

Christopher Ash



Remaking



a broken



world

The heart of the
Bible story

Remaking a Broken World

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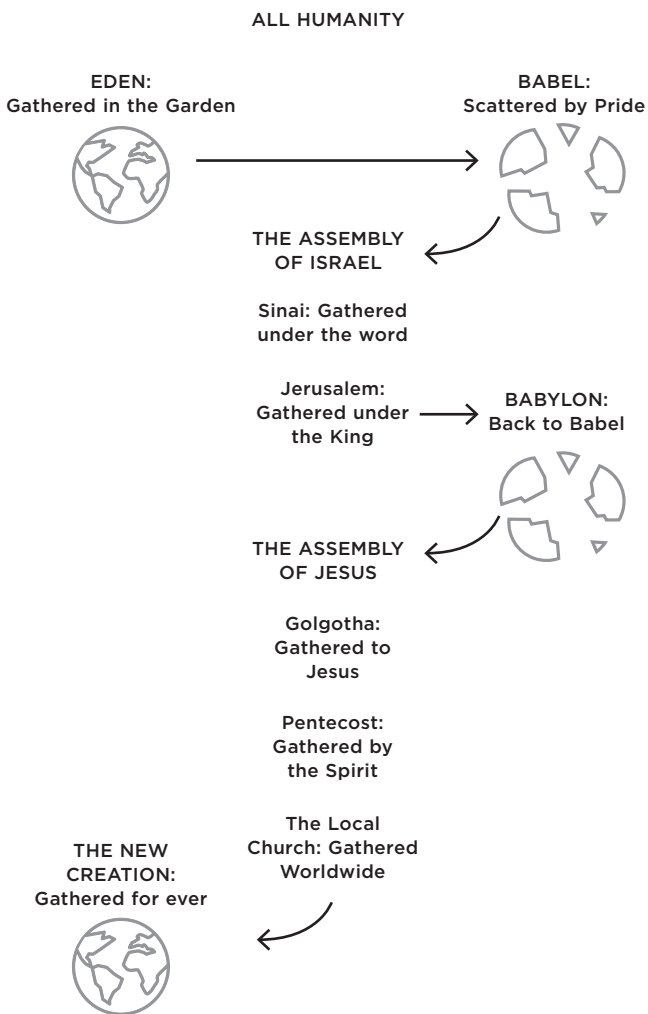
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To Emmanuel, Wimbledon

SUMMARY DIAGRAM



INTRODUCTION

Beginning With the God Who is One

How is a Broken World to be Remade?

We live in a world that is fractured on every level. From the family to international relations, it is hard to make and maintain harmony. Every day the news brings stories of broken relationships, strife-ridden communities and warring nations. How can it be restored to peace?

The thesis of this little book is that the ordinary local Christian church contains within itself the seeds, or the DNA, of a remade world. That will seem a very surprising thesis to those who think the local church is a complete irrelevance to the real world; and it will be greeted with ironic smiles by those whose experience of local churches is one of strife and tension. But I believe it to be true.

I want to persuade us to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to belonging to, and serving God in the fellowship of, a local church; and that this may prove to be the most significant thing we do with our lives. I want to convince us that the local church is at the heart of the Bible story, that it is close to the heart of the purposes of God, and that it is how a

broken world will be remade. I want you to share my passion that the glory of God is inseparably tied up with what happens in the local church.

This message is important in a culture of choice where we are used to being able to shop around for what we want. A survey of attitudes amongst non-churchgoers included a positive take on “spirituality” side by side with a negative attitude to religion. This was compared by one young man to the difference between playing football and being a member of a football team. He was happy with “spirituality” as a means of fulfilling his personal ambitions (like kicking around a football) but very unhappy at the idea of being constrained by being a committed member of a community (like belonging to a football team). Another commented, “If I am going to believe in something I will pick my favourite parts of different religions or pick something that I have invented ... that I feel comfortable with ... Not what I’m expected to believe in”; another said, “We take a little bit from this belief and a bit from that, and a bit from the other and then we come to our own major conclusion to live our lives by.”¹ It’s all a matter of what I choose.

These personal choice, pick’n’mix attitudes get translated when people become Christians, and they then appear amongst Christians in slightly different clothes. Christians can easily slip into church shopping (finding a church that meets our needs) and church hopping (moving around from church to church without settling into any one). We can get the idea that the Christian life is about special big events and celebrity speakers and find ourselves picky spectators, more interested in evaluating the church experiences on offer than in the hard graft of building deep relationships together shaped by the word of God.

What's the Point of A(nother) Bible Overview?

I want to persuade you, by a grand sweep through the whole Bible, that to belong in a committed and relational way to an ordinary local church may be the most significant thing you do with your life. I am going to try to do that from the whole Bible. That is to say, this book is an overview of the whole Bible story, a shortened and simplified version, an attempt to sum up the Bible story in brief. I used to live a short bike ride from the British Museum in the heart of London. Sometimes on a day off my wife and I cycled up there for a visit. The British Museum is a huge and fascinating place: it is hard to know where to start. So, in their wisdom, the people who run it offer a “One Hour Tour” of the museum. They show you some of the highlights, such as the Rosetta Stone and the Parthenon marbles. You can't really begin to see the museum in one hour. But, by taking you round some of the highlights, they hope to whet your appetite to return again and again to explore the treasures.

A Bible overview is a way in to reading the Bible, not a way round. It is like a series of signposts to help us reach a city centre rather than a bypass to make it unnecessary for us to go to the city centre at all. The Bible is greater than the sum of its overviews. You may be familiar perhaps with one overview; I hope you are, because many people have found a Bible overview a helpful way to start finding their way around the Bible. It can give us a sense of how it fits together.

My favourite first overview is *God's Big Picture*, by Vaughan Roberts; this is themed around how the Bible tells the story of the kingdom of God.² I have also been greatly helped and stimulated by T. Desmond Alexander's overview, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*.³ But because overviews have to choose some governing theme, they all need to omit parts of the Bible that don't tie very closely to that theme. Every Bible overview

omits more than it includes. Overviews are like different types of map. One map may highlight physical characteristics such as contours; another may give you the transport networks; a third may focus on political boundaries; a fourth on population density. Each is of value. But the reality of visiting the place will always be greater than the sum of all the maps you can lay your hands on.

Scattering and Gathering

So here's the reason I'm offering you an alternative Bible overview: I want to show you a fresh camera angle on the Bible story, one that brings the local church into sharp focus.

I'm going to tell the Bible story in a way that highlights scattering and gathering: scattering as a sign of God's judgment and gathering as a sign of God's rescue. To do that, I will of course miss out a very great deal. Maybe you have seen a photo of a familiar place, but taken from an unfamiliar camera angle or taken with a different kind of lens (perhaps a wide-angle lens rather than a telephoto lens). Perhaps you find yourself looking at a photo of a street you may have known from childhood, and yet noticing things that you have never seen before. No one camera angle or lens will encapsulate the whole experience of living in the street: but they may open our eyes to significant things we had not seen before.

A few years ago my wife and I decided to try to learn about wild flowers near the coast in South Wales where we were on holiday. Armed with our pocket guide to wild flowers, we set out. Before long, we spotted our first Viper's Bugloss. But having spotted one, it wasn't long before we were seeing these lovely little wild flowers all over the place. I am so unobservant I had never seen them before at all, though I must have walked by hundreds of them. My hope

is that this distinctive Bible overview will open our eyes to the significance of the local church.

Incidentally, this camera angle is not necessarily any better or worse than other camera angles. People sometimes ask how we can know whether a particular Bible overview is “the right one”. The answer is: they all are and none of them is, though some are more valuable than others. Imagine a photographer taking a photograph of a great sculpture for an illustrated book. No camera angle would be wrong, but some might show off the sculpture better than others. The test is whether or not a photo gives readers a good two-dimensional “feel” for the majesty of the three-dimensional statue. You will have to judge to what extent the scattering and gathering theme gives us an overall grasp of the Bible story.

Beginning with the God Who is One

Let us start with God. A famous Christian of the fourth century wrote that, “the very best order of ... every speech and action, is to begin from God and to end in God”.⁴ He was right: we shall start and end our story with God.

The Lord our God, the Lord is One

Our starting text is one of the most famous verses in the Bible:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one
(Deuteronomy 6 v 4)

This is the famous “Shema” recited regularly in synagogues for centuries (“Shema” is the Hebrew word for “Hear!” or “Listen!”). Moses is preaching to the people of God just before they moved into the Promised Land. There are just four Hebrew words in the statement he makes: The-LORD our-God the-LORD One (In Hebrew, “the LORD” is one word, as is “our God”).

“The LORD” in capital letters in our English translations is sometimes written “Yahweh” or “Jehovah”; it is the Hebrew name of the God of the Bible. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Moses and of the Exodus. He is the God who makes a covenant (or agreement) with his people. The strapline of the covenant is, “You will be my people and I will be your God” (e.g. Exodus 6 v 7 or Ezekiel 36 v 28). Moses calls him “our God”, not because he is the private god of Israel (as if there were lots of other valid gods and goddesses) but because he is the God who is in covenant relationship with Israel.

The emphasis and climax of the statement is the word “one”: the God of the Bible story, the covenant God in relationship with us, is *one!* This is a huge statement; it is rather like a part of a website that is full of hyperlinks elsewhere; it connects all over the Bible story. This is not a simple mathematical oneness that would stop God being Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God in Trinity, as we shall see in Chapter 7 (e.g. 1 Corinthians 8 v 6). So what does it mean?

1. One God

First, it means that the God of the Bible is the only real God. Centuries later the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “We know that ‘An idol is nothing at all in the world’ and that ‘There is no God but one.’” (1 Corinthians 8 v 4). The words “is nothing at all in the world” mean that an idol “has no real existence” (ESV). Of course, a god or goddess such as a Hindu god or the Muslim Allah exists, in a sense; but they exist only in the imaginations of their worshippers. They do not have any substantial, objective existence independent of the minds and hearts of their worshippers. If their worshippers ceased to worship them, they would cease to exist. Only the God of the Bible

exists independently of us: we could cease to exist and yet he would still exist. His divinity and reality would be unaffected.

2. One reality

Second, this verse therefore means that there is only one objective and substantial reality in the universe. This may sound rather philosophical, but it is important. I remember listening to a young woman called Julia telling her story. Julia had been brought up in a Christian home and had then gone to study Geography at university. There she had been immersed in a worldview in which it was firmly and repeatedly asserted that there is “no one reality”. There is “my reality” and there is “your reality”. “Your reality” may be real and true in a subjective sense “for you”; and yet “my reality” (which may contradict “your reality”) can still be true or real “for me”. In the intellectual world where Julia studied it was insisted upon (yes, really insisted upon, as if *this* truth were somehow really true!) that there is no one reality that is real in the whole world.

This is a world many of us inhabit at school or university or in the workplace. Not surprisingly Julia said she became confused, because a world with no one reality is a very confusing place. It was not until she found her rest in the one real God that her confusion was replaced by clarity. One true God means that there is one objective substantial reality within which you and I have to live. We can create our subjective or virtual quasi-realities as much as we like, but the day will come when we must reckon with what one theologian called “the God who is there”, and therefore with the reality that is there.⁵

3. One morality

Third, a consequence of this is that there is one objective morality: there is such a thing as right and such a thing as

wrong; morality is objectively true and not subjectively relative. By and large our culture does not accept this. The writer Will Self described the cultural world of his childhood like this: he was brought up in “a world where ethics, so far from inhering in the very structure of the cosmos, was a matter of personal taste akin to a designer label, sewn into the inside lining of conscience”.⁶ It is a vivid image: you choose your ethics label, and I choose mine, but it is no more than a matter of personal taste.

Taken to its logical conclusion, this is a frightening world, in which a paedophile or serial killer can claim that they are following their own personal moral code, and who are we to say they are objectively wrong? However, in the poetic language of the Old Testament, the world is not like a chaotic sea, with right and wrong shifting wildly from side to side in the waves. Instead it is firmly placed on pillars or foundations, a secure moral order rooted in the reality of the God who is One. For example, when Hannah the mother of the prophet Samuel celebrates the justice of God she sings, “For the *foundations* of the earth are the LORD’S; on them he has set the world” (1 Samuel 2 v 8). That is, in Will Self’s words, right and wrong do inhere “in the very structure of the cosmos.”

4. *Harmony under one ruler*

Finally, all this means that there ought to be universal harmony under one ruler. The world is a coherent place because it is made and sustained by one real God. It is not the playground or battlefield of many gods and goddesses all competing for supremacy, vying for the superior places in the heavenly Cabinet chamber. This is very different from the world of animism, in which we are at the mercy of the spirits of trees, of rivers, and of mountain tops. It is very different from the world of the Greek and Roman pantheons which formed the

culture of the New Testament world around the Mediterranean Sea. It is very different from the thousands of Hindu gods and goddesses. The world is not like Iraq after the toppling of Saddam Hussein, a country riven with competing people groups, or the Balkans after Marshal Tito, disintegrating into warring regions like Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo and Croatia. Nor is it like an anarchic school playground where the teachers are absent and life is one long fight for survival and supremacy.

The Bible story in three acts

But here's the problem: the world quite clearly is not living in harmony under one ruler. It is all too much like an anarchic playground. The Bible recognises precisely this tension. The clearest echo of the Shema in the Old Testament comes right near the end of Israel's history before Christ. After the exile in Babylon, the prophet Zechariah looks forward to a future day when "the LORD will be king over all the earth. On that day the LORD will be one and his name one" (Zechariah 14 v 9 ESV).⁷

In many places the Bible asserts that God is already king over all the earth. For example, he is "the LORD Most High ... the great King over all the earth" (Psalm 47 v 2). So how can Zechariah look forward to a future day when he "*will be* king over all the earth" if he is already king? Or, to put it another way, how can the Bible assert so firmly that the LORD is one and at the same time look forward to a day when the LORD will be one (Deuteronomy 6 v 4; Zechariah 14 v 9)? I think the answer is in the parallel statement in Zechariah: "and his *name* one". His "name" speaks not just of his identity but also of his reputation, of human beings acknowledging his kingship. In one sense, he is king over the whole earth now but, in another sense, he isn't. In one sense, he is "one" now but, in another

sense, he isn't. He is king in the sense that he governs the world exactly as he pleases: he is the Sovereign Lord. And he is "one" in the sense that his reality and glory undergird creation. But he is not universally acknowledged ("named") and known as the one true God. His world is peopled by rebels who are governed by God despite their hostility and against their will. Zechariah looks forward to that great day when the renewed creation will be governed by God through a redeemed humanity who will gladly bow the knee and praise him. But we are jumping ahead to the end of the story.

The story of the Bible is the story of how God will bring about that great day. The Bible may be thought of as a story in three acts. Act I is very brief, because it lasts only until Genesis 3. We might call Act I "Harmony". God makes one coherent creation, a universe in which his will is done perfectly and without complexity equally in "heaven" (God's space) and on "earth" (our space-time universe); there is no curtain or barrier between God's space ("heaven") and our space ("earth").

Act II may be called "Fracture", and it lasts from Genesis 3 until near the end of the book of Revelation. In Act II, although God continues to be the sovereign ruler of the universe, his will is not done on "earth" in the same way as it is done in "heaven" (which is why we must pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven", Matthew 6 v 10). Now it is a case of, "God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few" (Ecclesiastes 5 v 2). Because human beings break away from God's loving rule and decide to live their lives without reference to the God who made them, the whole universe is put out of joint, and humanity becomes fractured and scattered. Fault lines appear all over the place, and men and women are at war with one another and misgoverning a world that cries out to be well-governed.

The world is a broken place because it is alienated from the God who made it.

And yet the God who made it has not given up on it. He is at work to remake the world he still loves. God is determined not to be defeated. He will win, and his victory will see his world remade as he intended it to be. This is why Act III is “The New Creation”, the new heavens and new earth (i.e. the renewed and restored universe), which is pictured for us in apocalyptic language at the end of the book of Revelation.

However, a Bible overview that simply divided the Bible storyline into three parts like this would not be very helpful to Bible readers. It would put less than 1 per cent into Act I and Act III and leave over 99 per cent of the Bible in Act II! So I am going to shape our tour around nine critical Bible places or events on the way.

The Bible story in nine places

Our Bible tour is going to start in Eden, and then pause at Babel, Sinai, Jerusalem, Babylon, Golgotha, Pentecost, and Church, before concluding in the New Creation.

We are going to begin in the garden in Eden, with harmony, the nucleus of a gathered humanity close to God. We shall see that harmony tragically broken, and pause at the iconic story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 to see the fractured world vividly pictured for us. The movement from Eden to Babel speaks of a world that is scattered and fractured because it is alienated from the creator God who is One.

From Babel we will fast-forward through the promises God made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the great rescue of God’s people from Egypt (the Exodus), to Mount Sinai where the Ten Commandments and the Law of Moses were given. At Sinai the people of God assemble by the mountain

under God's spoken word of law: we shall see in this rabble gathered at the mountain the foreshadowing of a remade world. From Sinai we move to Jerusalem, to see how the foreshadowed remaking of the world develops with the promises of God's king given to David. Jerusalem becomes a powerful symbol of a regathered world.

From Jerusalem, however, we must move to Babylon, a word which came to symbolise the scattering of God's people in exile. The historical Babylon became much more than a place; it became a reprise of all the scattering that the ancient Tower of Babel symbolised. By the time we have travelled from Eden through Babel, Sinai, and Jerusalem and then out to Babylon, we really do not seem to have made any progress. What kind of a story is it that spends so long getting us from Babel to Babylon? It becomes clear that Sinai and Jerusalem together are not the remaking of a broken world, but rather the foreshadowing and anticipation of the actual remaking, which is yet to come.

The story continues after Babylon until we come to the central event of human history, at Golgotha, the place of the Skull (the place where Jesus was crucified) (Matthew 27 v 33). This terrible unfair death, itself the epitome of what goes wrong in a broken world, turns out paradoxically to be the event around which a remade world will focus and the magnet which will draw all sorts of people together. From Golgotha we move to the first Christian Pentecost in Jerusalem, where the miraculous understanding of different human languages signifies the reversal of the babble of tongues that was Babel. Golgotha and Pentecost show us how the promises of gathering in the Old Testament will finally be made real in the church.

So from Pentecost we move to the local church, which is at the same time scattered all over the world and yet contains

within itself the seeds of a worldwide gathering—local churches are scattered gatherings! We shall spend some time exploring how a local church is shaped around themes from Sinai and Jerusalem, while still suffering from being placed in a world east of Eden and in the long shadow of the Tower of Babel. We shall look at how the local church is made possible by the Cross and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Finally, from the scattered gathering that is the local church we follow the trajectory of grace to end our story with the New Jerusalem, a picture of the renewed Creation, a broken world remade at last to the glory of the God who is One. It is a great story.

Questions for Discussion

1. Review what this chapter teaches about God. Why does the nature of God mean there ought to be harmony in the world?
2. Why does it matter so much that there should be harmony in the world?
3. What experiences do you have of the pain of a broken world? What behaviours have caused this brokenness?
4. What experiences do you have of relationships in a local church? Do people relate differently there, or not?