

BIBLICAL LEAPS OF THE MORAL IMAGINATION
PART I:
STORY, COUNTER-STORY, AND CONFESSING COUNTER-STORY

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"Sin is not necessary, but it is inevitable."

Paraphrased from Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*

"[N]othing of any beauty or truth comes of a piece of writing without the author's thinking he[/she] has sinned against something--propriety, custom, faith, privacy, tradition, political orthodoxy, historical fact, literary convention, or indeed, all the prevailing community standards together."

Quoted from E. L. Doctorow, *Reporting the Universe*

The biblical literature, so I shall argue, reflects three leaps of the moral imagination, leaps which I shall designate as story, counter-story, and confessing counter-story. I identify these moments of moral clarity and conviction as leaps of the moral imagination because I do not think that one can arrive at them through an application of logic or the exercise of reason. Rather they can be achieved only through some kind of, either human or divine, serendipitous leap of the imagination. At any rate all three have profound implications for how we might profitably and prosperously live our lives.

STORY

The initial leaps of the moral imagination are related in the story of Moses giving the people of Israel the Ten

Commandments and in its New Testament recension, the story of Jesus teaching the disciples in the so-called Sermon on the Mount.¹ Although scholars debate the how, the when, and even the who² of these leaps of the moral imagination, the empirical reality of these leaps remains embedded in the traditions of ancient Israel and in the gospel stories of the early church.

The anonymous story tellers of ancient Israel tell the story of Moses teaching the Ten Commandments from a mountain to an escaped band of slaves. Similarly the gospel writer identified as Matthew tells the story of Jesus teaching, again from a mountain, a disparate, if not desperate, band of followers his intensification of the Ten Commandments.

Both teachings envision a life which is responsive in relationship to God and responsible in relationship to other people. In fact when Jesus is challenged to identify the single greatest commandment he replies: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

¹ The Greek word used to introduce Jesus' speech identifies it as "teaching" not "preaching." Why the tradition persists in labeling it "The Sermon on the Mount" is cloaked in mystery. The "Lecture on the Mount" would be more accurate.

² On the origin and authenticity of the Ten Commandments and the sayings of Jesus in "The Lecture on the Mount" see, for example, Walter Harrelson, *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980) and Robert Funk, Roy Hoover, and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997).

The Ten Commandments then begin with a declaration followed by an imperative: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:2-3). In a dominant polytheistic culture, the worship of one God is a leap of the moral imagination. However it is not the imperatives of moral imagination which prevail but the dictates of human inclination. Worship becomes ritualized, and empty declarations of piety replace genuine expressions of reverence for the creator of all life. Hence Jesus instructs his followers: "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:20); and he counsels them: "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them" (Matt 6:1); or again: "Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others" (Matt 6:5). That worship of God, that a responsive relationship with God does not involve the performance of public ritual but rather the proclamation of personal faith involves another leap of the moral imagination.

When instructing the Israelites about a responsible relationship with other people, Moses formulates the commandments as categorical directives: for example, "You shall not kill; You shall not steal" (Exod 20:13-17); and so on. In a culture which predominately formulated prohibitions in terms of

case law--if you do this, then that will be the consequence--such absolute formulations again involve a leap of the moral imagination. These categorical expressions place limitations on a few basic aspects of human behavior while leaving all other considerations open to human decision. A mutually supportive, functioning community exists only when people can trust each other not to kill them, not to steal from them, not to tell lies about them, or not even to desire their possessions. Sanctions are not necessary; the consequences for violations are natural. If people don't believe it, they should try it and see what happens. Of course people have been trying it for centuries, and we have seen what happens. The human community based on trust and mutual respect breaks down. Discord and dissonance threaten the stability of civic order. There is, after all, a reason why we have police departments and court systems.

Jesus' intensification of Mosaic teaching involves further leaps of the moral imagination. For example, Jesus tells his disciples: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister. You will be liable . . . ; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable. . ." (Matt 5:21-22). Recognizing that one can kill another not just physically but also emotionally, that one can kill with words not just weapons

involves yet another, considerable leap of the moral imagination. Or again in a self explanatory intensification, Jesus teaches his disciples: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'" (Matt 5:43).

COUNTER-STORY

Having formulated these initial leaps of the moral imagination in terms of a life lived in responsive relationship with God and in responsible relationship with other people, the biblical literature makes yet another leap and in so doing identifies a mystifying phenomenon and recognizes a daunting truth: despite the imperatives to live responsively in relationship to God and responsibly in relationship to other people, such a life is next to impossible to achieve with anything like faithful consistency. St. Paul states the abstract principle in Romans: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Rom 7:15,19). On the basis of his own experience, Paul gives voice to the central problem of human existence: the impossibility of consistently doing what we know is right. We can know what is right; but all too often, we

cannot do what is right. Why remains a mystery even to ourselves.³

Mid-Twentieth century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr also articulates this concept by arguing that sin is not necessary, but it is inevitable.⁴ It is not necessary that people test limits and push beyond boundaries, but it is inevitable that they will do so.

Although St. Paul conceptually identifies the phenomenon and Reinhold Niebuhr develops it further, it is the gospel evangelists along with the historians of ancient Israel who literarily argue the thesis through numerous stories, stories about supposedly faithful followers of Jesus and stories about Hebrew heroes who allegedly adhere to the commandments of God. An awareness of this phenomenon is not exclusive to the biblical literature. Before I discuss two sacred examples I want to briefly mention a secular example.

According to his autobiography, a young Benjamin Franklin engaged in "the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral

³ I realize that this understanding of Paul may not be what he intended. Should this be the case, I shall play the post-modern card: the meaning of a text is not exhausted by what the author originally intended. See, for example, Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West" in *The Writings of St. Paul*, ed., Wayne Meeks (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1972), pp. 422-434. However see also the discussion in Paul Achtemier, *Romans* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), pp. 118-126.

⁴The exact quote in theologese is: "The Christian doctrine of original sin with its seemingly contradictory assertions about the inevitability of sin and [human] responsibility for sin is a dialectical truth which does justice to the fact that [human's] self-love and self-centeredness is inevitable, but not in such a way as to fit into the category of natural necessity." See Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Volume I: Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), p. 263.

perfection."⁵ He compiled a list of twelve virtues, drafted a chart on which to record his successes and failures, and daily monitored his progress. Upon this progress he ironically comments: "I was surprised to find myself so much fuller of faults than I had imagined."⁶

Jesus' disciples fared no better than Ben Franklin at achieving moral perfection or even at being faithful followers. As Matthew records it, the disciples had twice witnessed Jesus feed large numbers of people with very little initial food. Then one day shortly after these events, they were in a boat with Jesus. It was lunch time, and they had only one loaf of bread. Jesus interrupts their discussion of how to provide lunch by saying: "You of little faith, why are you still talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered?" (Matt 16:8-11)

These are, of course, the very same disciples who at the beginning of the gospel "immediately" (Matt 4:20,22) responded to the call of Jesus, left their fishing boats and families, and became followers of Jesus and fishers of people. These are the same disciples who Jesus previously praised with the words:

⁵ Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Simon Schuster, 2003), p. 89.

⁶ Isaacson, p. 91.

"Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear" (Matt 13:16).

Hunger though is not the sole motivator for their lack of faith. This incident is not an isolated incident. Before Matthew's gospel is over the disciples will, among other things, reject the passion predictions, quibble with Jesus over the use of expensive ointment, fail to stay awake and support him in the Garden of Gethsemane prior to his arrest, flee at his arrest, and deny even knowing him during his trial for blasphemy. Matthew even notes that upon seeing the resurrected Jesus "some doubted."

These stories are not what character ethicists call "normative stories," that is, stories which reflect acceptable community virtues and values, stories which are used to shape the ethical character of a community and its leaders.⁷ Although the initial stories of the disciples and their relationship with Jesus may function as normative stories, the latter certainly do not. These stories are more like counter-stories than normative stories. Instead of instructing readers on how to live within a community of faithful followers of Jesus and offering paradigms of appropriate behavior, these counter-stories offer examples of how not to lead one's life and provide models of behavior which

⁷ Richard Bondi, "The Elements of Character," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 12 (1984).

will result in expulsion from the community. Yet as the contemporary American novelist E. L. Doctorow reminds us:

[N]othing of any beauty or truth comes of a piece of writing without the author's thinking he[/she] has sinned against something--propriety, custom, faith, privacy, tradition, political orthodoxy, historical fact, literary convention, or indeed, all the prevailing community standards together.⁸

This though is a thought to which I shall return. My immediate concern is to note that these counter-stories are not unique to the Gospels. They also occur in the hero stories of the Hebrew Scriptures. Quintessential among these is the story of King David. Interestingly enough, the tellers of the tale about biblical Israel's monarchy routinely praise King David for his integrity. Following a lengthy account of how David consolidated his kingdom and unified his people, one narrator evaluates his administration: "David administered justice and equity to all his people" (2 Sam 8:15). In assessing the reigns of subsequent kings, the deuteronomic chroniclers repeatedly use David as a role model,⁹ noting that while "David did what was right in the sight of the Lord" (1 Kgs 15:5), his successors did not, as, for example, King Ahaz who "did not do what was right in the sight of the Lord his God, as his ancestor David had done" (2 Kgs 16:2).

⁸ E. L. Doctorow, *Reporting the Universe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁹ See 1 Kgs 14:8; 15:3-5; 15:1; 2 Kgs 8:19; 14:3; 16:2; 18:3; 21:7; 22:2.

Such comments suggest that the narrative of King David may have functioned as a "normative story" intended to impart appropriate community values and virtues. Yet many of the narrated episodes conflict with this positive ethical assessment of David's character.

Violence and estrangement are repeated themes throughout the larger narrative. David's use of violence to defeat the Philistines wins him fame and acclaim; but it also alienates him from Saul, thereby forcing him into exile. Estranged also from his supporters, David seeks refuge with his former Philistine foes. As the eventual successor to a defeated Saul, David presides over a monarchy consolidated through a violent purge which eliminates all rivals. Even though David is not an active participant in the violence, he is its direct beneficiary.

Once David's political problems have been resolved, the story teller focuses on David's personal and familial life. Violence and estrangement are again the dominant themes. David sexually assaults Bathsheba and orders the murder of her husband in a failed attempt to cover up his transgression. David's behavior is then mirrored in the behavior of his sons. Amnon rapes his half sister Tamar and is then murdered by her brother Absalom. Exiled by David, Absalom eventually return to initiate a revolution against his father. Even though the revolt fails and ends with the execution of Absalom, David's legacy of violence and estrangement is passed on to his son Solomon. On

his death bed David instructs Solomon to consolidate his own power by executing all personal and political rivals. Yet through all these adventures and misadventures, David remains the recipient of divine favor, a favor expressed through the promises of II Samuel 7: "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam 7:16).¹⁰

This summary suggests a high degree of complexity in the portrayal of David, a complexity which results from a discontinuity between the various narrators' assessments of David and the narrated actions of David. These complexities and apparent contradictions make it difficult to construe the David story as a typical "normative story" which is used to shape the ethical character of a community and its leaders. This challenging story dramatizes more of the seven deadly sins than of the four cardinal virtues. It offers more of a model for a counter-community than a confessing community. Like the stories of the disciples in Matthew, these stories of David in Samuel and Kings function more as counter-stories than as normative, confessing stories.

¹⁰ For more on the David story, see my essay "The Complexity of Character and the Ethics of Complexity" in *Character and Scripture*, ed. William P. Brown

CONFESSING COUNTER-STORY

E. L. Doctorow has reminded us that such counter-stories may also have a function within the confessing community.

Novelist Salman Rushdie presents the case this way:

Impossible stories, stories with No Entry signs on them, change our lives, and our minds, as often as the authorized versions, the stories we are expected to trust, upon which we are asked, or told, to build our judgments, and our lives.¹¹

Significantly the tellers and redactors of Israel's story seem to recognize and accept the validity of Rushdie's claim. Instead of neglecting or even suppressing counter-stories, these perceptive chroniclers include them within the confessing story.¹² They not only include counter-stories within the confessing story but co-opt them so that counter-story becomes the confessing story.

This encompassing of counter-stories within the confessing story is the third and final biblical leap of the moral imagination. That the biblical literature makes this leap, not only recognizing and telling counter-stories but also canonizing them, is perhaps the genius of the biblical witness. Typically societies repress and suppress such stories. If they are told at all, they are told by muck raking-journalists and investigative reporters; or they are the salacious subject of

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). Pp. 73-97.

¹¹ Salman Rushdie, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), p. 199.

¹² On the hazards of neglecting and suppressing counter-stories, see Chinua Achebe, *Home and Exile* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

posthumous biographies. Rarely are they acknowledged and included in the canon of national literature. Yet the biblical literature not only tells these counter-stories, but it also includes them in the sacred canon of the confessing community, and as such they become not just counter-stories but confessing counter-stories. As such the "shadow" side of character is acknowledged and an overall complexity of character is accepted. Mirroring us to ourselves, counter-narratives thus offer a confessing community not ideals to emulate but complexities to ponder.

If one accepts Doctorow's notion that truth emerges from counter-narrative, if one consents to Rushdie's belief that lives can be changed through counter-stories just as they can be shaped by normative stories, and if one seeks accordingly to interpret the counter-narratives in the context of the overall biblical confessing narrative; then a discussion of the biblical moral vision must [re]focuses on what exactly is learned from these unauthorized, counter-stories. If they do not overtly cultivate virtues and inculcate character, what do they do? How are such stores useful in a discussion of the biblical moral imagination, especially a discussion emerging from these counter-narratives? How can they change our lives? What can they teach us about how to live our lives?

Contemporary cultural critic Terrance Rafferty provides a suggestion through his reflections on the elusive quest for the Great American Novel. The Great American Novel, he writes,

had to be one that would, comprehensively and definitively, explain us to ourselves, that would make sense of our senseless sprawl and contradictions--that would show us who we are and were and will be.¹³

Perhaps this is also how counter-narratives function with respect to constructing an ethical vision grounded in the moral imagination of biblical counter-narratives: through the stories of the disciples and though the story of King David, we gain an enhanced sense "of who we are and were and will be." Perhaps better than normative stories, these counter-stories "explain us to our selves." Rather than catalog virtues, condemn vices, and commend a vision of the good life, a discussion of a biblical moral vision may be limited by the nature of the stories themselves to attempts at explaining us to ourselves, of showing us who were and are and who we might as a result become.¹⁴ Instead of instructing us on the benefits and hazards of being a particular kind of person, stories, especially counter-stories, show us who we in fact are. Narratives after all are not discursive reflections on character and the nature of community but stories about people who live in communities; struggle with

¹³ Terrance Rafferty, *GQ* (July, 1999) 46.

¹⁴ This is, I realize, not how Aristotle envisioned character ethics. Nor is it consistent with the practice of this discipline by Stanley Hauerwas in, for example, *Character and the Christian Life* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1994) or *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame

each other, themselves, and even God; and attempt in some way to prosper.

What these stories mirror back to us is our human vulnerability, our penchant for making faulty decisions, our susceptibility for undertaking the irresponsible endeavors, our inclination for saying and doing the wrong thing at the wrong time. What these stories do is help us to recognize, if not accept, our human vulnerabilities. Ironically by acknowledging our vulnerability, by granting that sin is not necessary but inevitable, we discover freedom. Reinhold Niebuhr states what he identifies as the ultimate paradox: "[Humans are] most free in the discovery that [they are] not free."¹⁵ In conceding our vulnerability to error and our susceptibility to sin, we ironically become less vulnerable and more free. In accepting the complexity of our character, we are paradoxically better able to become the people God created us to be.

Our failure to recognize and accept our human vulnerability binds us to an arrogance which places us above and beyond the limitations of ordinary human beings. This arrogance incites blind actions which get us into trouble. The phrase "What was he/she thinking?" refers to just such an exercise of arrogance, the problematic nature of which seems obvious to others.¹⁶

University Press, 1981). Yet biblical scholars typically misuse and abuse the conventions of other disciplines to suit their own purposes.

¹⁵Niebuhr, p. 260.

¹⁶ For excellent literary examples of this phenomenon see the following baseball novels: Mark Harris, *Bang the Drum Slowly* (Lincoln: University of

In their portrayal of characters, the biblical story tellers insightfully reject the reductionistic simplicity of a single perspective and acknowledge an overall complexity of character. Biblical characters are therefore not merely shown as purely "good" or "bad" characters who must accordingly be either admired or despised. Yet accepting complexity does not mean an indiscriminating endorsement of a character's behavior. Nor does it encourage acquiescence toward an enigmatic portrayal of character whose very ambiguity silences all attempts at evaluation.

Although these biblical counter-narratives are not *The Great American Novel* or even *The Great Hebrew* or *Early Church Epics*, they are candidates for *The Great Human Story* in that they seek to explain us to ourselves. They seek in novelist Philip Roth's earthy phrase to present the human stain:

We leave a stain, we leave a trail, we leave our imprint. Impurity, cruelty, abuse, error, excrement, semen--there's no other way to be here. Nothing to do with disobedience. nothing to do with grace or salvation or redemption. It's in everyone. Indwelling. Inherent. Defining. The stain that is there before its mark. Without the sign it is there. The stain so intrinsic it doesn't require a mark. The stain the *precedes* disobedience, that *encompasses* disobedience and perplexes all explanation and understanding.¹⁷

Nebraska Press, 1956) and Bernard Malamud, *The Natural* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1952). In the former, Henry Wiggen and his teammates learn from their terminally ill catcher to accept their own vulnerability, and as a result they begin to work together and build a successful team. In the latter Roy Hobbs arrogantly flaunts his own vulnerability and fails to live out his heroic destiny.

¹⁷ Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000) p. 242.

Dramatizing so effectively the human stain, these biblical stories function more as counter-narratives than typical normative stories. The biblical tales often recognize that desired behaviors often cannot be separated from undesirable actions and that acceptable accomplishments and achievements cannot readily be extracted from unacceptable consequences and calamities. The disciples reject, betray, and even deny Jesus. Yet they are sent by Jesus into the world to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19). Though some still doubted after seeing the resurrected Jesus, Jesus nonetheless commissions them to baptize "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19). Likewise, David implements an agenda of violence but secures the autonomy of a new nation. Even though violence continues to plague his personal as well as political life, and he must live with the escalating consequences of this violence; he still finds favor with God.

Unlike the secular counter-stories of Rushdie and Roth, the biblical counter-stories of the human stain are also confessing stories. The formulation of a moral vision based on such confessing counter-narratives suggests an acceptance of complexity as an essential element of the human character and a recognition of the inability to isolate traits which are beneficial from those which are detrimental or even to identify the degree to which a given characteristic is helpful or

harmful. As such the complexity and consequent ambiguity of biblical characters itself becomes the source for theological and ethical reflection.

What emerges then from such reflection is not a catalog of virtues and vices but a consideration of what it means to be human before God. What emerges is not a recommendation for constructive community action but a reconsideration of how to live within the ambiguity of the human community. What emerges is not an admonition against destructive behavior but an affirmation of the equivocal nature of human beings. The resulting moral vision provides us neither with dogmatic assurance nor with problematic skepticism but with an enhanced understanding of the flaws and fecundities, the problems and possibilities of the human character. What emerges finally is a reflection of who we are and were and who we will certainly remain: complex, humanly flawed individuals who are also the beneficiaries of divine favor. Perhaps it is only when we can recognize and accept our flawed complexity and our resulting human vulnerability, perhaps it is only then that we can return to that original leap of the biblical imagination and find the freedom to live more responsively in relationship to God and responsibly in relationship with other people.