

The Jesus Story vs. Other Messianic Stories

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Introduction: What Story Do You Live In?

Why is there conflict with Christianity? Where can we expect opposition? I want to argue that it's because people want to live in their own stories, and be their own heroes. Let me begin by asking you, 'What story do you live in?' All of us live in a story. We have a storyline running through our heads. And we play a major role in it. Let me give you some examples.

Do you live in the hero story? This is a story where someone who makes a difference in the world and makes a name for himself or herself. You start off with some kind of hidden talent. You face obstacles, adversity, mountains and valleys of hard work, only to overcome in the end. What matters is the quest, the challenge, and the victory. It is the story of Harry Potter, the unlikely hero who is given a burden that no one else could carry, who fulfills his destiny. It is the story of King Leonidas, who gives his life against King Xerxes and the Persian Empire. Here's a clip from 300 on that. [clip from Scene 17, where Xerxes is calling Leonidas to submit to him.] Notice how the threat of Xerxes is to wipe out Leonidas' story. But as we know, the story is being retold by Dilios, who finishes his story on a new battlefield. As he finishes his story of the 300, he says, 'Here they stare now, across the plain, at 10,000 Spartans, commanding 30,000 free Greeks,' who are now united behind Sparta. Did you know that that story was retold in World War II. In the Battle of Britain, Winston Churchill called for British soldiers. He said the British were the 300 at Thermopylae, because the massive Nazi army had conquered Europe and was now coming for them. Every British schoolboy knew that hero story, and it gave them courage to stand against the Nazis. That is the power of the hero story: the superhero who beats the villain, the scientist who finds the cure in time, the criminal investigator who uncovers the truth and protects the innocent, the trial lawyer who persuades the jury and brings justice. Is that the story you live in?

Or do you live in the princess story? Is your story the story of someone who wants to be discovered, to be seen? You are a Cinderella, sweeping and scrubbing floors surrounded by people who don't fully appreciate you, who don't recognize your potential and your quality. You are waiting for someone to see who you really are. In the Asian-American community, the movie *The Joy Luck Club* exemplifies this type of story. Here's a clip of a daughter who has always wanted her mother to 'see' her. The setting is a dinner table where two childhood friends, June and Waverly, along with their parents, are having a shocking argument. Waverly's firm had hired June to do a design job, but unfortunately Waverly and her firm thought June's work wasn't good enough. [clip from 1:52.47 – 1:55.22] The scene resolves when June's mom says that she sees June being more generous than Waverly, even at the dinner table by taking the smallest piece of crab. She sees that June has a 'best quality heart.' When someone sees you, your life is more complete. Is that the story you live in?

Or do you live in the family struggle story? *The Joy Luck Club* is an example of this type of story, too. So are *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, *The Godfather* trilogy, Chinese movies like *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* and *To Live*, and *The Incredibles*. That's the story of a rags-to-riches family that goes through lots of silent suffering and family dissonance. Parents and children both want different things. And the family goes through misunderstandings and tears and conflict and sacrifice. But in the end, this family achieves not only success but family harmony. Children understand their parents. Parents understand their children. Love and appreciation blossom like a desert flower after a long drought. And then happy grandchildren are born. Is that the story you live in?

We are story-telling creatures. And these are good stories, aren't they? Regardless of what story we live in, we tend to want a happy ending. The question for tonight is, as we advertised, 'Will it happen to me, too?'

But Why Do We Expect a Happy Ending At All?

Most stories in most cultures in most times did not believe in a happy ending. If you could talk to those people, they would ask you, 'Why would you think there is a happy ending for you?' There's either a tragic ending or a circular non-ending, like in many Asian stories. Just look out at the world. The sun

risers, and then sets. The seasons come, and then go. People are born, and then they die. The thing that repeats is family. So that's why family became all-important. You keep trying to break through the circularity through your children, and your children's children. For a while, I believed that family was the most important thing in life. But I had to change my mind. In college, I saw all these super rich kids, and they were pretty spoiled. So I realized that my kids might turn out the same way. So there must be something larger than family, something deeper we are looking for and hoping for. Our purpose in life might involve family, but family is not our reason for being. The Chinese classic called *The Dream of Red Mansions* says as much. It's a story about family struggle that just keeps going around in circles, in cycles. All the family's hopes of regaining their honor rests on one boy, Pao-Yu, who can do it if he passes his government exams. All the family politics, the alliances, the betrayals, the affairs, happen around him. And then he fails. Tragic ending, or a circular non-ending. That is the way of the real world.

Some movies, when made for a European audience, have a tragic ending, like *Fatal Attraction*. It's not exclusively American, but it seems particularly American to have a 'happily ever after.' Why is that? What is it about American culture that has this expectation? I'll return to that question after a bit.

For now, I want to briefly explore the history of the happy ending. Where did it come from? The happy ending comes from one place: Judaism. The Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament was the first literature to expect a happy ending. Everyone else – Homer's Iliad from Greece, the Atrahasis Epic from Babylon, the Avesta story from Persia – were all circular. Hinduism and Buddhism are circular. If you could plot the story visually, it would be a circle. The Greek tragedies were based on this circular plot arc. You're born, you die. Empires are born, and they also die. Everything goes back to where it came from. The way things were – the way things are – the way things will always be. Life is circular.

The Pattern of the Messianic Story

Israel was different. The Jewish people alone had a linear perception of life. There are two reasons for this. First, they experienced their God as someone who made a promise, and then fulfilled it. That gave rise to a linear sense of history. You could mark things in time. All times are not the same. God makes things different. Second, they believed that their God was good, and that He would ultimately triumph over evil. Good and evil were not equal entities or equal principles in the world. Therefore, they would not keep going around each other, cycling through forever in a yin and yang kind of pattern. No. God would actually triumph over evil one day. And that period of history that all Jews hoped for, longed for, was called the Messianic period. It was the happy ending. Jewish monotheism, belief in one good God, created the idea of the happy ending. You can read Thomas Cahill's book *The Gifts of the Jews* if you want to a very readable book on this.

You can think of this story of God as a play with five Acts. Act One was the beginning of humanity, where God created humanity in a Garden land. But from the beginning, humanity allowed sin and evil into the world, and they were exiled from the Garden land. Act Two began with God's selection of Israel. They were a microcosm of humanity, and they knew that God was doing something with them that would one day affect all humanity. God brought Israel into a new Garden land. But Israel also allowed sin and evil in, and they were exiled from their Garden Land. Act Three was Jesus. And in this Act, God Himself, the author, enters His own story. He 'created' one human being, one member of humanity, in whom He would dwell, that would undo the sin and evil of Israel and all humanity.

If we could take a zoom lens camera and zoom in to watch Jesus very carefully, here's what we would see. We would see the classic suffering hero archetype unfolding in real history. Jesus filled it to the full. It was like Frodo struggling constantly with the Ring of Power, except that the evil was *inside* Jesus because he was wearing it. Why? Jesus took onto himself the flawed humanity that we all have. He wore it. So the same physical body that we have, that craves physical comfort and sexual satisfaction, Jesus had. The same mouth that we have, that gossips about others, sneers at others, and puts others down, Jesus had. The same fists that we have, that threaten others, that strike others, Jesus had. The same mind that we have, that always tries to think secretive, private and self-centered thoughts, Jesus had. But Jesus constantly redirected his own humanity back into the love of God. At every point, he resisted the temptation to love himself first above all others, a posture we know very well. At every point, he resisted the will to power. He realigned his own squirming humanity into his unshakable commitment to God.

And when he went all the way to his death on the cross, he exhausted the self-centeredness and evil of the humanity he took on. When you watched *The Passion of the Christ* and saw all the brutal torture thrown at Jesus on his way to the cross, that torture was there to persuade him not to go, to quit. That's why he would get up so quickly afterwards. It wasn't that he wanted more torture. It was that he would not be stopped by these obstacles being thrown at him. It's like how Sauron's Ring of Power had to fall into the fire to be destroyed, or how the pieces of Voldemort's soul had to be destroyed: Jesus brought his self-centered humanity into a collision with the other-centeredness of God, where it was crushed. That titanic struggle happened inside Jesus, in his very body. Paul in his letter to the Romans said, 'God condemned sin in the flesh of Jesus.' (Rom.8:3) So when Jesus was resurrected from the dead, he came back in a new kind of humanity, a perfected humanity, one that is totally in line with the holy love of God. Jesus perfected his humanity, so he could connect himself with us, so that our broken humanity might be made into a humanity that is being made whole and good, but only in vital spiritual connection with him.

Thus began Act Four, the Act in which we now live. The old Jewish prophecies said that 'out of Zion would come a message of salvation.' Zion would be the epicenter of a renewal that would ripple across the whole world. God's happy ending was another step closer to its fulfillment. Jesus sent his people into the whole world to proclaim a message that they were joined with him spiritually, and that anyone who wanted to be joined to him could be, by believing in him.

The early Christians were radicals for Jesus. They rescued babies left out on Roman doorsteps. They went into plague infested cities and cared for the sick and buried the dead. And whenever a Roman army official waging war on someone else wanted to become a Christian, they would say, 'That's great, but you're going to have to find a new job because Jesus commanded us to love our enemies, and we don't think you can do that while you're killing them.' That's really important, because later Christians compromised that.

So to back up, the Messianic story was a story of two basic elements: (1) a suffering hero who has (2) a global impact. From Jesus to the rest of humanity. From Jerusalem to the rest of the world. I want you to keep those two basic elements in mind, because we are now going to see what happened to that story.

The Narrative of Western Nationalism

In the West, something very strange happened. Uniquely in the West, the Jesus story was parodied. The Jesus story spread in all directions, but only the West perverted the story. Essentially, when the West started to reject Jesus himself, Western philosophers wanted to hold on to the happy ending, but without Jesus. After all, who wants to go back to a circular story? That's boring. That's fatalistic. That's repetitious. That's boring. That's fatalistic. That's repetitious. If I repeated that enough times, it would drive you crazy, and that's what they didn't want to admit. They didn't want to go back there. So they kept a linear story.

How many of you are philosophy majors? Do you study Enlightenment philosophy? The interesting thing about Enlightenment philosophy is that it isn't just philosophy. It's story telling. Hegel told a story about conflicting ideas that merged with each other and culminated in his philosophy, which would spread to the whole world. Adam Smith told a story of how capitalism can and will produce wealth for all nations, starting in England and spreading to the rest of the world. Marx told a story of revolution and socialism, starting in England and spreading to the rest of the world. Social Darwinism told the story of European civilization becoming more and more complex, like life apparently, over time. So it became the 'white man's burden' to 'civilize' the rest of the world. Freud and Nietzsche told the story of people in Europe realizing that God is dead, an idea which would then spread over the rest of the world, a world that was only primitive and superstitious. We protest those stories today, we argue with them, and yet we still live in them. I'll show you how.

But let me point out to you that the two basic elements, (1) a suffering hero who has (2) a global impact starting from Jerusalem, were distorted. The same plot arc was kept, but the details were changed. Instead of going from Jesus in Jerusalem to the rest of the world, you now went from the white man in Europe to the rest of the world.

The poet T.S. Eliot wrestled with that. In 1922, after the devastation of World War I, people started to realize that the story that Europe told wasn't true. The story of European civilization bringing the world to a better place was shown to be a false story. So T.S. Eliot, for example, wrote *The Wasteland*, which many believe to be the greatest poem produced during the 20th century. Listen to the destruction that the poem describes, Europe and the world lie in shambles:

And bats with baby faces in the violet light
Whistled, and beat their wings
And crawled head downward down a blackened wall
And upside down in air were towers
Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours
And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells.
In this decayed hole among the mountains

Not only is it filled with imagery of despair, but *The Wasteland* is not a story. It's a poem, a circular poem. That is key. One of the things Eliot understood was that the story told by Western philosophers is not true. It wasn't a story about Europe bringing the world into glory. It was a story about injustice. It suppressed other people's stories, like ethnic minority stories.

Let's think about American culture for a little bit. I asked earlier why is the happy ending so much of American culture? There is an American story, and it is a parody of the Jesus story. 'We are bringing democracy and progress to the world.' That's a Messianic story, minus Jesus and minus Jerusalem. Just substitute in 'the United States.' **The story is that there is a form of salvation that has been worked out, not in the physical body of Jesus, but in the social system of the United States, and now it's going to spread over the whole world.** This is why we are often completely surprised when the facts tell us that we're wrong. What about the environment? Did you know that, at this rate, by the time we are grandparents, we will not have any polar icecaps? What will that be like? What about the growing gap between rich and poor? What about the Native American story? What about the Black American story? What about urban poverty and violence? What about how quickly are blowing up people and using up resources so that there will be nothing left for our children? Notice how movies are more critical of U.S. involvement even in World War II: *The Good German*, with George Clooney, and Clint Eastwood's movies *Letters from Iwo Jima*, and *Flags of our Fathers*. Years ago, no one would have criticized U.S. involvement in World War II or explored our national self-interest in the War. World War II was the War where the U.S. was unquestionably good. Yet now, we are not at all certain about that.

But there are still many people who are Western Nationalists. They are the neo-conservatives on campus. We need to help them separate Western Nationalism from true Christianity. They are not the same. Not just for our sake, but for their sake and for the sake of the world. One of the litmus tests is the Luke 4 passage we studied yesterday. Jesus called the Jews right off the bat to love their enemies, the Gentiles, and especially the Romans. Nazareth was the home of a Roman garrison and it was a hotbed for Jewish rightwing nationalism. Jesus goes right up against that. You see, there are people in the U.S. who think that 1 American life is just worth more than 10 Iraqi lives, or 10 Afghani lives, even though Jesus says all human life has equal weight. Or they think it's better to kill, but Jesus shows that it's better to die, to be killed, than to kill. It's better to forgive your enemy and love your enemy than to fight against them. The early Christians believed that even though they existed in multiple nations, they were a real nation and a real community. In Western nationalism, the real community is first the nation, and all ethics bend around the nation. You kill and die on behalf of the nation. But that means the nation is a false god and an idol. The early Christians would not have tolerated that.

The Western story and the Islamic story are butting heads today. The reason is because Western Nationalism and the Islamic story are derivations of the Messianic story. They are competing for the same conceptual space, physical space, and economic space. But the West is filled with exhausted wells and exhausted stories. And we need to engage people with that.

The Narrative of the Liberal Campus

Here is where the Liberal Campus enters in, at least in the U.S. In the U.S., university campuses used to be part of the white power structure, but now they are advocates of political correctness, of the stories of ethnic minorities, of diversity, of post-modernism and not modernism. Why then does it seem okay to mock Christianity? At Tufts University, for example, you cannot mock Muslims or Hindus. But you can mock Christians. Why is this? There are three reasons.

Reason #1 is because most people think Christians are Western Nationalists. And sadly, many are. But they are fundamentally separate, and we need to have that discussion and make it clear.

Reason #2 is because the Liberal Campus forgets history. It forgets that it's a secular, dumbed-down version of what the Black Church, and some segments of the White Church, was calling for – the kingdom of God, where a spiritual transformation happens in people according to true Christian faith, and the captives go free from our own sin. What Martin Luther King, Jr. and Fannie Lou Hamer and other Black Christians called for was not a black ethnocentric politics, but the kingdom of God. This is why their concerns got bigger and bigger over time. It wasn't just the Black community they were interested in. It later became poverty, including poor Whites. And later, it became neo-colonialism in Vietnam. King spoke out against Vietnam, and arguably, that's what got him assassinated. In the White Church, in the Great Awakening, big tent revivals were originally held to call people to faith in Jesus and then to sign them up for the abolitionist movement. Methodists in the 1800's were abolitionists. The Liberal Secular Campus mocks Christians because it forgets history. It was the caboose in the conversation, and now thinks it's the engine. It followed the Black Church in its Civil Rights struggles, and now thinks it leads the way.

But Reason #3 is because the Liberal Campus has its own narrative, and it is the Messiah in that narrative. That narrative is that God is source of war, conflict, ignorance, prejudice, and intolerance. So the Liberal Campus came along, became the suffering hero in U.S. culture – look how misunderstood we are in the midst of all these other religious simpletons! – and sees itself as the solution to the world's problems by stripping out religion and prejudice from people. The precursors are Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. Notice again, that there is messianic plot arc to this story. So here's how we engage the Liberal Campus: The campus can't handle the diversity it says it promotes. Just last week, Trinity College in CT had graffiti saying essentially, 'Black people shouldn't be here.' At many Liberal Campuses, there's an incident every year when someone has too much to drink, and it becomes a racial incident. Or someone uses the N word. The deeper problem is that the Liberal Campus cannot change people's hearts, because education is not enough, and because the deeper problem with people is not that we need more information but that we need Jesus!

The Liberal Campus here in the U.S. doesn't see that in other countries, Christian solutions have been equally effective, if not more so. In South Africa, the racial legacy of Apartheid is being dealt with within the government, through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, because Christians like Bishop Desmond Tutu have been invited into national positions to have a national process based on Christian principles and allowing Christian people to publicly express their faith in the reconciliation process. But the same is not true in the U.S. In the U.S., the government has never formally apologized for genocide, land seizure, slavery, or segregation. Instead, it pushed that discussion to the Liberal Campus. That's why there is a felt tension between a mostly conservative government and the Liberal Campus.

But because the Liberal Campus tries to take God out of the conversation about diversity, it doesn't prepare you to engage in moral dialogue with other people after you graduate, because it can't: There is no moral basis for valuing every person unless there is a God who values every person. I was talking to an atheist student last spring about starting a Free Thought Society club on campus. He was surprised that I as a Christian wanted to help start this. I said, 'Actually, free speech and freedom of religion come out of Christian conviction. In the U.S. it was Roger Williams. In older times, it came from the Christian desire to have people make a free choice. It's actually atheists that have had trouble with free thought. Look at Hoxha in Albania, Stalin in Russia, Mao in China, Pol Pot in Cambodia, North Korea, and Vietnam. In order for each person's opinion to be valued, each person need to be valuable, and there must be a God who invests value into each person. That's why it's been so easy and somewhat logical for atheists to take that value away. And the Liberal Campus can't persuade people of faith in the South and the Midwest because

there is no point of connection. This is partly why the rest of the U.S. feels like the liberal Northeast is snobby, and there is some basis for that, because liberal secularists have cut themselves off from real moral and spiritual dialogue.

That's a critical failure, and it also shows up on campus now, not just after you graduate. At BC, there are social justice speakers that come onto campus because someone invites them: speakers about repression in North Korea, sex trafficking in Cambodia, Latino immigration, and AIDS in Africa. And who comes? The same people over and over, because most people on campus are self-centered careerists who just live in their own stories. And the Liberal Campus has no concrete challenge for the careerists. Study after study confirms that students who say they'll become civil rights lawyers doing lots of pro-bono work just become corporate lawyers. Students who say they're idealists who want to change the world become cogs in the machine maintaining the status quo. The Liberal Campus is ultimately trapped in a self-defeating circle. Many students at Tufts say, 'I'm atheist, and that means people don't really matter,' and I think that's an honest answer. So the Liberal Secular story has become circular.

The Narrative of Personal Narratives of Personal Advancement

That brings us to the last story: the narrative of personal advancement. We DON'T live anymore in a larger story where good triumphs over evil. We might have personal stories, or family stories. But no larger stories. So many of us, as we search for a happy ending, a linear story, will just narrow down the scope to our family or ourselves. 'Let's just have a linear career path. I'll just keep getting more powerful, more rich, and more happy.' Really? How many of you have seen the movie *Office Space*? I worked for Intel Corporation in California and it was like Office Space. I graduated in 1994 from Stanford, and got a job at Intel during the high-tech boom when Intel stock was doubling every 18 months. You would think people were really excited about what they were doing in Silicon Valley in the 90's. But you'd be surprised. I worked in an internal management consulting group. We consulted all the major chip design projects, so the Pentium II, III, and IV – I worked on all those computer chips. It was so repetitive. Every week I had to collect the same data from the same database. I had to run the same analysis. I had to go to the same meetings and present the same basic information week after week. It was pretty boring. If you think you'll find ultimate meaning in work alone, I think you're fooling yourself. How do I know that? Because I majored in Industrial Engineering. I was trained professionally to make organizations efficient and independent of any one individual. That means that there are a lot of people with my training who deliberately organize your job as a routine, so that if you leave, someone else can take your place pretty easily. Really: You will become replaceable. Even if you're the CEO of something, you'll wonder, 'Why do I have this grueling travel schedule just fundraising and lobbying for my organization?' Well, it's because you can't be entrusted with too much, because even a CEO has to be replaceable. Circularity again.

Coming Back to the Jesus Story

The happy ending – will it happen to you? People have an opposition to the Jesus story because they live in some other story. They're oriented along some other plot line. They think they can bring a kind of salvation to the world or to themselves through some other way, and they are deeply invested in that plot. They are the main character, the Messiah, that story. That's where opposition to the Jesus story comes from.

I think it's impossible to have a happy ending to your story without Jesus. Whether I think about it personally or more broadly, the story of Jesus is the best story I know. On all kinds of levels and for all kinds of reasons. With Jesus, God has taken one more step to the happy ending. He is the hero, so the hero story is filled to the full with him. And yet he calls us alongside him to share in it. He is the one who needs to be seen for who he is, and he also sees us for who we are. He is the one who restores the family of God, and we, as we are brought in, and called to invite others as well. But most importantly, I am simply drawn to Jesus as a person. He has changed my life and my story, and I've found that it is far better to be a minor character in his story than to be the star in my own.

That's why people question their stories. They'll feel at points that their story is oppressive, or arbitrary, or just plain wrong. They feel like there is no hope in their story, just no happy ending to look forward to. That is the issue here, and now. You have the opportunity to SWITCH STORIES. Let me repeat that: I

invite you to SWITCH STORIES. DO YOU THINK THERE'S SOME BETTER STORY OUT THERE???? Or, I invite you to reaffirm a choice you made earlier in your life, to truly live in God's story. Some of you try to live in more than one story fundamentally. Now of course on the level of practice, there is some overlap. I'm a Christian, and I value democracy but I'm not neo-conservative. I value education but I'm not a liberal secularist. I value having job skills but I don't live in the story of personal advancement. Fundamentally, I live in the Jesus story. And I want you to live in it, too. If you're trying to straddle stories, STOP IT. People are getting confused when they look at your life and listen to you. SO STOP DOING IT.

Another point to make here is about evangelism. If you are a Christian who feels embarrassed about evangelism, don't be. Everyone is an evangelist about something. Look at each of these categories. People in each camp believe something about evil and how to address it, so that's how they're doing it. They are the Messianic figure in each of these stories. I think the Christian response is the most effective and realistic, because we are not the Messiah! But if someone tells you that it's arrogant for Christians to do evangelism, just say, 'Look, everyone is an evangelist about something. We all want captives to go free in some form or fashion. We all think we have a story in which good triumphs over evil. It's just that I like Jesus a lot! I like him better than what you're offering.' So be straightforward, don't be embarrassed about Jesus, and call out other people's stories.

Step fully into the Jesus story. What other story could you live in that is more real and more awesome?