

Progressive Creation and the Struggles of Humanity in the Bible

A Canonical Narrative Interpretation

Zoltán Dörnyei

FOREWORD BY
Karen Kilby

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PROGRESSIVE CREATION AND THE STRUGGLES OF HUMANITY
IN THE BIBLE

A Canonical Narrative Interpretation

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Foreword

PICK UP THIS BOOK and read a paragraph or two, and you may not notice how unusual it is. Even a quick browse of the introduction or the conclusion will not reveal the distinctiveness, because Zoltán Dörnyei's style is modest, often understated—he does not shout at the reader about his originality.

A first thing to note is that it is a book which does not fit into familiar theological genres. Is it systematic theology? It deals with broad themes (creation and what we might normally speak of in terms of sin and evil) but there is far too much exegesis, far too much focused engagement with particular biblical texts, for this to look like any kind of standard work in systematics. It must, then, be biblical studies? But it ranges more widely and freely across the canon than any work in biblical studies that I can call to mind.

Zoltán Dörnyei came late to the study of theology, but he came already formed as a scholar, an established figure in another discipline. Both of these things were necessary to make this book possible. On the one hand, I suspect no one who had been shaped early in life by the conventions of contemporary academic theology would attempt something quite as bold as is found between these covers. On the other, because Zoltán brought to the project such a prodigious scholarly capacity, he has been able rapidly and gracefully to find his way around a really extraordinary range of literature, all the while working out his own quite unique proposal.

Zoltán offers in this book, then, something like a new paradigm. He offers a new canonical narrative, which draws lines of connection between Genesis and Job and the New Testament in unfamiliar ways; and at the same time, almost without trying, he offers a new way of escaping the divide between systematics and biblical studies (something which many theologians lament even as they instruct new generations of students in the difference between the two and train them to follow the conventions of one or the other).

What should one anticipate, then, when one reads a book so bold as this, a book which offers a new paradigm? Two things, I think—one about the book, and one about its reader. The book, one should expect, won't be perfect: in something so ambitious, new, and wide-ranging, there will surely be some lacunae, some loose ends, something to which we can object. And from ourselves, as readers, on the other hand, we should anticipate resistance, a resistance which arises quite apart from any actual problems in the book: when something does not fit long established patterns, it is surprisingly hard to take in, and nearly impossible to get beyond an instinctive feeling that “you just can't do it like that.”

For those who can put aside their resistance, there is a great deal to learn here: a rich theological proposal, intriguing in every chapter, and overall an enormous stimulus and provocation to thought. It is undoubtedly a fascinating piece of work.

Karen Kilby

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Preface

THE ORIGINAL MOTIVATION BEHIND this work has been a broad desire to explore the biblical basis of the fundamental challenges that humanity has been confronted with throughout its history, which has resulted in a state of affairs in the world that few would consider optimal. It was hoped that such an exploration would offer guidelines about Christian conduct in the current age, particularly with respect to spiritual challenges and how to respond to them. Accordingly, I set out to examine the theology of spiritual warfare, but as the investigation progressed, this initial focus underwent a considerable transformation largely due to the recognition of three important issues.

First, I realized that rigorous academic discussions of the topic already exist,¹ but at the same time, it also became clear that even works meeting the highest scholarly standards in this area tended not to reach the theological mainstream. One reason for this, I came to believe, was the fact that while the scriptural references to various heavenly beings and spiritual forces have been subjected to extensive scrutiny in biblical studies, the resulting proposals usually remained somewhat “localized,” that is, did not add up to an overarching theological argument that was sufficiently integrated with the central themes of the Bible, such as atonement and salvation through Jesus Christ. This observation shifted the focus of my project toward adopting a broader perspective that could potentially bring together the relevant episodic insights into a coherent and comprehensive construal (hence the adoption of a canonical narrative analysis, as discussed in chapter 1).

Second, and related to the first point, it also became apparent that human tribulations cannot be fully understood from a theological perspective without examining their origins in the biblical description of creation; it

1. E.g., Page, *Powers of Evil*; C. E. Arnold, *Three Questions About Spiritual Warfare*; Moses, *Practices of Power*; for a recent overview, see Beilby and Eddy, *Understanding Spiritual Warfare*.

was felt that, regardless of the complexity, subtlety, or abstraction of the analysis, the fundamental question of why God's creation accommodates evil and suffering would inevitably emerge at some time. This point was driven home to me during the study of the book of Job: As we shall see in chapter 5, this book offers arguably the most elaborate insights into spiritual opposition to God's work and the resulting human struggles and suffering, and yet the conclusion of the text—God's response in the final divine speeches to Job's pleas and complaints—almost entirely concerns creational issues. Therefore, the current, final version of the book starts out with the presentation of a progressive view of divine creation that spans the biblical canon from the beginning of Genesis to the eschatological completion of new creation at the end of Revelation.

Third, over the course of the analysis, I came to realize that while spiritual challenges remain an important aspect of understanding humanity's struggles as portrayed in the canon, they are presented in the Bible as part of a wider discourse that is centered around the inherent imperfections of human corporeality and creatureliness. An obvious illustration of this point (to be elaborated on in chapter 3) is the fact that while the serpent of the Fall did play an active role in leading Adam and Eve astray, the ultimate reason for the first human couple's failure to obey God's command lay not so much in the power of the serpent's deception as in the fact that they *could* be deceived because of their human failings. Consequently, the scope of the enquiry has been extended to include a description of the wide range of corporeal, societal, and spiritual vulnerabilities and temptations of humankind, and the original focal issue, the biblical basis of spiritual warfare, will be addressed directly only in the final chapter (chapter 7) in a consideration of the various practical implications for the Christian believer's conduct.

The discussion in the following chapters draws on extensive biblical interpretation, and given the basic tenet of hermeneutics that the subjective preconceptions of the interpreter will inevitably shape the nature of any interpretation, let me conclude this Preface by addressing some relevant aspects of my personal background and the overall tenor of the interpretive approach adopted in this book. Having been christened as a Catholic, I grew up in a non-believing family in Communist Hungary and became a Christian in a Baptist church only when approaching forty. Since then I have attended churches of three different Christian strands, and while I adhere to the Ecumenical Creeds, I have been impacted by a socio-ecclesiastic context in the UK that is often described as post-denominational, and have not developed as a result a strongly partisan denominational identity. From a hermeneutical perspective, such an "undefined" spiritual background might carry both possible benefits (e.g., fewer constraints on drawing on

a wide variety of Christian interpretations and images) and potential risks (e.g., eclectic mixing of views that are not necessarily compatible). Given, however, that a nondenominational position is relatively untested in biblical scholarship, it is fair to conclude that its implicit presuppositions are not as yet always clear. For the purpose of exegesis I use the Protestant canon of the Bible, partly because this collection of biblical books can be seen as a “common denominator” among the various versions of the canon, shared by all mainstream Christian strands.²

My academic background also represents a somewhat nonstandard history regarding biblical scholarship. Although I have undertaken both undergraduate and graduate studies in theology (leading to an MA in biblical interpretation and a PhD in theology), the formative aspect of my academic career has been three decades of working in the social sciences as a psycholinguist specializing in research on second-language acquisition. In this position, I have gained broad experience of engaging with textual and linguistic information (including issues of translation and intercultural communication), both at the discourse and micro-linguistic levels, and this experience has prepared me in some measure for the systematic handling of biblical texts and for anticipating some of the challenges of scriptural analysis that an interpreter may encounter. At the same time, the ingrained norms of empirical research in the social sciences carry the ongoing risk of generating a proclivity to identify “optimal” solutions and, in doing so, to underplay the hermeneutical inevitability of the pluralism of potential biblical interpretations.

Regarding the interpretive approach adopted, the current book follows the hermeneutic tradition that views the biblical corpus as a *canon*, that is, a textual whole in which the individual elements are not only mutually interpretive but are to be understood in relation to the whole of which they form parts.³ Within this framework, I will be working alongside the Christian tradition that maintains that the biblical corpus is a divinely inspired set of texts; that is, regardless of the extensive human involvement of authors, redactors, scribe copiers, and church authorities in shaping the biblical texts, it is assumed that ultimately it was God who—to use Wolterstorff’s terminology⁴—“authorized” the resultant biblical canon. Having said that, I am aware of many subtle and less subtle challenges to biblical interpretation

2. Thus, as John Peckham (*Canonical Theology*, 44) rightly points out, in the canon debates the concern is not that the sixty-six books of the Protestant Bible are canonical, but rather whether there are other books that should be viewed as canonical.

3. See e.g., Peckham, *Canonical Theology*; Webster, “Canon.” Chapter 1 of this book offers further discussion of this topic.

4. Wolterstorff, “Unity behind the Canon,” 228.

concerning biblical authorship, divine inspiration, the canonization process, historical accuracy, and internal textual contradictions—to name but a few—and the material in the following chapters is not blind to such matters; in this sense the approach is in accordance with Kevin Vanhoozer’s notion of “critical biblicism” concerning interpretive authority.⁵

Besides my personal conviction, there was also an academic rationale for giving such a high status to Scripture in the hermeneutic analysis. This was related to the fact that the Ecumenical Creeds of the patristic era, which have served as a compass for Christian believers over the past millennia, make no mention of matters concerning human struggles, tribulations, or the assaults of agents of evil, including those of the devil. The silence of the Creeds in these complex and highly loaded matters has left Christian believers with a great deal of uncertainty and has been partly responsible for the development of diverse explanations, proposals, and strategies in these areas over the centuries, with little consensus on some key issues across different church communities and denominations. This uncertainty has been palpable, for example, in the wake of salient tragic events of the past two decades such as the 9/11 attacks or the 2004 tsunami, when many people—believers and nonbelievers alike—were groping for an answer to the question of how such things could be allowed to happen. A less dramatic but equally pertinent example of the same issue concerns *human temptation*, a recurrent biblical theme which is also one of the most frequent sources of struggle within everyday Christian life. There is an absence of creedal guidance on this matter and, as will be argued in chapter 7, while the literature contains many useful, practically oriented works on the topic, there is currently no fully articulated Christian theology of human temptation—indeed, there is a marked paucity of reference in the scholarly literature to matters of temptation and, more generally, on how to handle spiritual challenges. This can be seen to considerably reduce the effectiveness of the church in helping believers to stand firm amid their struggles.

With no realistic prospect in the near future of an Ecumenical Synod laying down guidelines to fill these gaps, one may argue that the biblical corpus remains the most solid basis for theologians to build on when seeking further understanding of such contested issues. The current work is an attempt to examine what lessons would emerge from the Scriptures in these areas if a conscious effort was made to focus on the biblical text as the primary source of analysis, with as few preconceptions as possible, and it will be argued in chapter 1 that the “low-inference” and relatively open-ended nature of the specific hermeneutical approach adopted—a canonical narrative interpretation—is consonant with this goal.

5. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority*, 145.