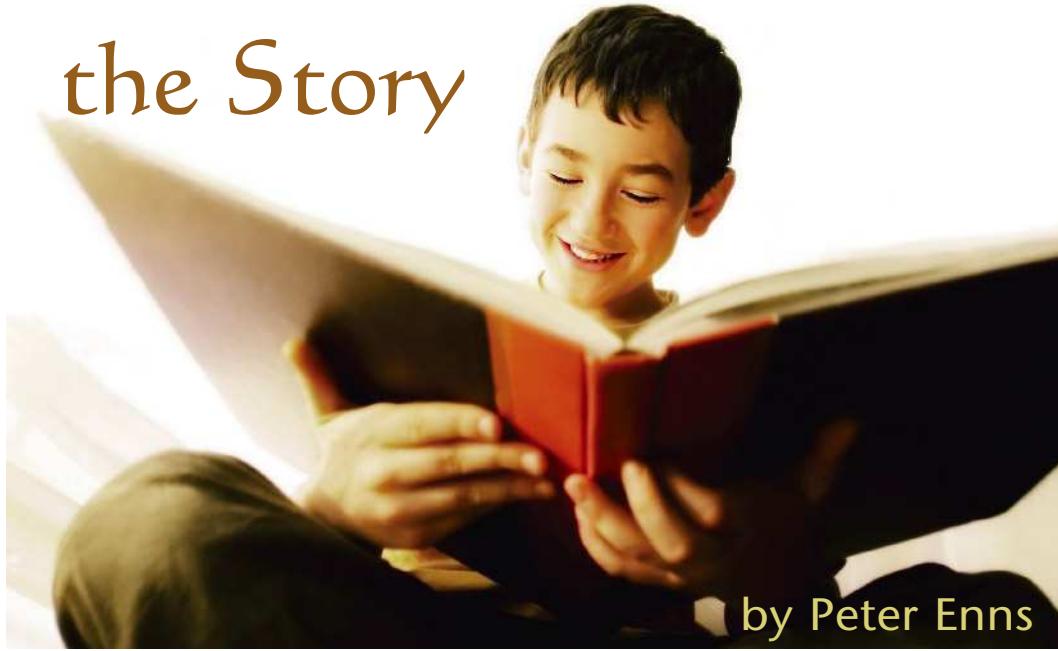


# God Lets His Children Tell the Story



by Peter Enns

**M**y seminary Hebrew professor, former colleague, and friend, Al Groves, who is of blessed memory, was a wonderful, honest, and pastoral man. When dealing with the theological difficulties that arise in the course of reading the Bible, Al would say, "God lets his children tell the story."

That is a great way of putting it. The Bible is what happens when God allows his children to tell his story—which means the biblical writers told the story from their point of view, with their limitations, within the cultural context in which they wrote.

When children tell the story of their father or mother, parents are typically delighted by how much they get and the childlike way that they see the world. But they are also well aware that children miss a lot when they tell the story, and invariably refract the complexities of family life through their own youthful vision.

It's not a perfect analogy, I know, but roll with it: think of how young boys talk in the schoolyard about how great their father is. There are ways of telling the story to make sure everyone knows they have the best dad around.

I remember telling my middle school mates that my father was an engineer who left a promising academic career before coming to America. He

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also knew a lot about guns, since he was in World War 2, and killed bad guys left and right.

That story was genuinely connected to my real father, but honor was at stake. How I told the story was dictated, unwittingly, by rules of the schoolyard.

My father was a blue-collar machinist (not engineer) who wanted to be a school teacher

(not academic), but World War 2 got in the way. He was in the war, but I didn't dare let on that he did not fight for our side. He was born in Russia, was captured by the Germans, and was forced to be a German-Russian translator (and therefore a German soldier). He also hated guns, since his community in Russia was pacifist Mennonite. But he won a turkey shoot

when I was young, a fact I exaggerated and incorporated into my narrative.

But I never mentioned the many things my father did that were also heroic but not quite as exciting—like coming to all my Little League games, working long hours to make sure we kept a roof over our heads, clothes on our backs, and cars to get around in even though money was very tight.

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Had I talked like that, it would have fallen on deaf ears.

When God lets his children tell the story, the way that story is told is deeply and thoroughly influenced by the "rules of the schoolyard."

In the case of the Old Testament that means ancient tribal societies that valued in their people and in their gods such things as taking land, "vanquishing"

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(i.e., killing or enslaving) their foes, and generally bragging about who has the best gods and the best kings.

That is how people thought, and this "rule" is stamped all over the Old Testament. This is a way of understanding why the Bible behaves the way that it does. It bears the marks of the limitations of its cultures.

Bear in mind this is only an analogy, but if we want to extend this to the New Testament, we can think of the teachings of Jesus as a more "mature" telling of God's story. Jesus tells the story in a way that is more in line with who God is ("you have heard it said, *but I say to you...*"). Such things as

land acquisition and killing and enslaving enemies is no longer part of God's narrative.

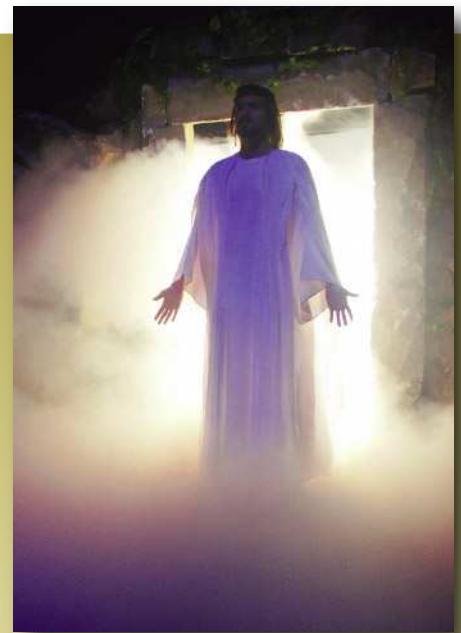
It's like a boy who grows up to be an adult, gets a job, and has a family of his own. Now ask him to tell his father's story. The son's life experiences have brought him to a deeper knowledge and appreciation of his father's experiences, and the story will reflect that.

Now he will talk about seeing his father get up at the crack of dawn to trudge off to work, come home late in smelly and filthy machinist clothes, and then on the weekends build his son a fort, or renovate the basement, or sometimes just crash on the couch.

Both narratives, the child's and the adult's, are expressions of love. But now the less heroic acts become the more heroic and dominant story, the things the grown son is truly proud of and wants to tell others. And this story reflects the real thing more closely, with greater three-dimensional depth. □

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