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In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts by C. S. Song
(review)

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Christianity & Literature, Volume 65, Number 2, March 2016, pp. 262-264
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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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of liberal discourse has the side effect of removing agency from Catholics themselves, few of whose voices are heard here. One question is, Did the rhetoric of Catholic politicians of the mid-19th century conform to or resist the idea of religious liberty? Moreover, the human costs of anti-Catholic discourses are elided at the expense of risking a positive spin on them as the watersheds of religious liberty. Finally, Fenton focuses on rhetorical production (the creation and sustenance of discourses), at the expense of reception: What did readers make of this anti-Catholicism? Was it received and made part of their lives or was it ignored?

Still with these qualifications in mind, I can recommend *Religious Liberties* to this journal's readers seeking a well-written, rich, and ambitious study encompassing literature, Christianity, and political theory. Fenton's scholarly performance alone is worth the ticket of admission, even if the apples and oranges she so fascinatingly tosses ultimately remain distinct.

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C. S. Song. *In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts*. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2012. ISBN 978-0-227-68023-0 (paperback). Pp. vii + 172. \$18.90.

Choan-Seng Song is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Theology and Asian Cultures at the Pacific School of Religion in San Francisco. His book *In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts* seeks to challenge "Western biblical scholars and theologians who have monopolized the interpretation of the Bible" (115). He desires to throw "wide open the door of interpretation to men and women from outside the West, to people of different ethnic origins and cultural backgrounds, to women as well men, to the powerless over against those who hold power, whether political, social, religious, or academic" (115). Here is how Song structures the book to accomplish his goal.

The book consists of ten tightly integrated chapters and a bibliography. Chapter headings include, "In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts," "Story Is the Matrix of Theology," "Theology Rewrites Stories," "Stories Rectify Theology," "The Theological Power of Stories," "In Search of Our Roots," "Stories within a Story," "Stories Are Culturally Distinctive," "Stories Can Be Theologically Interactive."

The final chapter, "The Bible, Stories, and Theology," provides the reader "approaches" to pursue theology conceived in stories inside and outside of Scripture. Chapter 10 answers this question, "How is...intense theology to be born out of the matrix of stories?" (152). The first step of story theology is, "Awareness of the theological nature of stories" (155).

For Song, "[s]tory is the matrix of theology" (18). This axiom drives his book, challenging the Western penchant for systematic theology. He raises some intriguing questions to make his case: "Who says theology has to be ideas and concepts? Who has decided that theology has to be doctrines, axioms, propositions?"

(6). Song's conclusion? "God is not concept; God is story. God is not idea; God is presence. God is not hypothesis; God is experience. God is not principle; God is life." He adds, "theology worthy of its name has to be part and parcel of the dramas of life and faith" (116).

Song ably answers the above questions in the book. And his story-based approach to theology is his major and masterful contribution to the Christian world. The book reminds one of Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (1974), Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981), Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones's *Why Narrative?* (1997), Leland Ryken's *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (1984), Kevin Vanhoozer's *Drama of Doctrine* (2005), and Rob Bell and Brian McLaren, among others, in the emergent church movement in the USA. One significant difference between Song and the above authors, however, is his entertainment of secular stories in theologizing.

As one who has lived in Asia for many years I loved the stories from the various countries from that part of the globe, as well as the more familiar, "The Ugly Duckling." But why include secular stories? How does this relate to discovering the theology of Scripture? Song surmises, "Stories have the capacity to transcend time and space" (162).

In secular stories, whether real-life stories, parables, fables, folktales, myths, Song searches for themes related to theology within Scripture in these three areas: (1) suffering and faith, (2) sin and death, and (3) transformation of life (131). Why? Because "Whatever form or genre it may take, it is a real life story both to the storyteller and the listener" (132). For example, the real-life stories of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mahatma Gandhi, Hitler, and Martin Luther King cross "oceans and continents" and carry theological truths.

"The Ugly Duckling" serves as a second example in that a metaphor of the gospel can be embedded in a fairy tale. To illustrate, the ugly duckling can be transformed into a beautiful swan if she is willing to journey into an unknown world. Song does not seem to be arguing for spiritual equivalency of Scripture and secular stories, rather he perceives the universal of earthiness in both.

While Song provides excellent definitions of the various genres, not all readers will agree with the genres he assigns to various parts of Scripture. Some will interpret this as a weak, subjective view of Scripture that does not give Scripture its historical due. For example, Song categorizes Genesis 2 and 3 as a folktale (137–44).

This criticism will not bother Song in that he sees truth embedded in any genre. "It is *truthful* not in the sense that it is derived from what is called 'objective truth,' but because it gives expression to their genuine fear about things beyond their control and their sense of helplessness when faced with crisis of life" (137). Others will argue that this book is too one-sided—consider the title. Everything centers on story. Interestingly one rarely hears this observation in relation to the sole propositional side.

Song, of course, has his reasons for the story emphasis, which he documents thoroughly throughout the book (see title chapters above). One of these is,

“Theology does not make us see, but story does. A theological thesis does not enable us to hear, but a story does . . . Story makes us see deeply into the abyss of the human heart desperately looking for the God of love” (69). Even so, Song seems more interested in sequence than superiority. Consider this statement: “John, the author of the Gospel that bears his name, is a brilliant theologian and also a magnificent storyteller. Perhaps he is a storyteller first, then a theologian . . . it is from stories, real-life stories, that his theology has developed and grown” (30).

How will one walk away from a thorough read of *In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts*? That will depend on a number of things. One’s theological background, generation, and pedagogical preferences will no doubt impact the read. Some will find it provocative. Others will find it perplexing or puzzling. Still others will find it provoking and persuasive.

Wherever the reader lands, what cannot be denied is the ability of story to communicate to the East *and* the West, particularly to a postmodern audience currently characterized as oral-preferenced learners. These individuals, who John Sachs calls “digitorials,” prefer stories and images over statistics and abstract concepts; screens over printed texts. Is it time to reintroduce a story-based theology to regain a lost perspective (particularly in the West) of Scripture? Is it time to provide propositions a story-based home from which they emerged? Song would answer these questions with a resounding “Yes!”

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The Feminine Ethos in C. S. Lewis’s Chronicles of Narnia. By Monika B. Hilder. *Studies in Twentieth-Century British Literature*, 10. New York: Peter Lang, 2012. ISBN 978-1-4331-1817-3 (hardcover), 978-1-4539-0900-3 (e-book). pp. xv + 206. \$84.95.

The Gender Dance: Ironic Subversion in C. S. Lewis’s Cosmic Trilogy. By Monika B. Hilder. *Studies in Twentieth-Century British Literature*, 11. New York: Peter Lang, 2013. ISBN 978-1-4331-1935-4 (hardcover), 978-1-4539-1048-1 (e-book). pp. xvii + 222. \$81.95.

Surprised by the Feminine: A Rereading of C. S. Lewis and Gender. By Monika B. Hilder. *Studies in Twentieth-Century British Literature*, 12. New York: Peter Lang, 2013. ISBN 978-1-4331-1989-7 (hardcover), 978-1-4539-1164-8 (e-book). pp. xix + 207. \$82.95.

A persistent theme in Lewis studies for many years has been the question of his supposed sexism or misogyny. The latter—essentially an ad hominem attack masquerading as criticism—has been amply refuted by the testimony of women who knew him. The former charge, sometimes put forward gleefully and sometimes