

# The Story of a System<sup>1</sup>

Vincent Cheung

Copyright © 2008 by Vincent Cheung. All rights reserved.

PO Box 15662, Boston, MA 02215, USA

<http://www.vincentcheung.com>

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION.  
Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of  
Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

---

<sup>1</sup> The following is an edited correspondence, with a revised and expanded response.

You advocate systematic theology as the most important thing that a person can study. However, there is also biblical theology. How do these relate?

Systematic theology is topical. Biblical theology is linear, in the form of story. It seems to me that the Bible is much more than merely systematic theology. The Bible is about God gaining glory from both the salvation and damnation of men and angels. God demonstrates who he is, but by way of story.

Let me tell you a story about a bunny. His name is Roger, and he lives with his parents and siblings in a small hole. Since they treat one another with love and respect, the space does not usually feel too cramped. And whenever he needs some fresh air, he can always go for a stroll.

One Sunday morning, Roger woke up much earlier than usual. Not a church-going bunny, he would usually sleep until noon on Sundays. But this morning he was awakened when his sister, Marlene, kicked him in the face with her big foot. He was just about to give her a piece of his mind when she rolled over and mumbled something about carrots. Roger sighed, and decided that he would postpone his revenge – right now he wanted to go back to sleep.

Two hours later, Roger was still awake and his eyes were red with frustration. He was too hungry! And so he decided to venture outside to look for food.

There are many lawns in his neighborhood. As Roger trespasses into each one, he was careful to avoid detection by the dogs. He was convinced that they would be overjoyed to capture him for a special Sunday brunch. He jumped over here...sniff, sniff. He hopped over there...sniff, sniff...looking for something delicious.

Suddenly, he tripped over a rock and fell face first on the grass. He was dazed for a few seconds, but soon recovered. Boy, he was angry! He whirled around to curse at the rock – like I said, he was not a church-going bunny – but then he noticed that it was not a rock at all.

What was it? It was a thick rectangular object, shaped like a brick, but this was not like any brick that Roger ever saw. So he moved closer, and as he shoved his head forward to sniff at it, he saw that there were words written on the top of this brick-like object. Although his mother had taught him the entire alphabet and to read some simple signs, the words on the object were too advanced for him: "Institutes of the Christian Religion, by John Calvin."

Ah! It was what we humans call a book. And in this case, it was a systematic theology. But Roger did not know that. Always the curious one, he flipped through each page with his paws, scanning each line:

....., .....  
....., .....

....., ..... , .....

[Although my illustration could be made more realistic by reproducing Calvin's *Institutes* in full here, I doubt that the reader would tolerate this. So at the risk of dulling the effect, imagine in this place the full text of Calvin's *Institutes* or any other work in systematic theology that spans at least a thousand pages.]

....., ..... , .....  
....., ..... , .....  
....., ..... , .....

Roger did not understand most of the words. And since the book was obviously not edible – well, he was not *that* hungry – he walked away from the book and moved on to the next lawn, hoping to finally find one of those carrots that Marlene was mumbling about....

A story is an account of events. According to this definition, the above would certainly count as a story. But if someone asks me to tell him a story, and I comply by relating Roger's Sunday experience to him, he would rightly observe that the story is merely an excuse to teach him systematic theology.

In a moment we will consider just how much the Bible is like Roger's story, but right now the point is that just because something is presented as a story does not mean that the whole thing is a story. As noted, broadly speaking, a story is an account of events, but it makes a difference when many speeches and letters are intertwined with the account of these events. It is premature to place the greater emphasis on the Bible as story until we consider how much of this story in fact consists of speeches, letters, and other forms of non-narrative discourses.

We should first define some terms. Both systematic and biblical theology are "biblical" in the sense that both of them are derived from and faithful to the content of the Bible. Thus the term "biblical theology" can generate some confusion unless we remember that the emphasis is in the arrangement of the content, and not the source of the content. Systematic theology is a synthesis and presentation of biblical revelation in a topical and logical arrangement. When we call it "logical," we do not imply that biblical theology is illogical, but again we refer to the arrangement, so that one item logically proceeds to the next. As for biblical theology, it is a synthesis and presentation of biblical revelation in a historical or chronological arrangement, following the order of events as they appear in the Bible.

As an account of events, a story can be historical or fictional. We may also call it a narrative. When we refer to the Bible as story, it is understood that we consider it an account of historical events – incidents that happened in specific times and locations. Some theologians contend that, as story, the Bible lends itself to biblical theology. Their views regarding systematic theology vary from thinking that it is a permissible

contextualization of the biblical data to an altogether unnatural enterprise that does violence to the text in order to satisfy man's lust for systemization.

At this point, even the assumption that the Bible more readily lends itself to biblical theology than to systematic theology is premature. Just how much of this "story" consists of accounts of events? Just how much of this "story" consists of accounts of discourses, as in speeches and letters? I flipped through every portion of the Bible to make a rough estimate, which would be sufficient for our purpose.

Let us say that Genesis is a narrative, as well as a significant portion of Exodus. But after this, Exodus 20-40, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy are proclamations and expositions of the law of God, not narrative as such. Let us say that all the books from Joshua to Esther are narratives, and for the sake of simplicity, we will not count the discourses in these books. Job contains one discourse after another, and hardly any narrative material. Read through the Psalms – these are not narratives. Likewise, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are discourses. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel are mostly discourses. Daniel contains narratives, and emphasizes discourses in the form of prophecy toward the end. The twelve minor prophets, from Hosea to Malachi, are almost entirely discourses. Hosea, Haggai, and Zechariah include some narratives. The narrative element is prominent in Jonah.

Turning to the New Testament, except for Mark, more than half of each Gospel consists of discourses, and this estimate includes only the discourses of Jesus, not those made by the Gospel writers. Although Acts contains many significant discourses, most of the sections should be classified as narratives. Then, all the letters, from Romans to Jude, are classified as discourses. Revelation is apocalyptic material – I would classify it as discourse, but let us call the whole of Revelation narrative except for the letters to the seven churches.

An estimate that defines narratives and discourses in the biblical books in the above manner yields the following figures. The Old Testament consists of 63% discourses, and the New Testament consists of 67% discourses. Together, the Bible consists of 64-65% discourses. This alone would make it obvious that the simple designation of the Bible as "story" is deceptive.

There are two more factors to consider. First, recall that we have not counted the discourses in the books that we have classified as wholly narratives, such as 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, and 1 & 2 Chronicles. In other words, many discourses were ignored, so that the figures are in fact biased *against* the number of discourses in the Bible. Second, an overwhelming number of the narrative portions of Scripture provide readily usable data for theological systematization, often even apart from the narrative context itself. Discourses may remain at 65%, but passages that lend themselves to systemization (including these discourses) could be between 80-95% of the Bible.

Again, it is admitted that these figures were produced by a very rough procedure of calculation, and if one distrusts it, he should comb through the Bible to confirm this

estimate. In any case, simply bringing to our awareness the fact that much of the Bible consists of discourses and not narratives as such is sufficient to make my point, that is, it is inaccurate and deceptive to say that the Bible is "story" and therefore lends itself to biblical theology more readily than to systematic theology. This claim contradicts the plain presentation of Scripture as an account of events that devotes more space to discourses than narratives.

There is no need to denigrate story. Indeed, much of the Bible consists of historical narratives, or story, but it is also true that most of it is not story, but discourses. Just as it would reflect inferior scholarship to stress the narrative aspect of Roger's story, when over a thousand pages of it consists of a systematic theology, it would be misleading to stress the narrative aspect of Scripture to the neglect and detriment of the discourses and systematic portions. However, this is what many people do. When this happens, it is likely that an intellectual bias is involved, that is, they harbor a prejudice against logical systems, and a preference for stories.

Those who insist that the Bible is primarily narrative in nature, and that this premise should dominate all of our exegesis, theology, and preaching, are not seeing the Bible for what it is. Their religious or philosophical disposition favors this false view of the Bible, but it does not reflect reality. The truth is that the Bible contains both narratives and discourses. It is both a story and a system, both historical and theological, and it is presented in a manner that intertwines both the story and the system. There is no need to denigrate either.

Sometimes it is alleged that God speaks in narratives only, and that systematic theology (even if legitimate and necessary) is a "human" product, organizing the data in the narratives into logical form. This is false. The Bible itself contains discourses of systematic theology, in logical or topical form, sometimes in similar arrangements as our own theological expositions. Paul's Areopagus speech is one example of systematic theology (Acts 17:22-31).<sup>2</sup> Then, Colossians 1:15-23 assumes, if not presents, a system of theology with christology as its central motif.<sup>3</sup> It is sometimes said, "The Bible is story or history, not a textbook in systematic theology." But in the light of these and many other biblical passages, sometimes large sections of systematic expositions of theology, this is a deceptive characterization.

And of course the Bible also contains examples of biblical theology. Consider Stephen's speech in Acts 7 – a brilliant piece of biblical theology with the Jews' resistance against the Holy Spirit as its central motif. Therefore, we must acknowledge both systematic theology and biblical theology in Scripture. They are distinguishable and they perform different purposes, but they are intimately intertwined, and they inform and serve each other.

Finally, we turn our attention to the statements, "It seems to me that the Bible is much more than merely systematic theology. The Bible is about God gaining glory from both

---

<sup>2</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Presuppositional Confrontations*.

<sup>3</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Commentary on Colossians*.

the salvation and damnation of men and angels. God demonstrates who he is, but by way of story." They are highly misleading. If the Bible is more than systematic theology, it is also more than biblical theology. And it is insufficient to say that God demonstrates who he is by way of story, if the story is like the account of Roger's Sunday hunt for food. If we wish to insist that God glorifies himself by way of story, then let us also admit that the story he tells contains more discourses than narratives.