Middle Narratives as an Aspect of Biblical Theology

Memory has become a topic of interest in biblical studies. As a category for thinking about the past, it has several advantages over the more traditional term “history.” One advantage is its being an English equivalent to Hebrew and Greek words that do come in the Bible, as “history” is not. Remembering is a key imperative in the Old Testament, especially in Deuteronomy but also elsewhere. Its significance is taken up by Jesus and by Paul (“Do this in remembrance of me”). Whereas history might seem implicitly to embrace everything, the notion of memory presupposes the selective nature of our relationship with the past, a selectivity based on the significance of the past for the present and the future. Historical study, too, works in light of the significance of the past for our concerns, but we may present it as otherwise. Further, for better and for worse a focus on memory also subverts the inclination to focus on the question whether events happened.

“History” is inclined to refer especially to the past of a community; we are inclined to add an adjective such as “personal” if we use the word to refer to an individual’s past. The opposite may apply to “memory.” In Western culture we may think of memory as an individual affair, but the Bible assumes that an entity such as Israel has a corporate memory, and modern memory studies especially emphasizes “cultural memory” or “social memory.” In biblical studies one can therefore think of the Bible as embodying, or at least including, the corporate memory of Israel and/or of the Second Temple community and/or of the early Christian community. It comprises what they wanted to remember or wanted people to remember or wanted to be remembered by.

Narrative is then the way in which an individual or a group organizes its memory, and the Scriptures are dominated by narratives that articulate the past in the form that these cultures wanted to affirm.

In particular, what I call “middle narratives” do so. I base the notion of middle narratives on the idea of middle axioms in ethics. One significance that can attach to the idea of middle axioms is that they articulate tenets lying between more concrete imperatives on one hand and more general principles on the other. The Bible talks both in terms of specific duties such as “build a wall around the roof of your house” and of general obligations such as “love your neighbor.” Middle axioms help mediate between these by providing tenets that are less specific than the former but more concrete than the latter.

In parallel, the Bible contains many individual narratives expressing theological insights: stories about Israel, about individual Israelites, about Jesus, and about the infant church. It also implies a grand theological narrative, which the creeds aim to encapsulate. In addition, however, the Bible includes a series of extensive explicit or implicit middle narratives, which form a distinctive way in which it does theology. In this paper I examine the theological implications of some of these middle narratives, consider how they may be seen as part of a grand theological narrative that emerges from the Bible as a whole and is (I suggest) a key aspect to biblical theology, and consider the relationship between the middle narratives and the grand narrative. In the terms of one of the questions suggested for the meeting of this SBL section, I am putting forward one answer to the question, “What is a 'biblical theology of the New Testament'?” A 'biblical theology of the New Testament' is, or at least involves, the drawing up of the grand narrative that extends from the Old Testament into the New.

I should note that the word narrative itself and the idea of a grand narrative are cultural clichés. Following Jean-Franҫois Lyotard himself, people who talk about narratives and about a grand narrative sometimes simply have in mind ideas or theories or worldviews. In a more traditional sense, a narrative is an account of a sequence of events. In the Bible narratives in this narrower sense are prominent, and it is narrative in this sense that I am studying.

My first middle narrative is Genesis to Kings, which is a *grand* theological narrative in its own right. At one level it is one long exercise in memory and in memory formation. I take it as reaching its final form not long after the last event it relates, during the exile; it embodies a way of understanding Israel’s history from its beginnings to the time of the community for which it was written. This assumption about its date goes against the trend in Old Testament study that reads this narrative as reflecting the Persian period, but I don’t think my reading will be greatly affected if one takes that approach. I do assume that much of the contents has a long history and I am not averse to the idea that it had seen earlier editions, but I am focusing on the work as we have it.

One way to read this middle narrative is to focus on the significance of four key figures, Abraham (who can stand for the ancestors in general), Moses, Joshua, and David. Abraham stands for the way Israel’s life is lived in the context of God’s promise to its ancestors. Moses stands for the assertion that Yahweh reigns as king in the world and over Israel. Joshua stands for the people’s entering into possession of Canaan. David stands for the way Israel’s life is lived in the context of God’s commitment to him and to Jerusalem. But the story in which these four figures stand out is framed by two further motifs characterized by some ambiguity. The story begins with God’s creation of the world and of humanity as a whole. The implication of Genesis is that God’s involvement with Israel is designed to fulfill God’s intention to bless the world, yet that motif all-but disappears within the main story. The narrative eventually ends with the unraveling of all that has preceded. The people find themselves back in the Babylonia from which Abraham had been summoned. That fate overwhelms them because more often than not they flout the will of their sovereign, expressed through Moses. It results in their losing the land into whose possession Joshua led them. The Davidic monarchy comes to end. Rudolf Bultmann called the Old Testament the story of the miscarriage of God’s plan.[[1]](#footnote-1) This understanding is inappropriate as a summary of the Old Testament as a whole but it is a fair description of Genesis to Kings.

Reading Genesis to Kings would thus be a sobering experience for Judahites during the exile. How could it not be profoundly discouraging? There are two sorts of answers to that question. One might start from Gerhard von Rad’s description of the Books of Kings, in particular, as a *Gerichtsdoxologie*, an act of praise at the justice of the judgment of God.[[2]](#footnote-2) Admittedly in light of memory studies I no longer think this description is quite right, because a *Gerichtsdoxologie* would need to be addressed to God, and the Books of Kings are addressed to people, as a statement of how they need to remember their past, but some aspects of their effect are similar. They invite people to face the facts about their story, and in this sense to make their own *Gerichtsdoxologie*. It will involve them standing naked and vulnerable before God (or owning that that such is their position). Given their story, all they can do is cast themselves on God’s mercy. But one encouragement towards their doing so is God’s showing himself as one characterized by faithfulness and mercy through their story; perhaps these qualities have not come to an end (as Lamentations notes). Another sort of encouragement in the story is God’s making those promises to Abraham, as 2 Kings 13:23 notes. More prominent is God’s making those promises to David, which have inhibited God from casting off his successors (1 Kings 15:4; 2 Kings 8:19; 19:34; 20:6). The closing scene of 2 Kings, relating the release of King Jehoiakin in exile, constitutes a sign that God has not abandoned these promises.

This first middle narrative declares, then, that God has a purpose for the world as a whole, that his plans for implementing his purpose have not so far been fulfilled, that likewise he has not been able to fulfill his purpose for Israel to be the means of implementing that purpose, but that all might not be lost.

The Scriptures’ second middle narrative is Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah. Again, I do not assume that this narrative came into existence in one go, but two things are clear. One is that the overlap between the closing verses of Chronicles and the opening of Ezra invites readers to read these works sequentially. The other is that these closing verses of Chronicles indicate that, like Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles belongs at least a few decades after that little note of hope at the end of 2 Kings, which refers to the release of King Jehoiakin in 561. Chronicles knows that Cyrus’s conquest of Babylon in 539 was a more significant indication that Yahweh was still at work. The reference to it leads into the account of the restoration of the temple in Ezra; the policies of subsequent Persian kings make possible the further works of restoration by Ezra and Nehemiah.

Chronicles begins its actual recounting of Israel’s story with David; the story from Adam through Abraham, Moses, and Joshua to Saul is told by means of a list of names occupying the first third of 1 Chronicles. Its account of David’s importance then focuses on his significance for the temple, which links with the importance of the temple in the account of the return from exile in Ezra 1—6. One could thus say that the three key figures in this middle narrative are David, Ezra, and Nehemiah, and that its focus lies on Jerusalem: its temple and its worship, Ezra’s renewal of its life, and Nehemiah’s rebuilding of its walls.

There is again some ambiguity about this middle narrative. Beginning with Adam throws into sharper light its saying nothing about God’s purpose for the world as a whole. Yet its treatment of emperors such as Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes gives them a more positive relationship to Israel and to Yahweh’s purpose than one finds in references to emperors in Genesis to Kings. At the same time, Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah frets over the fact that the community is still under the control of a superpower. While it sees Yahweh as having fulfilled his promise to restore Israel after the exile, it portrays the Second Temple community as struggling in various ways with adversity and with its own failure. And it does not reach any closure. At the end of Nehemiah, the story simply stops.

The third middle narrative I consider is the one expressed in the visions in Daniel. Here the superpowers, which were more prominent in Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah than in Genesis to Kings, come into the forefront of the narrative; and in association with that fact, the visions declare that God is going to bring his purpose for the world to its consummation. The sequence of superpowers comprises Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece. Daniel may be picking up an older scheme that began with Assyria, the actual first Middle-Eastern superpower; if so, the scheme has been adapted to fit a framework that begins with Daniel himself, living in the Babylonian period. At the other end, the scheme later comes to be adapted to include Rome, and subsequently to cover later superpowers. But within Daniel, the scheme embraces Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece, which eventually give way to the implementing of God’s reign through his people. This middle narrative, then, offers a perspective on the entire history of Israel from the exile to the end.

In Daniel 7 the animals that symbolize the empires emerge from the sea, which is likely a negative image; the sea is a symbol of dynamic power that operates independently of God, at best (in the new heavens and the new earth in Revelation 21, there is no more sea). The vision does not go back to creation but begins with the emergence of the superpowers. Their sequence involves neither consistent degeneration nor progress. Babylon is bad, Medo-Persia is less awful, Greece is truly bad. The evaluation corresponds to Judah’s experience at the hand of the empires. The last of the visions is noteworthy for its detailed account of the conflicts between the Seleucid and Ptolemaic monarchies and their relationship with Judah, standing between them. The theological significance of this account is the way it portrays history as going nowhere, a tale “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Yes,

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day

To the last syllable of recorded time.”

(Only after typing those words did I recall that they were uttered by Macbeth in Dunsinane Castle, twenty miles west of here).

Yet the visions do not portray history as petering out or just jogging along, as might be the implication of our first two narratives. When it has reached its darkest point and when the last superpower in the sequence has reached a height of arrogance and blasphemy in relation to God, and of oppression over God’s people, God intervenes, terminates the superpower’s rule, and gives over power to the his saints. The visions were vindicated by the defeat and withdrawal of the Seleucid forces from Jerusalem in 164, after which Judah gained control its own destiny, though it held it only for a century until the next superpower arrived.

The narrative expounded by Daniel’s visions complements the one in Genesis to Kings, which offers a perspective on the story from creation to the exile. Indeed, combining these two generates a suggestive Old Testament grand narrative. Its first half indeed takes the story from the world’s creation to a plan that reaches miscarriage under the Babylonians. Its second half exponentially increases that gloom in the way it also sets Israel’s continuing story against the backcloth of the history of the world as a whole from the Babylonian empire onwards, a history that has no meaning. It declares that the absence of meaning from history does not indicate that miscarriage has the last word or that things are out of God’s control. The goal of history will not be reached by Israel’s obedience or by the nations’ initiative, but that goal will be reached by God’s intervention. It deserves noting that neither the three middle narratives we have considered nor this grand narrative incorporates a messianic figure.

There are other middle narratives one could infer from the Old Testament, notably from Isaiah, from Jeremiah, and from Ezekiel (and they would incorporate a messianic figure). But I need to move to some New Testament middle narratives. While these belong to the other side of the gap we assume exists between the Testaments, in my view they are probably as near temporally to Daniel’s visions as Daniel’s visions are to Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah, and these New Testament narratives are nearer to Daniel’s visions than Daniel’s visions are to Genesis to Kings.

I begin from Mark. Mark arguably has so short a time frame, three years, that it hardly counts as a middle narrative. Most of the Gospel relates incidents from Jesus’ ministry; the last third covers the closing week of his life; one final paragraph relates his resurrection. Whether this brief ending is original or something has been lost, readers apparently thought its brevity unsatisfactory, and added alternative endings to take the narrative on into the story of the proclaiming of the gospel. Within Mark’s own work, for our purposes more significance attaches to Jesus’ declarations in Mark 13 about a coming persecution, a desolating sacrilege, and a coming of the Son of Man. If we take Mark 13 into account, this middle narrative extends forward in a parallel way to Daniel’s visions, from which it derives its imagery. Yet its focus lies resolutely on Jesus’ story, and its implication for its readers is that they need to focus resolutely on the life and death of Jesus, and on the coming crisis and its resolution.

Matthew’s middle narrative also takes Jesus’ story forward with a brief account of events following the resurrection, and it also incorporates Jesus’ declarations concerning what Matthew calls his coming and the end of the age. It contrasts with Mark in a more striking fashion in the way it takes Jesus’ story back from his ministry to his birth, and behind his birth to his ancestry; the account traces Jesus’ origins into the past, to Abraham via the exile and David. While Mark referred to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry as a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and utilized Old Testament imagery to portray the coming crisis, he did not attach any significance to the Old Testament story itself. In contrast, Matthew portrays Jesus as the logical culmination of Israel’s story. He structures it in that threefold way (Abraham, David, the exile), which interestingly ignores the exodus, like Chronicles. Matthew thus from the beginning makes a link with Israel’s story and invites its readers to see themselves as living in light of a more substantial middle narrative than Mark’s.

Luke’s story extends the narrative further. First, it tells even more about the background to Jesus’ birth, and does so in a way that implicitly links Jesus’ story onto Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah. The community into which Jesus is born is the community that David, Ezra, and Nehemiah established. It’s sometimes said that the Hebrew order of the Old Testament, closing with Chronicles, is a Jewish order, whereas the Greek order, ending with the Prophets and in particular with Malachi, is a Christian order. In origin it is quite likely that both are Jewish orders, and in content Hebrew order leads just as suggestively into the New Testament as the Greek order does (furthermore, the last word in the Hebrew order, in the book of Malachi, is the word *herem*, annihilation, which is not too obvious a lead in to the gospel story). Luke incorporates a different account of Jesus’ ancestry from Matthew’s, and it is one that traces that ancestry back to Adam. Luke’s account thus again recalls Chronicles. But Luke’s much more striking extension of this middle narrative comes when Luke’s Gospel leads into a second narrative, almost as long as the first, relating how the Jesus story spread through his home country and then around the Eastern Mediterranean to Rome. Once again Luke-Acts parallels Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah in the way it comes to a stop rather than to a conclusion. Readers know that more must have followed the last events that are related in Acts, but they do not discover the nature of the continuing story.

Again, there are other middle narratives that we could infer from the New Testament’s non-narrative works.[[3]](#footnote-3) But the issue I now wish to consider is the generating of a grand narrative from these middle narratives, a grand narrative that would be a key feature of a biblical theology. In calling them middle narratives I indicate that I am not giving up the idea of a grand narrative, though I have questions about the common form of the Christian grand narrative, which comprises creation, fall, redemption in Christ, and the second coming. I recognize that middle narratives are not so different from what Lyotard calls “little narratives” or “local narratives,” which he regards as the nearest we can get to a “grand narrative.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Paul Ricoeur has likewise commented that “The birth of the concept of history as a collective singular, under which the collection of particular histories is placed, marks the bridging of the greatest gap imaginable between unitary history and the unlimited multiplicity of individual memories and the plurality of collective memories underscored by [Maurice] Halbwachs.” The trouble is, Ricoeur comments, that human plurality “chips away from within the very concept of history as a collective singular.” Special histories resist globalization.[[5]](#footnote-5) In examining the Jewish understanding of memory, Yosef Yerushalmi has noted that the Greeks did not see ultimate meaning in history as a whole.[[6]](#footnote-6) Perhaps they were wise. One might see Ricoeur’s observation as a comment on Qohelet’s way of looking at things, in particular the lament that God has put “eternity” (*ha‘ōlām*) in humanity’s mind, yet has not enabled people to fathom it (Qoh 2:11). There is thus no total history in the Old Testament itself, even in Daniel, yet we have seen that there are some pretty grand narratives and that the adding of Daniel to Genesis-Kings and Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah within the Old Testament makes it not a huge leap to infer a grand narrative from the Old Testament. Likewise the narratives we might infer from John, Paul, and Revelation look pretty grand. In seeking to articulate a grand narrative on the basis of scripture, then, we are undertaking a task of which the individual biblical writers did not dream, though no more so than in other aspects of biblical theology, and we are undertaking a task that is not alien to the scriptures as a whole.

Taken as a whole, the New Testament middle narratives embrace the Old Testament grand narrative and nuance it in light of Jesus. Or perhaps the point should be put the other way around: they set their own middle narratives in the context of the Old Testament grand narrative. They have nothing much to add to the Old Testament’s account of the past up until the story of the last empire. What they do (in common with other Jewish understandings of the day) is extend and nuance the account of the empires in Daniel’s visions by adding another empire that is a further embodiment of the beast. Their distinctive Christian angle is to present the story of Jesus as another intervention of the One on High who appears in Daniel 7. Like the visions in Daniel, these New Testament middle narratives describe this intervention as if it brings the ultimate end, but it does not do so. They are explicit about this point, in that they incorporate their own vision of events to follow Jesus’ death and resurrection and the story that continues in Luke. They know that there will yet come the crisis that was historically constituted by the fall of Jerusalem, but that this crisis, too, will not be the end. The grand narrative they imply embraces creation, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David; it embraces Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece; it embraces Rome and Jesus’ birth, ministry, death, and resurrection; it embraces the outpouring of God’s spirit, the proclamation of the gospel as far as Rome, the fall of Jerusalem, and the end still to come.

Considering this grand narrative when two thousand years have passed gives us a strangely new relationship with the middle narratives in both Old and New Testament. If we had been living in the year 50 or 60AD, then like Mark we might have thought that not much significance attaches to the earlier middle narratives, but the passing of two thousand years gives them more significance. In the West, at least, the church lives in a context more like that which Chronicle-Ezra-Nehemiah addresses and describes than that of a Christian community in Mark’s day. Our context is one in which God’s promises have been partially fulfilled but in which nothing much seems now to be happening. We might even see ourselves as living in a situation like that of Judah in the exile. In some parts of the world and/or during some periods of history, the church finds itself living in a context more like the one addressed in Daniel’s visions. One can see that the church in (say) Kenya) in the 1950s might well find great encouragement in the middle narrative that pictures the rule of superpowers as not destined to go on forever. We would be unwise to live in light of one of those earlier middle narratives as if the events related in the later ones had not happened. Yet the church’s greater danger is to live as if it makes no difference that we are living two thousand years after the events that look as if they were bringing the scriptural grand narrative to its climax. To put the point more sharply, Isaiah 52 declares that God’s reign has arrived, but the world did not change as much as you might have expected. Jesus said that God’s reign has arrived, but the world did not change as much as you might have expected.

In my thinking biblical theology, involves creating from the varied materials within scripture the big picture that might emerge from the whole, or using the building blocks constituted by this varied material to construct an edifice that makes good use of them all and doesn’t involve either the importing of further materials from elsewhere or the casting aside of some of the materials in the conviction that they don’t really belong in this building. But it also involves discerning which materials need highlighting in order to articulate the statement that needs making in the context in which the building is to be erected and to function.

1. See “Prophecy and Fulfillment,” in *Essays on Old Testament Interpretation* (ed. C. Westermann; London: SCM, 1963) = *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics* (Richmond: Knox, 1963), 50-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Old Testament Theology* Volume 1 (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd/New York: Harper, 1962), 357-58; cf. “Gerichtsdoxologie,” *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* (Munich: Kaiser, 1973) 2:245-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. James C. Miller, “Paul and Hebrews: A Comparison of Narrative Worlds,” in Gabriella Gelardini (ed.). *Hebrews: Contemporary Methods—New Insights* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 245-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See e.g., Jean-Franҫois Lyotard, “Universal History and Cultural Differences,” in *The Lyotard Reader* (Oxford, UK/Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989), 314-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago, 2004), 299, 301; see e.g., Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (reprinted New York: Schocken, 1989), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)