

IS THERE A HOME FOR THE BIBLE IN THE POSTMODERN WORLD?*

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What place do ancient texts have in situations that are radically different, in terms of both structure and drive, from the worlds in which they were formed, revised, transmitted, and authorized? Can “premodern texts” (which were questioned in the “modern era”) be at home in the “postmodern world”? Can ancient scriptures still (be made to) speak in the postmodern world? In other words, would the postmodern world accommodate the Bible? How may the Bible serve as “home” in the postmodern world?

Postmodernity, eScapeGoated

“Postmodernity” is the new beast at whose feet many people lay the blame for whatever ideas and behaviors make them nervous. It has been shoved into places usually reserved for the mischievous (woman) temptress that must be domesticated, the wild (queer) orientations that must be tamed, and the reckless (satanic) tendencies to confuse values and violate boundaries that must be ruled. Many defy postmodernity because they feel that it does not exhibit and sustain “faith” or have respect for “order.” They do not feel at home in the postmodern world because it is unsteady, fragmentary and fragmenting, and hostile to the principles of faith and order, which presuppose certainty, harmony, and fixity.¹

Postmodernity, the specter behind “postmodernism” (see distinction below), is a scapegoat for whatever exposes and agitates people’s insecurities. Some of my colleagues and friends accuse me of being postmodern whenever, for instance, I challenge religious or cultural traditions. Previously, in their eyes I was just silly, but now I am postmodern (for the same reasons). However, they do not realize that being critical and difficult do not necessarily make one postmodern. I might still be silly, but that does not mean that I am, therefore, postmodern. I argue, on the other hand, that the onslaughts of the Western Enlightenment Era (or “modernity”) and its scientific modes of thinking are much more contentious against cultures and traditions and matters of faith and order, which do not always stand on the kind of positivist evidences and reasoning that mod-

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¹James K. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), pp. 15–30.

ern minds prefer, than postmodernity is.

This essay does not address the (dis)connections between modernity and postmodernity² but, rather, joins the chorus of voices that seek to demystify postmodernity³ and to ponder how we may still appreciate the Bible (differently) in our postmodern world.⁴ The essay circles around the Bible primarily because it is one of the points of intersection for many Christians, a site of contact that signifies Christian unity. I circle around the Bible also because it contains multiple voices and is open to a diversity of responses, so it is a lighthouse that points to the harbor of diversity in unity and unity in diversity.

This essay aims to show and tell, in form and content, that postmodernity is not as spooky as people fear it to be. It will hopefully help relax the dis-ease with the place of other teachings and doctrines in the work of faith and order in various spheres of the Christian life.

Postmodernity, Unspooked

Postmodernity is like a rip current that pulls swimmers away from shallow shores. A rip current forms when waves break unevenly; usually the ends break first, then the waves fold inward and gush back out to sea at the middle, creating a ripping pull that is much stronger than the power of the waves that came from the deep. The rip current is scary for swimmers who try to swim against it, for it is like swimming upstream against the strong whitewaters of a narrow, but deep river; it can be deadly (those swimmers can drown). It can also be “deadly” according to the way Indigenous Australians use the word *vis-à-vis* referring to something that is pleasurable, fun, cool, awesome, and so forth. The best way to enjoy the rip current is to ride it out to sea, feel for a place where one can swim away from the pull of the current (by swimming outward to the left or to the right of the rip), then circle around the current and back to shore. As the sea gets deeper, the rip current weakens and one can easily swim away from and around it.

Comparing postmodernity to a rip current allows me, at the risk of oversimplification, to imagine two “pulls” in postmodernity, one scary and the other fun. There are more than two pulls, of course, but these two suffice for this essay. I am referring first to the destabilizing effect of postmodernity, the pull that rips and carries one away from the safety of the shallow shore; second, the playful aspect of postmodernity, the pull that one can ride into the deep, where it sinks,

²See Thomas Dockerty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1987); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991); Christopher Norris, *The Truth about Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); and Patricia Waugh, *Postmodernism: A Reader* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992).

³See Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*; and Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God* (London: SPCK; Orleans and Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006).

⁴See A. K. M. Adam, *Faithful Interpretation: Reading the Bible in a Postmodern World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006).

thus releasing one to swim away. The rip of postmodernity whirls one into, at once, pain and pleasure, danger and enjoyment, fear and tranquility, disempowerment and freedom—the kind of experience that Julia Kristeva calls *jouissance*.⁵ Together, they are “deadly.” I pause to address the two pulls in turn.

I turn first to the scary pull. Postmodernity haunts people who imagine that it shakes the foundations of order and disturbs structures of meaning and faith.⁶ This perception often dismays the unsteady and misguides the skeptic. I hold, nevertheless, that postmodernity does not smash belief-systems or raze structures and havens of meaning. It does not, to use an image with which Pacific Islanders are familiar, pull the mats from under us. Rather, postmodernity shows that the mats on which we sit were woven with many strands and are already frayed. The strands are supposed to hold each other in place; but every time the mats are rolled out and people sit or walk on them, the furry surfaces of the strands are flattened and smoothened out, so that the strands can slip out of place and, thus, the mats continually unravel. Thus does postmodernity call attention to the fraying composition of our mats, but it does not pull the strands apart or push us away from our mats. Postmodernity exposes the flux as well as the woven-ness and constructed-ness of our mats (our “security blankets”)—the places where we sit and stand, and it challenges us to come to terms with the wavering stability of our placements. Put simply, postmodernity reminds us that we occupy both real and ideological spaces that continually unravel (crumple and disintegrate) and thus we need to find meanings in the fray.

Photo by Loni Ve'a Taufa, used with permission.⁷

⁵See Anita Monro, *Resurrecting Erotic Transgression: Subjecting Ambiguity in Theology* (London: Equinox, 2006), pp. 15, 109ff.

⁶Crystal L. Downing, *How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith: Questioning Truth in Language, Philosophy, and Art* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), pp. 16–18.

⁷See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/> and <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

The first framed image I ever owned⁸ was a postcard that shows a globe open at the bottom, with all sorts of things falling out to form a trash heap below. The image is Michel Granger's *la grande décharge* ("the great dump," 1977). This image matched how I, a struggling Third World student at that time, saw the world: The world was unraveling, falling apart, in pieces. This was one of the reasons why postmodernity made sense to me—simply because it also saw how "the world" was unraveling, falling apart, fraying.

Postmodernity is not preaching something new. In the Judeo-Christian biblical tradition, for instance, realizing that the world is falling apart goes back to the two creation stories. In the first story, after each day's creative activities, God sees, and the narrator announces, that the things called into existence that day were "good" (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, and 25). Then, on day six, God judged that everything called into existence was "very good" (Gen. 1:31), before resting on day seven. The world was intact and in a "good" state. Everything was according to plan, and the creating God was satisfied; so God could now take a rest.

The second (garden) story, however, begins with God's noticing two "lacks" in the creation: God had not sent rain, and there was no one to till the soil (Gen. 2:5). The world was not as good as God saw it in the first story. In God's trying to make up for these lacks, especially the second one (the man created to till the soil needed a helper, suggesting that he was not properly endowed for the task for which he was created), the world began to unravel. In trying to plug up what was lacking, God exposed more lacks; it felt as if, as in the postcard, the world was open at the bottom, and its contents were falling out. According to this perspective, the garden story was not about the loss of paradise or the fall of humanity but about how the creative acts of God also unraveled the creation. The world was falling apart even before the talking serpent revealed the truth about the forbidden fruits that would enable one to know "good and bad" (which is a divine characteristic—compare Gen. 2:15–17 and 3:1–5).

The world falls apart in a different sense at the beginning of the Bhagavad Gītā. This Hindu text contains a conversation just before the battle at Krukshetra between Prince Arjuna and his charioteer and guide, Krishna (a divine being, *Bhagavan*). The battle lines had been drawn, the conch shells of war blown, vibrating in the sky and on the earth, and the parties were ready to fight. At that moment Arjuna asked Krishna to draw his chariot between the armies so that he could see who was fighting whom. What he saw melted his courage: "There Arjuna could see, within the midst of the armies of parties, his fathers, grandfathers, teachers, maternal uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons, friends, and also his fathers-in-law and well-wishers" (1:26). He could not gather the spirit needed to fight his friends, relatives, and teachers: "I do not see how any good can come from killing my own kinsmen in this battle, nor can I, my dear Krishna, desire

legal code.

⁸Displaying a framed photograph or image was not common in my home island when I was growing up, where people (old and young) were more interested in telling stories and sharing memories than in showing dead moments. To have a picture or image framed was a privilege associated with Westerners.

any subsequent victory, kingdom, or happiness” (1:31). At that very moment on the spot, Arjuna’s world(view) fell apart. He became confused about his duty (2:7), and the rest of the conversation contains Krishna’s instructions about *dharma* (duty and harmony).

Both religious texts predate postmodernism and Granger’s *la grande décharge*, but they coincide in the awareness that “the world” is not as constant, secure, and meaningful as we often assume (hope) it to be. The Bible and the Gītā say more about the world and other things, but the awareness of the flux and brokenness of the world is one of their points of intersection with postmodernism. Such awareness echoes the elusive concept of *Shunyata* (emptiness or zero-ness) in Mahayana Buddhism, which suggests that everything is in flux, constantly becoming and collapsing, and void of essential substance or self, because everything is interdependent. This Buddhist perspective also predated postmodernism.

I divert to distinguish postmodernity from postmodernism. While I stated above that the Bible and the Gītā predated postmodernism, I imagine also that the kind of energy characteristic of postmodernity, which pulls postmodernism, ticked in the pulse of ancient societies also.⁹ Postmodernism is the “ism” that lays claim to the spirit of postmodernity, an “ism” that can be located in time as the cultures that superseded modernism (around the 1960’s according to Fredric Jameson or in the mid-1970’s according to Steven Connor).¹⁰ The spirit of postmodernity here echoes what Jean-François Lyotard has referred to as the “postmodern condition,” which he characterizes as incredulity toward totalizing meta-narratives or grand narratives that assume some form of transcendent and universal truth.¹¹ Postmodernism gives expression to postmodernity, but postmodernity is not limited to postmodernism. Can postmodernity be limited to a place and time or to anything at all? This seems impossible, given that the pull of postmodernity, evident in postmodern theories, has “the desire to project and to produce that which cannot be pinned down or mastered by representation or conceptual thought, the desire which has been identified by Jean-François Lyotard as the pull towards the sublime.”¹²

Since, as I imagine, the pull of postmodernity was present in ancient texts and religious cultures, so that it is not totally new or irreligious, then there is no reason to fear it. Postmodernity is present almost everywhere. Lift a text or a tradition, whether ancient or recent, and turn over a story or a memory, and one finds the ripping pull of postmodernity in play. To fight the ripping pull of postmodernity might pull one under. One would be better off by riding it out be-

⁹I must confess that I see postmodernity in the pulse of ancient texts and religious cultures “also” because I resist the divide among premodern, modern, and postmodern, which gives the implication that the premodern (including the natives of the South Seas, my ancestors) were simple and unsophisticated.

¹⁰Cf. Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

¹¹See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. xxiv–xxv.

¹²Connor, *Postmodernist Culture*, p. 17.

fore circling around and relocating oneself, possibly at another place. This is the second pull of postmodernity that I wish to address briefly—the opportunity to be playful that postmodernity creates.

By reiterating the volatility of “the world,” postmodernity raises the anchors of the powers-that-be, setting those adrift, and opening up a space for the rafts of marginalized, exploited, and displaced subjects. The de-centering arm of postmodernity also raises a flag for the politics of difference and otherness. The second pull of postmodernity is liberating, and I will briefly turn to three of its codependent ripples—story, identity, and diaspora—and how they may impact the way we read the Bible in the postmodern world.

| <i>Story</i> | <i>Identity</i> | <i>Diaspora</i> |
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| <p>In kindling incredulity toward meta-narratives, maintaining that no one narrative controls over all other narratives, Lyotard opens a portal for people to look for and listen to local narratives. In other words incredulity toward grand narratives is an invitation for alternative and multiple stories, including stories from <i>la grande décharge</i>.</p> <p>Unfortunately, (especially Western) churches dread the postmodern challenge as if it seeks to reject Christian narratives; so, in response, we give up, withdraw from, the storytelling functions. The challenge and the response do not coincide; the challenge is against the “power of stories,” and the response is to neglect the “joy of telling.”</p> <p>When did Christian narratives become meta-narrative?¹³ In whose eyes and</p> | <p>In promoting heterogeneity, which seeks to embrace subjects who have traditionally been marginalized, especially with respect to race, gender, and class,¹⁴ the post-modern critique of identity is liberating. This “turn to the Other” has taken root and born many fruits in many lands and circles.</p> <p>The de-centering of dominant mastering subjects needs to go together with the sensitizing and empowering of displaced and outcast subjects,¹⁵ but it does not always happen this way.</p> <p>Sometimes, the decentering process takes place in order to install another master from within the same circles of sovereignty, and the new master extends the empire of his forefathers. The boundaries of control are not broken, and the cultures of domination grow.</p> <p>Sometimes, de-centered</p> | <p>The awareness of limits, margins, and acts of marginalization draws attention to space and placement. Where one is, one’s context, helps condition who one is, how one thinks and operates.¹⁷ Things are interesting for the postmodern subject because she or he spreads over several places (a hybrid) at once. Recently, many governments legalized dual citizenship, as if one can occupy and have “home” in two countries at the same time (a possibility for the “haves” and the wealthy).</p> <p>We need to reconsider what “home” (and citizenship) means in our postmodern age. Home is no longer just about land and space.</p> <p>As people spread throughout the world away from their homelands, and as technology brings people from distant lands closer together, home is no longer the</p> |

¹³Cf. Adam, *Faithful Interpretation*, pp. 9, 62.

¹⁴So, bell hooks, “Postmodern blackness,” © Oberlin College, September, 1990 (available at <http://www.allaboutbell.com/>); Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, tr. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994); and Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996).

¹⁵So, Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, tr. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1972); and Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, tr. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983).

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| <p>for whom? Are we exaggerating the place of Christian narratives in a world where Christianity is not the dominant religion? Even though governments with strong military powers and rigorous warfare tactics are from Christian countries, Christianity is not the grand religion.</p> <p>Why do we imagine that Christian narratives are the only narratives that postmodernity challenges?</p> <p>Given that we are Christians, we see our narratives as grand. They are grand for us, and we are many; but they are not grand for everyone, and they are more.</p> <p>Postmodernity creates a space where Christian narratives can be in conversation with narratives that are grand for other people, both people from other faiths and people from outside the dominant Christian cultures. Postmodernity welcomes such conversations, which, illustrated in my musings above, is one way to engage in the storytelling function.</p> <p>Once we calm down from stressing over the postmodern incredulity to meta-narratives and come to terms with our illusion concerning Christian narratives, we should consider reclaiming the storytelling function. If we do not, we leave storytelling in the hands of the media (which feeds viewers'</p> | <p>subjects cannot shed the scales of the master cultures, both the language and the models of domination; thus, they become shadows and puppets of their masters. With respect to race, for instance, those subjects are often said (by members of racially oppressed communities) to be "whiter than white people," and, with respect to gender, they are "manlier than man," and so forth.</p> <p>The postmodern critique of identity is not about paying mere lip service to our heterogeneous makeup, but it calls for resistance against homogenizing tendencies (for example, essentialism) and for the reconstruction of identities (of both the Other and the de-centered master-subjects). It affirms the agency of the Other and embraces our fraying mass consciousness and woven mass cultures.</p> <p>The postmodern reconstructed identity has a cross-cultural face, a face that belongs across ethnic and cultural (gender, age, sexual orientation, and so forth) divides. The reconstructed postmodern identity is multiple and varied,¹⁶ for example, there are multiple Pacific Island identities, and there are variations within each island group.</p> <p>The postmodern reconstruction of identity can help</p> | <p>place where one lives. A Fijian might have grown up in Seattle and now lives in Rhode Island, partner to an Italian from across the border with Canada, but "home" for her is somewhere on the shores of Fiji. Home is not where she is, but where she draws her identity. Home is more than space; it is also about the harbors of one's security and identity.</p> <p>I make a simple point here; but others might misunderstand, so I reiterate—a Fijian living in the US is not in diaspora (to say that she "lives in diaspora" is to keep her in perpetual displacement); rather, her "home is in diaspora." Likewise, a European in India or an African-American returning to Ghana will long for home, which will not be where they are. The location of identity, their home, is not where they are; they are strangers where they live.</p> <p>What is (or makes something) home for a postmodern subject? What in a place, memory, event, and so forth, makes them home for a postmodern subject? In light of the foregoing, whatever it is must be elusive. "Home is elusive." At the same time "home is illusive" (in the Freudian sense), it is that which is not present but for which one longs and thirsts.</p> <p>Context conditions iden-</p> |
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¹⁷Cf. David Adamo, *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective* (New York: University Press of America, 2006); and Daniel Patte, general ed., *Global Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004).

¹⁶Stephen E. Fowl, "The Importance of a Multivoiced Literal Sense of Scripture: The Example of Thomas Aquinas," in A. K. M. Adam, Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Francis Watson, eds., *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), pp. 35–50.

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| <p>hunger for information) and the gazes of moviemakers (who aim to dazzle and entertain).</p> <p>Reclaiming storytelling is one way of refusing to let go of our narratives. To continue to tell them is to not let them slip out of sight. They will now and then slide out of place, but we can reweave them back into our mats at different places than before.</p> <p>With regard to the Bible, it contains many strands that await retelling and weaving with other narratives.</p> | <p>us see, for example, how the “people of the land” are varied and multiple. From Genesis on, “people of the land” refers to groups of non-Israelites (Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, and so forth). However, when we get to Ezra, “people of the land” also refers to Jews left at home, not taken in the exile.</p> <p>The critique and reconstruction of identity open up our narratives for (mass) varied conscious retelling and cross-cultural interweaving.</p> | <p>tity, and so does home (in the form of family, food, customs, clothes, memory, story, tradition, etc.). Context is present; home is transcendent, across “the river,” over yonder. One way to make this elusive home present is through recalling memories and telling stories.</p> <p>Alas, I am back to storytelling and the quest for a home for the Bible in the postmodern world. The Bible is home for Christians; it is a home that is in diaspora. (Those who imagine that they can master the Bible bear the cuts and scars of essentialism.)</p> |
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The foregoing imagines postmodernity to be bestowing opportunities upon us to reclaim our storytelling roles, to affirm differences and variations when we reconstruct identities, and to account for the ways in which context and home (which is in diaspora) condition who we are. Postmodernity oozes with liberating and reconstructive energies, more so than with threatening waves of destruction.

Postmodernity reFramed, Bible Repositioned

Turn Granger’s *la grande décharge* over, and the world fills up, as if to say that turning the world as we know it upside down is an opportunity to reconstruct it. My software allows me to rotate *la grande décharge* 180°; in so doing I see that the reconstructed world is filling up with rejected junk. That is an appropriate image for this essay, for it embodies the hope for the return of the repressed,¹⁸ the abject,¹⁹ and the sublime.²⁰ We may end up reconstructing the world with rejected materials and with repressed subjects, but this does not mean that we will end up with the same world. Since we will reorganize (differently) the previously “dumped” materials, we will therefore end up with a different world. A reordered world, even with the same material, is a different world.

I unpacked my understanding of postmodernity around the Bible and the task of reading the Bible,²¹ which are, figuratively speaking, strands woven into

¹⁸Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1927); and Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, tr. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977).

¹⁹Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*.

²⁰Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*.

²¹See also A. K. M. Adam, *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000).

the Christian mat. Though I limit myself to the Bible and the task of reading, others may extend the opportunities that postmodernity bestows to other strands, such as the various understandings of (the trinitarian) God and humanity, of tradition and order, of rituals and sacraments, or of how those may intersect, and so forth.

I focus on the Bible also because it has successfully weathered the ripping currents of postmodernity. The Bible contains multiple stories, none of which we should read as a meta-narrative. We should, instead, read the stories in creative tension, just as the persons of the Trinity relate to one another. This is a healthy challenge against the tendency, on the one hand, to see the Bible as a meta-narrative, and, on the other hand, to use one biblical narrative (such as John's understanding of Jesus) to control the meanings of all other (biblical and nonbiblical) narratives. There cannot be a biblical center or a canon within the canon. As the three persons of the Trinity are diverse yet united, different but the same, so are the biblical narratives. All the biblical narratives should, therefore, get an opportunity (under the direction and leniency of readers) to talk with and listen to each other as well as to interact with narratives from beyond the covers of the Bible, in written and oral forms, ancient and more recent. At the urgings of postmodernism, we can no longer keep the Bible separate from the sea of stories that flow through public channels. Nor should we in churches sit back and leave the task of telling (our) stories to Pixar, Disney, Paramount, and others.

Storytelling is subjective, and it forms subjects. It is an opportunity for many to become subjects, both the ones who tell and the ones who listen, for the latter, in time, would tell more people; so, storytelling constructs identity (of both the tellers and the listeners) and empowers the rippling of the circles of storytelling. Among the indigenous people of Australia, for instance, to participate in storytelling is a chance to share the traditions that form their identities (which has to do with both from whence they have come and where they are heading) and to swim in their sea of stories. The challenge for indigenous Australians is not about finding a story to tell, but about feeling that one has received permission to tell a story. Permission here is not about sanction, as if some people are prohibited from participating in storytelling events. Rather, this permission has to do with feeling (especially when one is away from home) that the story one wants to tell belongs in the circle of stories in the place from which one comes. The currents of postmodernity can be formative in this regard, for, in resisting meta-narratives and homogeneity, the storytelling circle should be permissive for many, including indigenous peoples.

Storytelling is an opportunity to cross boundaries, for to really tell a story one must enter the world of the story. One sits in a current setting and tries to manifest a story from another time and place. Without crossing into the story-world, one merely tells a story for the sake of sharing information and entertaining an audience.²² To really tell a story one must enter the story-world and as-

²²Storytelling among Pacific islanders and indigenous Australians is not about sharing information but about locating our roots and naming our identity, who we (think we) are, in an exercise that exposes our interconnected webs of relations. Storytelling is not just another opportunity to entertain an audience but a process of constructing our sense of belonging through rituals and ceremonies.

sume the identity re-membered in the story. Upon entering the story-world, one realizes that the story invites weaving with other stories. The task of manifesting a story will draw the teller and the listener toward other memories and stories, so that a double movement, a double “crossing,” takes place in storytelling: (1) The storyteller crosses into the world of the story, and (2) the story invites the storyteller and the listener to cross into the world of other stories.

Given that the Hebrew Bible privileges the Judean story and the Israelite identity, we from outside those cultures do not need to adopt those. We may choose to do so, and that is our choice. But, we must remember that we are adopting a story that our ancestors did not construct, a story that contributed to the enslavement and massacre of our ancestors. We are making the home (story) of another be our home (story). We must, therefore, be responsible for the story (home) of another people and for our foreignness to their story, their home. Some of us may privilege stories from outside of the Bible, and we, too, should bear in mind the postmodern incredulity toward meta-narratives. Privileging nonbiblical stories is not sacrilegious, for in doing so we participate in a biblical (canonical) process, insofar as the stories in the Bible were not biblical (canonical) from their beginnings. The Judean biblical story contains elements from outside the experiences and cultures of their ancestors,²³ so the privileging of stories and ideas from outside the covers of the Bible is something done in the Bible itself. These are further evidences of the spirit of postmodernity that operates in the Bible.

In positioning the Bible on the currents of postmodernity, we encourage the Bible to cross its literary and cultural boundaries and to engage other narratives. Postmodernity gifts readers and storytellers with the opportunity to weave biblical narratives with other narratives. In other words, in positioning the Bible on the currents of postmodernity, we return it to its “home,” and we remind ourselves that the Bible is not a (or our) mat but a strand in our mat (woven with multiple stories).

Bible reSurfaced, at Home

I suggested above that the Bible is home for many Christians; but we Christians do not share the same understanding of what a home is and what transforms something into a “home,” nor do we appreciate our homes in the same way. The home to which I am referring here is the one in diaspora (see above).²⁴ This home is whatever anchors one’s sense of security and identity. It might be a place that has become home because of a custom, a memory, a story, a song, and/or a teaching, for example. Without the latter that place is just a space, a

Storytelling is a process that forms our hopes for where we are going; it engages the past with the present and merges time and space.

²³Cf. Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973).

²⁴I must confess one other thing: As a migrant worker, it appears paradoxical that I imagine that I am not in diaspora; rather, for me, my home is in diaspora. I am not in diaspora because I am in a place of comfort, but my home is in diaspora because it is not where I am.

site, rather than a home. A space is home because it is loaded. Home is loaded. A space is home also because it is welcoming. It does not imprison but draws one to its limits, giving one security and the opportunity to feel that one belongs.

Saying that home is in diaspora is a paradox; “home” gives the impression of comfort and security, certainty and availability, but locating it in diaspora suggests that this home is also removed and transcendent. This home is comforting and not present, so one cannot own and control it, as if it were divine.

This is the kind of home to which the Hebrew Bible leads readers, especially those who read it as a story that extends from Genesis to 2 Chronicles (rather than from Genesis to Malachi as in the Christian “Old Testament”). The Hebrew Bible presents readers with a story that interweaves many stories, starting with creation events and a garden episode and ending with curses and expulsion, followed with a story of sibling rivalry, murder, and the marking of the murderer for endless wandering. The story picks up with the proliferation of human iniquity and the floods of God’s punishment from which God saves one family with many animals in an ark. The deluge and the constructed ark seemed to invite humans to build a high tower (in case God breaks the covenant sealed with a rainbow), and God responds to this construction by coming to confuse languages and to disperse the people further. Expulsion from home and dispersion of humans are two of the strands that hold these stories together. There are other strands, of course, but I privilege these two in this retelling.

Abram and his sons, their sons and grandsons,²⁵ servants and daughters, wives and handmaids, with many animals, moved back and forth between the land that God promised them, a land that already belonged to other “people of the land,” and to other lands (one being Egypt). The land of promise was not always fertile and abundant, and the story of the patriarchs circled around famine and departure from their home (a space that became home because God promised it, but the same space was home for others before Abram laid claim to it).

From Egypt Moses led the populous Israel back to the land of the Canaanites, and the Israelites had to fight, kill (and some of them were killed), and grab both land and wealth, thereby fulfilling God’s promise. The majority of the people who left Egypt died on the way in the lands of other peoples (that is to say, Israel did not exodus through an empty wilderness) under the eyes and arms of their God. Descendants of the people that came out of Egypt divided the land of the Canaanites among themselves upon their arrival; some chose to accept their portion across the Jordan, but others preferred to stay in Transjordan, and, consequently, they dispersed throughout the land. Dispersion continued, even in the land that God promised. In this land Israel fell into and out of favor with their God, who graciously and patiently sent judges to deliver the chosen people.

After the kingship was established, ongoing internal and international tensions and unrest caused further dispersions of the people. The house of David overtook the throne of Saul, and two generations later the empire divided into northern and southern kingdoms, with centers in Samaria and Jerusalem. Israel

²⁵Except for Benjamin, all of Jacob’s children were born outside the land that God promised to the patriarchs; their places of birth were outside Canaan, thus problematizing claims to belong to the land of the Canaanites.

(in the north) turned away from the house of David (in Jerusalem, to the south), and the unity of the descendants of Abraham fell apart. Foreign nations later arrived to take control over them, Assyria taking over in the north and Babylonia in the south. Thus, dispersion continued with some people running back to Egypt and neighbors standing aloof while foreign invaders tore down the walls of the capital cities.

My retelling is selective, and it follows a plot that leads into exile, where the people long and lament for “home” with songs, questions, and stories. This umbrella story ends in 2 Chronicles with the people in exile poised to return home. It is a story of dispersion, of longing for a home that is not at the place where the people are. There are places in the story where readers get the impression that the people have returned from exile and started to rebuild their homes, but the overall flow of the narrative is from creation to exile, with “home” not fully owned or captured.

The Christian scriptures in their received form also point toward departure for a home that is beyond reach, as if it is in diaspora. The “New Testament” begins with four versions of the Jesus event, ending with the resurrected Christ ascending to a home that is yonder, leaving the followers with the expectation of his return. The Second Coming, however, did not happen right away but was delayed even up to the end of Revelation, which looks toward the consummation of time and the ultimate end of suffering. Reading the Bible as a whole brings to mind the story of Odysseus, who, in Homer’s *Odyssey*, arrived back in Ithaca after journeying for ten years after the end of the Trojan War and having to compete for his wife Penelope. He won his wife back and found out that she was faithful during the long time he was away, but then he had to face a test Penelope designed to find out if he were really her husband. Odysseus’ homecoming was a return to a place that was no longer home to him. The story ends with Odysseus setting off again, as if he is destined not to be at home. For him, too, home is not where he is; home is in diaspora.

How different are the foregoing stories from those of refugees who have come within the borders of the United States? They live among you, but “home” for them is not where they are, and that is no fault of yours. You might be most hospitable, but there is something about belonging that is mysterious.

There are four strands in the foregoing that we should interweave in order that they can hold each other in place. First is the affirmation that the Bible is home for Christians. Second is the awareness that the Bible contains stories about peoples whose homes are in diaspora. Third is the recognition that we cannot lay claim to, as if we can own and thus control, that which is in diaspora, beyond our reach. Fourth is the realization that the Bible is one strand in the mat of our faith and our perception of order. The Bible is loaded and divine and is open for interweaving with other narratives, other strands, and other homes. It is through interweaving (which serves as a metaphor for storytelling) that we can bring the Bible closer to where we are, so that the Bible can surface among us, as a home that is at hand.

This essay circles around the Bible and the *jouissance* in the task of reading the Bible in a postmodern world, waving a flag for storytelling as a way of assuring that our narratives do not slip out of sight. In response to the postmodern

celebration of otherness, difference, and heterogeneity, storytelling encourages the interweaving of our narratives with those of other peoples. In this regard storytelling can be a tool for upholding unity in faithful diversity. Moreover, storytelling is a helpful way of making present that which is not within reach, the home that is in diaspora.²⁶

In response to the postmodern challenge, therefore, I argue that we do not really need meta-narratives. What we need are storytellers. We need storytellers because we are addicted to stories, because we need stories to live. We need storytellers to survive, and storytellers will now and then give the Bible homes, here and there.

²⁶Since storytelling is not free of biases, there is always a threat that a storyteller will harmonize and sanitize the story by removing multiple and alternative meanings. The readings I have offered illustrate how storytelling can resuscitate multiple meanings, thus affirming that diversity of meanings can coexist in the same text.