

A Story within a Story within other Stories: On Selecting Biblical Texts amid the Shift to the “Anthropocene”

Ernst M. Conradie

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0020-6952>

- Department of Religion and Theology, Faculty of Art, University of the Western Cape, Bellville, South Africa
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Abstract

This contribution is provoked by Maina Talia’s impressive Ph.D. dissertation entitled “Am I not your Tuakoi? A Tuvaluan Plea for Survival in Time of Climate Emergency.” He proposes a reading of the parable of the merciful Samaritan instead of focusing on the Noah story or Job’s lament. How, then, does one select which story to read and how to read that? The Bible is clearly a story of many stories, while cultural contexts are of course also shaped by multiple, often conflicting stories. In this contribution, three intersecting sets of stories are explored, namely the biblical story in a canonical context, cosmological narratives (the universe story with specific reference to the advent of the Anthropocene), and the Christian story of God’s economy from creation to consummation. How, then, do these stories intersect with each other? How can this help us to come to terms with the contemporary shift from the Holocene to the Anthropocene?

Keywords: Anthropocene; God’s economy; Good Samaritan; Noah; Narrative

Introduction

This contribution is provoked by Maina Talia’s impressive Ph.D. Thesis entitled “Am I not your Tuakoi?¹ A Tuvaluan Plea for Survival in Time of Climate Emergency.” He proposes a reading of the parable of the merciful Samaritan instead of focusing on the Noah story or Job’s lament. During the apartheid years, the South African New Testament scholar Welile Mazamisa also wrote a PhD thesis on Luke 10, in which he focused on the role of the victim in the story, while having something to say about the attackers as well. At various times, other (South) African scholars have focused on the exodus narratives, the wandering through the wilderness, the conquest of Canaan, the reconstruction under Ezra and Nehemiah, king Josiah’s reforms and Jeremiah’s lamentations to find a key to explore the meaning of the Bible for us today, in changing circumstances.

How, then, does one select which story to read and how to read that? The Bible is clearly a story of many stories, while cultural contexts are of course also shaped by multiple, often conflicting stories. There is a need to zoom in on the particularity of one story but also at times a need to zoom out to see how one story is embedded within

¹ This article is based on a paper read at a conference of the Oceanic Biblical Studies Association on “Bible, Climate and Health”, Malua Theological College, Samoa, 30 August – 1 September 2023.

another. In this contribution, I explore three intersecting sets of stories, namely the biblical story in a canonical context, cosmological narratives (the universe story with specific reference to the advent of the Anthropocene), and the Christian story of God's economy from creation to consummation. How, then, do these stories intersect with each other? How can this help us to come to terms with the contemporary shift from the Holocene to the Anthropocene?

Whose story?

I will start with a quotation that I have cited very often before in different contexts:

It's all a question of story. ... Our traditional story of the universe sustained us for a long period of time. It shaped our emotional attitudes, provided us with life purposes, and energized action. It consecrated suffering and integrated knowledge. We awoke in the morning and knew where we were. We could answer the questions of our children. We could identify crime, punish transgressors. Everything was taken care of because the story was there ... (Berry 1988:123)

On the one hand, I think this quotation rings true in a variety of cultural contexts, as it captures the role of cosmological narratives.² It is not as if such stories form part of a particular culture. Rather, the inverse is true: a culture is embedded within the narrative world projected by the story.³ To explain this more theoretically, here is another quotation from the same author:

For peoples, generally, their story of the universe and the human role in the universe is their primary source of intelligibility and value. Only through this story of how the universe came to be in the beginning and how it came to be as it is does a person come to appreciate the meaning of life or to derive the psychic energy needed to deal effectively with those crisis moments that occur in the life of the individual and in the life of the society. Such a story is the basis of ritual initiation throughout the world. It communicates the most sacred of mysteries. ... Our story not only interprets the past, it also guides and inspires our shaping the future. (Berry 1988:xi).

On the other hand, one needs to ask whose quotation this is. Who is included and who is excluded in using the pronouns "we" and "our"? Whose story is it anyway? This matters given the many global divides – between North and South, East and West, colonisers and the colonised, conquerors and conquered, perpetrators and victims. The question is not only which story this is but whose story it is and who is telling that story to whom in order to make what point? History is all too often written by the victors while the stories of the victims dissipate as their blood seeps into the soil. There are his-stories but also her-stories. Whose story is told and celebrated in song and dance typically depends on to whom the land belongs or is perceived to belong to.

The quotations above come from the North American Catholic scholar Thomas

² The focus here is indeed on cosmological narratives. For a discussion of the notion of "story" and the many modes of narrative theology, see Conradie and Lai (2021).

³ This argument is derived from the so-called Yale school of narrative theology. See, e.g. Lindbeck (1989).

Berry, whose life of scholarship was aimed at bridging the religious divides between West and East. The quotations are from his book *The Dream of the Earth*, in which he confessed himself to be a geo-logian (thinking from the Earth understood as Gaia) more than a theo-logian. Under “we”, he is assuming North American Christians, mostly Roman Catholics. He is commenting on the role that Genesis 1 and 2 have played in such contexts. Berry (1988:123) therefore adds:

We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it, is no longer effective. We have not yet learned the new story.

Berry is calling upon Christians to recognise the “new story”, namely the way in which modern science is able to reconstruct the history of the universe as a single story (see Berry and Swimme 1992; Tucker and Swimme 2011). For Berry, following the lead of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, contemporary science has the ability to bridge the many global divides precisely because the universe story has *universal* significance. The universe story can only be reconstructed through collaborative efforts from scholars in multiple disciplines from around the world. It can be adopted by and told by everyone, at least by any educated person. This also means that the warnings of scientists about climate change, sea level rise, ocean acidification, the loss of biodiversity, deforestation, and so forth need to be heeded. For Berry and his followers, there is a clear ecological moral to this story.

All of this may still ring true, but to put so much emphasis on science, to *consecrate* science in this way, seems to entrench the role of scientists and those who hold positions of authority in economic centers of power (see for instance Sideris 2017). This can only re-entrench the plight of those already marginalised on the global periphery. Such an emphasis on science also trivialises the role of the humanities, of religion and of theology. Again, the question is: whose story is it? In response, there is a need to juxtapose the scientific version of the story with Indigenous cosmological narratives. This will tend to increase diversity and perhaps exacerbate conflict between such stories given competing claims for universality.

One may radicalise this response by saying that one can only tell one’s own story with any authenticity. No one can know anything beyond her or his own experience and bodily identity. Even shared experiences will soon become contested. Even that may be tricky, as any attempt at doing so soon illustrates. We hide things from ourselves that are obvious to others. We select some threads and weave them together in a way that is never fully coherent (Niebuhr 2006). If so, can one tell any story whatsoever? Any story needs to be properly contextualised and provincialised. One cannot tell someone else’s story without doing injustice to their context, culture, language, joys and sufferings. This applies especially given differences of race, gender, class, caste, sexual orientation, culture and language. Moreover, one may listen to the stories of others and seek to show some empathy, but can one ever really understand the stories of others, put oneself in their shoes, claim to represent them?⁴

So whose stories may one then still tell? This question poses a stark challenge to

⁴ Gayatri Spivak (1988) famously questioned attempts to represent the subaltern. For a discussion of the problems that this poses for historians, see Evans (1997:191–223).

those who describe themselves as Christians. Why? Because Christians, especially gentile Christians, do precisely that. They tell the stories of others, adopt them as their own and live by such stories, even though such stories are far from innocent. They tell the stories of Israel as God's covenant partner, because they see themselves as grafted unto Israel's story, included in God's covenant with Israel, not replacing Israel as God's covenant partner (heeding the danger of supersessionism), for better or for worse, given the exclusion of others from such a covenant. They tell the stories of the early church in faraway countries as documented in the gospels and the acts of apostles as if these form part of their own story. And they tell the story of the subsequent spread of Christianity, that is, of conflicting branches of Christianity, from Jerusalem to Galilee and Samaria, and from there in all directions – North to Syria, South to Egypt, West to Rome and East to Persia – and subsequently to the ends of the Earth as we now know it. "Why would they do that?" one may well ask.

Which Story?

If it matters whose story one tells, it also matters which story one tells. This is illustrated by Maina Talia's (2023) Ph.D. dissertation entitled "Am I not your Tuakoi? A Tuvaluan Plea for Survival in Time of Climate Emergency."⁵ Talia (2023) offers an extended reading of the parable of the Good (better: merciful) Samaritan in Luke 10. He contrasts this selection with two alternatives. The one is a reading of the Noah story (Gen 6–9) to affirm God's covenant with Noah. Accordingly, the world will never again be destroyed by water from above or below. Trust in God's loyalty to this covenant implies that one may hold God to such promises. God the Creator can rescue us (i.e. Tuvaluans) from the impact of climate change, namely sea level rise and king tides. The second alternative is in dialogue with Job's lamentations over unjust suffering. The assumption is that a country like Tuvalu contributed a miniscule proportion of historic carbon emissions but is threatened by annihilation in the form of uninhabitable islands, the end of nationhood, and a loss of cultural identity. Instead, Talia acknowledges the threat of climate change as irreversible, focuses on the Tuvaluan quest for survival (to the point of stating that climate justice has become meaningless⁶) and recognises the need for finding good neighbours – who will provide hospitality not only to individual Tuvaluans but will also allow them to bring with them the bones of their ancestors and enable their language and culture to survive. He focuses on the role of the innkeeper in the parable, since the care that is required cannot be once off, cannot be reduced to finances and needs to be institutionalised (see also Longenecker 2009; Adiprasetya 2018). But where can such good neighbours be found?⁷

During the apartheid years, the South African New Testament scholar Welile Mazamisa also wrote a PhD thesis on Luke 10.⁸ Mazamisa recognised that white South Africans would typically place themselves in the position of the priest or the Levite and, with the Pharisees as the original addressees, would therefore question their own

⁵ See Havea's (2023) discussion of the use of such a covenant to justify the dispassion and displacement of the Canaanite peoples.

⁶ See also Talia (2022).

⁷ This question is pursued by Holmes Rolston (1999:212–291), with reference to the parable in Luke 10, in an extended conversation with the notion of "selfish genes" in sociobiology and evolutionary psychology.

⁸ See Mazamisa (1987)..

sincerity, willingness to help and misdirected religious zeal. They would struggle to come to terms with the ethnicity of the Samaritan in the story, given a thousand years of conflict between Jews and Samaritans (over Solomon’s use of slave labour) and Jewish critiques of Samaritan syncretism. Instead, Mazamisa focuses on the plight of the nameless victim in the story, clearly seeing parallels with the many victims of apartheid. He hints at the identity of the perpetrators as well, noting the role of colonial robbery, structural violence and police brutality. Likewise, Miranda Pillay completed her Ph.D. on Luke 10 in the context of HIV and Aids, also adopting a victim-centred approach.⁹

Selecting biblical stories in order to make sense of a present predicament is rather typical in the South African situation. In the early 19th century, white Afrikaner colonists (the term was used unapologetically) often likened British imperialism and the suppression of their language and cultural identity to the “house of slavery” in Egypt. They used the language of exodus to describe the so-called “Groot Trek” to escape from British rule, leading to the colonial conquest of the rest of what is now South Africa. Ironically, this trek was directly prompted by the abolition of slavery by Britain, outlawing the owning, buying, and selling of humans as property throughout its colonies around the world by 1 August 1834. Indeed, apartheid theology was a form of liberation theology (from British hegemony) gone wrong.

Due to the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910, colonial rule remained entrenched, excluding the vast majority of inhabitants from citizenship. With the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, the British colonial policy of segregation was maintained and radicalised under apartheid. It was especially the story of the tower of Babylon that was used to critique British hegemony and to legitimise divisions on the basis of ethnicity. In response, the motif of the house of slavery was again used, now with reference to apartheid but also to settler colonialism. Since 1990, several other biblical motifs have been used, including the exodus narratives, the wandering through the wilderness, the promise of a land of milk and honey, the conquest of Canaan, and the reconstruction under Ezra and Nehemiah, in order to find a key to explore the meaning of the Bible for us today in changing circumstances (see for example Mugambi 2003).

Likewise, during the height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, some scholars turned to Tamar’s cry and Jeremiah’s lamentations, now with reference to the ANC government’s unwise policies in this regard (see for instance Ackermann 2001). In a document published by the South African Council of Churches in 2009, entitled *Climate Change – A Challenge to the Churches in South Africa*, another biblical analogy was employed, namely with reference to King Josiah’s reforms. The observation was that a fundamental reorientation of the global economy is required, away from reliance on fossil fuels to sustainable alternatives:

There was a time during the reign of Josiah, king of Judah, when drastic reforms were seen as the only way to avert a looming catastrophe. This stimulated a return to the Torah, to an understanding of how God’s just and merciful laws have to be reinterpreted within the context of that time. That understanding created the environment for the emergence of the Second Law – the book of Deuteronomy.

⁹ See also the essay on Luke 10:25-37 by Geraldine Wiliame (2021).

However, a few decades after that the prophet Jeremiah came to a point where he had to realise that a catastrophe could no longer be averted. The earlier messages of warning were not heeded. The crisis was imminent. In hindsight we know what that meant: that everything precious to him was lost. The dynasty of David came to an end. The temple was destroyed. The city of Jerusalem lay in ruins. Lament was the only appropriate response. ...

The biblical analogy of Josiah would be more appropriate for our times than that of Jeremiah. It is not yet too late. We know that we have only a decade or so to take on the challenge. This would require a decisive change of direction, in biblical terms a conversion (*metanoia*), a change of heart and mind, towards a sustainable economy as well as such a lifestyle. (SACC 2009:57–58).

One may conclude that, given the use and abuse of the Bible,¹⁰ it matters which story is read, discussed and employed to interpret a present context. The danger is of course arbitrary selection, so that one's preconceived ideas are merely affirmed with reference to the biblical texts. This danger was obvious in the case of the theological justification and biblical legitimation of apartheid (see Loubser 1987). If any suspicion emerges that one's selection of stories is ideologically distorted, it does not help to tell more and more similar stories. To counter any one story with a different narrative would not help either. The truth claims embedded in one story cannot be refuted by another story.¹¹ Inversely, a hermeneutics of suspicion that the Bible is itself ideologically distorted (given interests of race, gender, class or species) can also merely be confirmed by the selection of particular texts.¹²

Three Intersecting Sets of Stories

How, then, can one ensure a more responsible form of hermeneutics in appropriately selecting stories? I propose that Christian communities need to distinguish between three intersecting sets of stories:

First, the Bible itself is clearly a story of many stories. Even where stories are repeated or seem to be in conflict with each other, the editors who preserved, transmitted and compiled the biblical texts did not hesitate to juxtapose such stories and integrate them within larger corpuses, sometimes adding brief editorial comments. Given the formation of the biblical canon (and despite the debates surrounding that), one cannot read any one story in isolation from others but has to read them all in their canonical context. This applies to favourite stories and so-called "texts of terror" alike.¹³ Of course, the Bible contains many other genres besides stories, but these genres are embedded within an unmistakable narrative framework. For Christians, this means reading from Genesis to Revelation. One can read such stories synchronically as if they have equal status and can be appropriated in the same contemporary context, prompting debates on

¹⁰ In the South African context this is well symbolised by Gerald West's (2016) *The Stolen Bible*.

¹¹ See the argument by James Gustafson (1988).

¹² This problem is pertinent for the hermeneutics employed in the Earth Bible project as well. See the six ecojustice principles described in the first volume edited by Norman Habel (2000).

¹³ There is a huge corpus of literature on such texts of terror, inspired especially by the now classic study by Phyllis Trible.

the ideological distortion of both the text and its reception. However, the challenge is to also read them diachronically. The point is that one needs to follow the trajectory of how the stories are strung together. Accordingly, one should not get bogged down with the details of any one story but should follow the direction in which they are pointing. An archer should prepare the bow and arrow but should then focus on the target, not on the arrow itself. The question is the point towards which the plot of the story is heading. The biblical canon closes in an open-ended way so that we need to extrapolate its trajectory in the appropriate direction (Nürnberg 2002). This task of biblical hermeneutics is so complex that, not surprisingly, scholars tend to focus on what lies within their scholarly expertise. That then comes at the risk of arbitrary selection and ad hoc correlations with contemporary challenges.

Second, there are the stories of our individual lives, our family histories, the history of a particular place, of institutions, the history of culture and language, of ethnic identities (but this often opens the proverbial can of worms), of nations and empires, and the rise and fall of entire civilisations. This is embedded in the larger history of our species, from the emergence of hominins, great apes, mammals, multicellular life, first in the sea, then on land. Then there is the formation of the planet that we call Earth, of the solar system, of stars and galaxies. We know only small fragments of this story, and these often seem bewilderingly chaotic.¹⁴ Nevertheless, all of these can be and have been integrated into one universe story that is held together by gravity.

One may say that this is a story in four chapters, namely about (a) the origins of the universe in the “primordial faring forth” (the so-called Big Bang) leading to the formation of stars and galaxies, (b) the formation of the Earth from the “ashes of dead stars”, (c) the emergence and evolution of life on earth, and (d) the late emergence and spread of hominin species and eventually of *homo sapiens* out of Africa (Berry and Swimme 1992; Rolston 2010). Precisely because of claims to universality, one needs to ask again whose story this is, how the story is told (and distorted) and to whom it is told. Nevertheless, the point is that it has become possible to tell this story in an integrated way. One can even do so in a single sentence, but children would surely want more elaboration.

Note that there is an interplay here between the local and the universal. One can only tell a story, any story, from this place, from a sense of location. Any pretence to tell a story with universal significance is riddled with the dangers of hubris and hegemony. However, a similar danger plagues a narrow focus on one place that forms the breeding ground for narrow group identities and special pleading for narrow interests.

Also note that the biblical stories form part of the universe story but pale into insignificance by comparison. One needs to distinguish various aspects of narrative time here. The figures mentioned in the biblical stories, let us say (to play it safe) from Abraham to John of Patmos, cover about 2000 years in terms of narrated time. The stories themselves may have been orally transmitted over many centuries, but the history of the coming into being of the Bible (as textual production) spans less than half that period. Acts of narration stretch over another roughly 2000 years to the present. Still, this is a very short period, about a loosely put together number of tribes, in one small geographical area in the history of *homo sapiens*, which stretches over around 200 000

¹⁴ See Chakrabarty (2021:158) with reference to observations by the geologist Jan Zalasiewicz.

years, not to mention the 500+ million years of life on land, the 4.54 billion year history of the Earth and the 13.8 billion year history of the universe. What, then, is the significance of the biblical stories? Why attribute such enormous weight to them?

Third, there is what may be called “the Christian story”. This is the set of stories that Christians tell about who God is, what God is like (God’s character and attributes), and what this God did, is doing and is still expected to do, given God’s covenantal promises. In Patristic theology, this was described as God’s economy, from where the term “economic Trinity” is derived. This is again a story of many stories, with many versions and even more distortions and contestations. Yet it is possible to identify some core motifs that appear in most versions. One may again identify various chapters of the story to narrate, let us say, God’s work of creation, ongoing creation, the emergence, rise and fall of humans, providence, election, salvation, the formation, up-building, ministries and missions of the church, and the expected consummation of God’s work.¹⁵ These stories are held together by the conviction that it is the same God who is involved from creation to consummation. This is easier said than done, as controversies over the doctrine of the Trinity amply illustrate. God may have many faces and names but the Jewish-Christian conviction remains that “God is one” (Deut 6:4). Yet, often this set of stories remain more implicit than explicit. To integrate these chapters into one story may easily become hegemonic, but to allow them to become separated may be even worse. This prompts the question whether it is best to refer to “*the* Christian story”, “*a* Christian story” or the plural “Christian stories.” Each of these harbours dangers.

Note four ambiguous features of this third set of stories. First, the story of God’s economy cannot be equated with the biblical story but is nevertheless based on it. It assumes that this is in continuity with the content of the biblical stories and captures its meaning. But it is by definition post-biblical in the sense of secondary reflection on the biblical texts that are presumed to be more authoritative than, for example, the versions of God’s economy expressed in the creeds and confessions.

Second, the story of God’s economy forms part of the history of Christianity which itself covers only a small part of the history of humanity. However, in terms of narrated time (what the story of God’s economy covers), it looms larger than the universe story itself. It boldly speaks of the creation and the consummation of the whole world and what transcends the world, namely its Triune Creator.¹⁶ It employs ultimate categories with some audacity to speak about ultimate origins, ultimate destiny and what ultimately matters.

Third, the Christian story of what God is doing cannot be equated with salvation history (which is but one aspect of it), the history of Christianity, of Christian churches or of individual Christians. To do so would fall into the trap of idolatry, blasphemy, apostasy, heresy, you name it! It is especially in contexts where Empire and Christendom merge that this danger is prevalent: *in hoc signo vinces!* Here an apophatic reserve is a necessary act of protest. In short, the Christian story at best offers a critique of the history of Christianity.

Fourth and at the same time, the Christian story of who God is and what God is doing

¹⁵ See the argument in Conradie (2015). This pattern is also followed in the current project (Conradie and Lai, eds, 2021) on *An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the “Anthropocene”*.

¹⁶ For a discussion, see Conradie (2021), titled “On the Hope that the Christian Story May Transform the Universe Story”.

also cannot be separated from either the universe story or the history of Christianity. To do so would fall into the traps of Gnosticism, docetism or escapism. Then an apophatic silence is no longer sufficient. If the gospel does not become deeply rooted, it cannot become good news. It is not as if the gospel is a foreign seed that must be planted in different cultural soils.¹⁷ There is nothing wrong with indigenous plants and seeds! Instead, the gospel operates like a shovel or like pruning scissors to weed out parasites that strangle the growth of indigenous plants.

The Contemporary Twist in the Tale: The Shift to the “Anthropocene”

There is a contemporary twist in the proverbial tale, signified by the advent of the so-called “Anthropocene”. This is not the place to discuss the scientific details or the controversies around in the humanities and social sciences.¹⁸ The Anthropocene Working Group of the International Commission on Stratigraphy offers the following definition of the so-called Anthropocene on its homepage:

The “Anthropocene” is a term widely used since its coining by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000 to denote the present geological time interval, in which many conditions and processes on Earth are profoundly altered by human impact. This impact has intensified significantly since the onset of industrialization, taking us out of the Earth System state typical of the Holocene Epoch that post-dates the last glaciation.¹⁹

Allow me to offer seven brief and preliminary comments in this regard:

First, the bottom line is that, according to the dominant scientific position, we are no longer living in the relative stability that has characterised the Holocene Epoch since the end of the last ice age. There has been a rupture in the Earth system that will remain evident in the Earth’s rock layers for millions of years to come. Earth is a dynamic, self-organising planet where sudden and drastic change (not only gradualist change) in the Earth System and in the interaction between its sub-systems is possible. While there is planetary multiplicity, self-differentiation and variability at all scales, the integrated Earth system exists in the singular.

Second, the stability of the Earth System has been disrupted (“profound altered”). This means that the interplay between the atmosphere, the geosphere, the hydrosphere and the biosphere (including the noösphere and the technosphere) and their various sub-systems is no longer what it used to be. The “many conditions and processes” that are altered are signalled by nothing less than climate change, ocean acidification (its “equally evil twin”), sea level rise, the loss of biodiversity, species extinction, deforestation, desertification, global pandemics such as Covid-19, and so forth. This impact has intensified

Third, the shift from the Holocene may be gradual and slow from one human generation to a next, but in geological time it may also be deemed rapid and cascading,

¹⁷ See Upolu Vaai’s (2021:22) critique of “pod theologies” that stay above the ground and do not become rooted in the soil.

¹⁸ For a discussion, see Conradie (2022).

¹⁹ See the homepage of the Anthropocene Working Group at <http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene/> (last accessed 31 March 2023).

interlaced with irreversible tipping points that (for humans) may well be deemed “catastrophic” (Clark and Szerszynski 2021:15). This is symbolised by the precision marking of “golden spikes.”

Fourth, the most recent shift is anthropogenic: it has been caused by human beings, or at least some humans, some more than others. While humans have always had an impact on local environments and larger ecosystems, the “Anthropocene” suggests a shift, indeed a rupture in the Earth System as such. Except for the role played by cyanobacteria in the oxygenation of the Earth’s atmosphere, this is unprecedented in planetary history.

Fifth, using the term “Anthropocene” as such, with quotation marks and with reference to Paul Crutzen and the AWG, claiming that it is “widely used” cannot hide the fierce contestation that has erupted over naming it as such, its precise dating, its anthropogenic causes, generalisations regarding the presumed “anthropos” across various global divides, debates in the humanities on culpability for the shift (modernity, industrialized capitalism), and many more (see Conradie 2022). The underlying problem is that the advent of the “Anthropocene” as a historical marker cannot escape from the problem of a history written by the powerful (in this case influential scientists), by the victors of history, all too often telling a his-story. This applies even if the content of the story is one that fragments, disrupts any hegemonic claims to totality (again modernity, capitalism) (Havea 2021:3). The danger remains that narratives of a rupture in the Earth system “can erase Indigenous peoples’ perspectives on the connection between climate change and colonial violence” (White as quoted in Clark and Szerszynski 2021:53). Inversely, it is implausible that the shift to the Anthropocene is mono-causal, that it can be brought under a single rubric such as industrialised capitalism, also because socialist economies are also premised upon sustained economic growth. Such debates are necessary given the multiple power struggles at play, but none of this can alter the bottom line, namely the shift that is taking place away from the stability of the Holocene.

Sixth, to speak of a “shift” should not be underestimated. Compare that with coming to terms with fluctuations (e.g. mood swings) and change (e.g. growing older) in individual life, generational change or natural cycles associated with day and nights, seasons, daily weather changes, the tides and so forth. Such a shift must be understood in terms of the way feedback loops operate in a self-regulating system to amplify small changes.

Finally, before the advent of the Holocene, human communities were confronted by multiple fluctuations (consider transfers of leadership), but the most significant change was probably related to wars and migration, while other social changes (beyond individual birth, child-bearing and death) were imperceptible. Amid the Holocene, there have been many fluctuations (given wars, the rise and fall of empires), but it was the shift to a dispensation beyond the last ice age that enabled the emergence of agriculture, towns, larger cities, empires, writing, the use of bronze and later iron, the introduction of the wheel, coins for trade, the plough, the lens, gunpowder, printing, the steam engine, and so forth. Each of these innovations brought about linear instead of cyclical change. One may debate the magnitude of the changes brought about by the industrial and the digital revolutions, together with the French and American revolutions and their associated societal changes and turning points, at times prompting “rapid social change”

instead of gradual, cumulative change.²⁰ However, the shift to the “Anthropocene” and its associated tipping points may well prove to be comparable in magnitude with the shift from the late Pleistocene to the Holocene.

Making sense of the shift from the Holocene to the “Anthropocene”

Can these three sets of stories help us to make sense of a shift of this magnitude, from the Holocene to the “Anthropocene”? Allow me again only a few brief comments in this regard:

First on the biblical story from Genesis to Revelation. One candidate that must be reconsidered is the Noah story (Gen 6–9). There is no need here to discuss the enigmatic figure of Noah, the genre of the text, the similarities and differences with other flood narratives or the (ecological) significance of the ark. Noah’s flood is portrayed as a primeval happening and clearly not as a historical event. Nevertheless, the narrative setting, namely a flood that covers “the whole earth”, fits very well within the transition to the Holocene and the massive amounts of melting ice that would have flooded large parts of the Fertile Crescent. This must have inspired many legendary stories of coping with such a flood.²¹ As such, the Noah story is one of survival amid the stark challenges associated with a shift of this magnitude. God’s rainbow covenant then speaks of a new beginning under altered conditions.²² The promise that the world will never be destroyed again by water should be taken indeed as a promise (not a guarantee²³), as the basis for a new social order emerging from the deluge. Perhaps there is room to follow the biblical pattern of speaking of a second law (Deuteronomy), a new exodus, a new Moses, a new David, a new covenant, a new Jerusalem, even a new Earth, namely by speaking of a new ark (תֵּבָה – Gen 6:14 also Ex 2:3, an “ark” for Moses).

What that may entail remains open for further discussion. A new ark clearly cannot be modelled on a huge Titanic or its lifeboats for the elite only. The ark is necessary for survival amid rapid environmental and social change, but this provokes many further questions about boarding passes for the ark. The emphasis should be on the need for a revised covenant. Such a new covenant should be more inclusive than the one with Noah, should be attentive to issues of biodiversity and facilitate solidarity with climate refugees.

Another biblical “story” that must be considered is that of the apocalypse. Not surprisingly, the references in the New Testament to the flood and to Noah’s ark are related to apocalyptic imagery of the pending destruction of the world, if not by water, then by fire (see Matt 24:37–39, Luke 17:26–27, 1 Peter 3:20, 2 Peter 2:5, 2 Peter 3:6, Hebrews 11:7), and the coming / revelation of the Son of Man. Such imagery harbours a protest against an unacceptable present, a trust that God’s judgement over the godless will be fair, and that a remnant will be saved from trial (2 Pet 2:9) through the new covenant symbolised by baptism (1 Pet 3:21). Noah’s story is therefore heralded as an

²⁰ For this perceptive understanding of history as interpreting social change, see Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 1–35.

²¹ Ulrich Körtner (1995:111, note 15) mentions hundreds of parallels in the history of religions according to various sources.

²² On such a retrieval of the rainbow covenant, also from within the Tuvaluan context, see Lusama (2022:191–195).

²³ A divine guarantee of survival has proved to be ecologically disastrous, since it has created the religious foundation for unbridled economic growth. See Körtner (1995:171).

example (Heb 11:7) of the kind of faith that is required to come to terms with an unbearable situation, where things simply cannot go on like they do.

The apocalyptic imagery in the book of Revelation clearly cannot be regarded as predictions of “the end of the world” as an event in the far future that would hold no meaning for those persecuted under Roman imperial rule.²⁴ Nevertheless, it does speak (for every age anew) of the possibility of a new dispensation emerging from the demise of the former. The imagery is graphic and perhaps hard to fathom, but the scale of such a transition is beyond any worst-case scenario that the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change may come up with. An army as many as the sand of the sea is destroyed by fire (Rev 20:8–9), the earth and heaven make way for the One on the throne (20:11), the first earth and the sea itself disappears (Rev 21:1), making way for a new heaven and a new earth (21:1), a new Jerusalem (21:2). The consolation that Christian apocalyptic provides is not the proclamation of an end to history but the reinterpretation of the unbearable present as a transition to a new dispensation.

One may conclude that there is some biblical material to work with but also that any literal interpretation and any direct correlations with past or future historical events will run into insurmountable difficulties. Biblical interpretation requires intersections with the other two sets of stories.

Second, the universe story may obviously help to make sense of the transition from the Holocene to the “Anthropocene”. That is exactly the purpose of the geological timescale with its pretence of precision marking.²⁵ Placing the rise and fall of human civilisations in the context of millions, indeed billions of years is sobering, to say the least, as is the place of the ultra-thin peel of life rooted in the outer crust of planet Earth, amid other planets, stars and galaxies, stretching over billions of light years. However, such scientific reconstructions of the universe story can hardly help us to make sense of this moment in history or tell us how to proceed from here. It has to be noted that the geological timescale imposes a chronological view of time as normative, therefore underplaying the distinction between qualitative time (*kairos*) and quantitative time (*chronos*). This cannot do justice to an Indigenous understanding of time (where there is often no abstract word for time) either, where what matters is the ongoing flow of movements, marked by a deep breath, a shared laugh and a celebration of the joy of life despite what tomorrow may bring.

Third, the Christian story of who God is and what God does is incredibly versatile given the categories and symbols that are employed. Together they form a sophisticated lens or interpretative grid that may be used to make sense of any particular event and of history as a whole. However, telling this story is open to so many controversies and distortions that it is hard to believe that it can indeed help us to make sense of the shift from the Holocene to the “Anthropocene”. This is a task that nevertheless cannot be avoided and is taken up in the multi-volume project on *An Earthed Faith*.²⁶ At this stage

²⁴ There is by now ample matter on the book of Revelation from the perspective of ecotheology. See especially Keller (2021); Rossing (2004).

²⁵ I am persuaded by the argument of Clark and Szerszynski (2021:175), for a longer-term, more regionalised position that recognises “the more gradual, patchy, discontinuous and incremental geological changes wrought by a range of human collectivities over multi-millennial time frames.” The need for precision-marking in the Anthropocene Working Group is then somewhat misplaced.

²⁶ Three volumes have been published thus far with one forthcoming in 2024. See Conradie & Lai (2021), Conradie & Moe-Lobeda (2022), Conradie and Jennings (2024), also Conradie and Vaai (2024).

of the project (given collaborative work done in 2023), I may merely note that the symbols that are significant here are related to the theme of God’s providence (Conradie and Vaai: forthcoming), especially God’s work of conservation in sustaining nature (typically with reference to the Noah story) and God’s work of governance in history (often with reference to the tower of Babel and at this stage confronted by rather apocalyptic scenarios).

On the intersections between these stories

What must one then make of the intersections between these three sets of stories? May one simply choose to focus on one of these stories or prioritise them so that the one set is understood in the light of the others? Is it possible to find a reliable point of departure? Since one cannot tell any of these stories as a whole, how does one select any particular episode as significant? If one opts merely for immediate contextual relevance, how does one avoid power struggles, again prompting the questions: Whose story is this? Which story is to be told? And: To whom is the story told?²⁷ Note that there is an obvious need for zooming in and out. However, in telling any particular biblical story a differential play of signifiers takes place with all the other biblical stories reverberating in the background. The same applies to the other two set of stories. There are intersections between these three sets but they necessarily remain fluid.

While no clear answers are to be expected to such complex questions, three hints may provide some cairns for the journey ahead:

The first hint is that, at least for Christian communities, it would be important to hold the three stories together. To drop or underplay any one of them could prove disastrous. To drop the Christian story would imply a loss of Christian authenticity. To drop the universe story would be to fall in the trap of Gnostic or docetic escapism. To drop the biblical story would be to spoil the fun and to lose a sense of situatedness in very particular historical and geographic circumstances.

The second hint is that looking for a secure point of departure may well be futile. It is more important to keep the story going, to allow for the stories to intersect each other. This will allow for critical correlations so that distortions can be recognised and hopefully addressed. Like a juggler, one needs to keep at least three cones in the air all the time.

The third hint is a reminder that the direction of a story is important, especially where stories remain open-ended. One tells a story about the past in the present with a view to what the future may hold. To lose the forward-thrust of a story is to misunderstand such a story. To expect a closure of this story sometime soon would not do justice to the dynamic of the story. Instead, I suggest that we need to keep the question open: What is God up to in a time like this?²⁸ Moreover, any listener to a series of stories would be

²⁷ In addition to the ways in which the content of these stories intersect, there is also a need to recognise how stories, telling the stories and talking about such stories are weaved together. See Jione Havea’s notion of “talanoa” that refers to three overlapping events: “story, telling (of stories), and talking (*toktok*, conversation, storyweaving). A story (talanoa, which is usually a mix of stories) dies if there is no one to tell (talanoa) it and if others do not talk (talanoa, as conversation) about it; a telling (talanoa) is dry without a story (talanoa) and turns into lecturing or scolding without conversation (talanoa); and a conversation (talanoa) withers without story (talanoa) and telling (talanoa). As conversation (storyweaving), talanoa is ongoing. It extends beyond the three-events of talanoa. See Havea (2023:2–3).

²⁸ See Volume 2 of the *An Earthed Faith* series on *How Would We Know what God is up to?* (Conradie and

keen to know what is actually coming in the next episode. That will determine whether the story is one of tragedy, loss and sadness, love, dead-ends, more of the same, or hope for a brighter future. Christians, one may suggest, may anticipate that the direction of the story will follow the pattern of the resurrection of the One who was crucified. For them, this is the decisive twist in the tale, providing a proleptic clue to what may be coming.

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