Subtly, other messages are conveyed. The cross stands at the center of the biblical picture, acting as the door between slavery and freedom. Christ’s people are redeemed for the world; hence the line loops back toward the box.

One can make more sense of Israel. We recognize Israel’s essential role in the story but without going to extremes—either making too much or too little of Israel.

The larger looping line depicting the gathering of the nations gives a partial picture—a sneak peak—into what God is up to in the world. He is bringing about a new creation, which is revealed in full with the salvation of all nations. A new world is taking shape.

5

Reproducibility

Whether literate or illiterate, people can draw squares and circular lines. The picture is easy to remember and explain. There is flexibility to say more or to say less. Of course, one does not have to include all the details I’ve mentioned above. I could have said much more . . . and much less. The graphic does not obligate the teacher to memorize a great mass of information; however, the advanced teacher is free to add as much detail as (s)he might wish.

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