Doing Christian theology in stories has become a major trend in Christian theology today. This is the way it should be. After all, the Christian Bible is a story book. Take away stories from it, what would be left? Is the Christian Bible still our Bible? Writers are story tellers. Painters are story tellers. Even scientists today are learning to be story tellers.

The strange thing is that Christian theology, although trying to serve the story book called Bible, has largely been theology of ideas, concepts and texts. This is a grave mistake most of our theological fathers and mothers made. I also found that this is why Christian theologians, among them Minjung theologians, have not been able to make a breakthrough in their efforts to develop theologies in Asia. They get stuck in ideas, concepts and texts from the western theologies and bogged down in the latter’s theological quagmire. The outcome is a little like what the prophet Isaiah in ancient Israel said (Isaiah 28:10):

Concepts upon concepts
Ideas upon ideas
Here a little, there a little
(My free rendering)

This, as I see it, is a wrong approach and direction. It has continued for many centuries in the West, and here in Asia we have not been liberated from it. This is evident from the theological books we read, text books we use, and theological debates we carry on. This non wrong “orthodox” way of doing Christian theology has to be reversed and changed. That is why my lecture today is entitled: “In the Beginning were Stories, not Texts.” What I advocate is to do Christian theology with stories, in stories, not in and with texts.

**What’s Wrong with Textual Criticism?**

What we teach and learn in theology is mostly textual criticism and not reading and appreciation of stories. This is the first thing I would like to remind you today. The Bible consists of texts, we are taught, hence we must treat it as texts. Treating the Bible as texts, trying to elicit meaning out of it, we are taught to study it, analyze it, dissect it, to make it
into small units, then to stitch it together calling it pericope. This is what we do with texts. We have to learn many difficult theories of textual criticism such as redaction criticism, literary criticism, form criticism, and so on.

But the texts that can be dissected, made into small pieces and units, are dead things. There is no life left in it. You want to elicit meaning from it, but the meaning you elicit is not the meaning of the story but the text. You may stitch back the pieces and units together, but it is no longer the same thing as the story you turned into texts.

To continue our analogy. We can compare textual criticism to what anatomists do in a morgue. What they dissect is a dead body. After they have done with their anatomical examination, they would stitch back the body. But the body they stitch back together is still a dead body; they cannot perform the miracle of making it a living person. I think this is a good parable for the biblical criticism we study at theological schools. The result is disastrous, to say the least, only we do not know it. Through textual criticism, we conduct biblical anatomy on the Bible. We treat it as a dead book, not as a living book, book alive with life, full of life. We process it a closed book, not as an open book filled with uncertainties and excitements.

Stories, in contrast, are very different. This is the second thing I want to emphasize. You have to read it from beginning to end. You cannot skip parts of it in a hurry to get to the end. There is no short cut to it. A story is a story because it is filled with twists and turns. It may be quite contrary to our initial expectations. You cannot predict the end of it before “the end of time.” And what we may predict at the beginning or in a mid-way may turn out to be entirely wrong.

This, for example, is the way most of us learn about the history of Israel and Judah. Our western counterparts are in such a hurry to get to the end of it that they have set aside and left unattended many crucial meanings on the way. They have developed the theology of Canaan as the promise land, created the paradigms of promise and fulfillment, Israel as the old chosen people of God and Christians as a New Israel, and so on. But the present situation of conflicts between Israel and Arabs tells us a totally different story. The sad thing is that theological textbooks we read, theological education we receive, have not changed a bit in spite of the realities of Palestine with which the world has to deal. We still play with the same old paradigms, praying God to bring about the end time as soon as possible.

This is not the way we read literature. Can we predict, reading the Greek classic of Homer’s Odyssey, wishing that Odysseus, one of the Greek heroes who sacked and conquered Troy, did not have to spend ten long years wandering the world, undergoing all sorts of pain and suffering? Can we read the French novelist Maupassant’s Jean val Jean, wanting the story of Jean Valjean to reach a happy end? Or can we read Charles Dickens’s Tale of the Two Cities, hoping that the repercussions of the French Revolution on certain persons and their families in Paris and London would be different?
It is no difference with detective stories. Reading detective stories has taught me many things, especially having taught me how to study the Bible. Reading a detective story by Agatha Cristie or P.D. James, for instance, I may predict the outcome of a murder case. But my predication is often wrong, being upset by the authors. The authors have often taken me by surprise, taking me to entirely different directions and destinations.

Then the order of reading a story has to be reversed. This is the third thing I would like to share with you today. After reading a story from beginning to end, it has to be read again from end to beginning. You will then discover hidden messages of the story in your second reading. You realize that a story has messages crying out to you, messages you have never dreamt of before.

Almost none of us would read a theological book twice, first from beginning to end and then from end to beginning. There is practically no theological book that can stand reading more than once, except to pass the exam. Who has read Karl Barth’s twelve volumes of Church Dogmatics twice? To be honest, I didn’t read it twice in its entirety. I dare say, none of us read the whole Barth’s Church Dogmatics twice. It is even rare that it has been read once. I imagine Karl Barth now spends more time with God than with Mozart, busy cutting his Church Dogmatics down to size so that God could read it at least once. Karl Barth is one of the few western theologians who made efforts to tell theology like stories, but he did not succeed quite well. His conceptual power far outweighed and then outmaneuvered his story power!

The fourth thing is this. A story has to be read as a whole. There is no pars pro toto for a story. As a matter of fact, it is the other way round, that is, toto pro pars is more likely. I have already said that you cannot dissect a story and make it into small pieces, hoping that you could put the pieces back together as a story. This is a futile exercise. Reading a story could be compared to a jigsaw puzzle. Another comparison! Each piece of the puzzle, although a part of the whole, is not the whole. It is only you finish the whole picture that you see the role and function of a piece.

How to read a story as a whole? It is not as simple as it seems. It is an art. It is an association. It is an intuition. I learned this from Socrates, that eccentric Greek philosopher around 2,500 BCE. The method he used, as we know, is called “midwifery method.” He went round the streets of Athens trying to help young people understand and practice love and justice. But not many had the intuition to understand what he tried to inculcate in them, not to say, to practice it. He was condemned to death by members of the Athens Assembly, some of them had sat at his feet. His was very similar to the case of Jesus. Among the mobs that cried out for Jesus’ crucifixion before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate was those who used to follow him.

In Zen Buddhism there is a difference between the so-called “sudden illumination” and the so-called “gradual illumination.” What makes the difference is intuition. Those endowed with quick intuition would come to the awareness of truth and untruth much faster than those equipped with slow intuition, although they all study same books, undergo same training, going through same exercises. Is God unfair? I do not know. But this is what we have to reckon with.
Confucius of ancient China taught the education principle of “providing education for all people without discrimination” (you jiao wu lei). That is why he had as many as three thousand students, but only a few of them achieved a high level of scholarship. Why? because they were able to “infer three from only one that they have been told,” or “to infer the rest from what is already known.” This is the power of intuition.

We are surrounded by Stories

But do not despair. There are methods to reading and intuiting what a story is trying to say to us. This way, this method, we have to apply to the comprehension of the Bible and theological studies.

First of all, we need to realize that we are surrounded by stories. The same thing is true of the women and men of the Bible. This is not a profound theory but a fact of life. Think of our birth story. Is it not the story of our parents, our grandparents, and generations of our forebears? Is it not, in a word, stories of our ancestors? An English saying is true, that says: “no person is an island.” At this point, that Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber comes to mind. He is correct when he says in I and Thou that in the beginning were relations. Scientifically, this seems what DNA tells us.

If our birth is a web of stories, so is our life. This is evident when we read biographies and autobiographies. The worst kind of biography and autobiography, in my view, is one that manipulates life stories into justification of one’s ideology, extolling of one’s religious faith, or justification of one’s particular worldview. Here stories are no longer stories, but like pieces of the jig-saw puzzles, showing a idealized picture of what one had actually been.

Secondly, history, any history, is stories, more accurately, history is made up of stories. Is this not true with history of Korea, history of Taiwan, history of Malaysia? Take, for instance, Korea. The history of Korea, basically, consists of “moving stories of bravery and fortitude of people”(kho ke khe chi)? Is it not the stories of Ochlos, as Professor Myong, a New Testament scholar, used to say? In this sense the early Minjung theologians were right when they resorted to the stories of people over against the texts of the rulers. But they did not carry stories of people to theological conclusions and develop Korean theology of people’s stories. They abandoned stories of people on the way.

Instead of painstakingly and “systematically” creating Christian theology with these stories of people, they reverted back to the texts of western theologians, leaving you younger generations of theologians in Korea in a lurch or at cross-roads. My guess is that many of you have also left stories of people for the texts of western theologians. This is one of the reasons, I am afraid, why it has died a premature death. Minjung theology, as far as I can see, has no credible heirs. Am I wrong? I hope I am wrong.
Thirdly, stories cannot be moved around, in their original form, crossing national borders and ethnic boundaries. If you do not respect the national borders and ethnic boundaries of a story, you are bound to do injustice to it and misunderstand it. But this is what we do all the time with stories of the Christian Bible. Our Bible is stories of the Hebrew people and stories of the followers of Jesus. But without further ado, the Christianity “Christianize” stories in the Bible, distorting it, mistakenly applying it to the Christian faith for the last two thousand years. Is this not the way the Bible and theology are still taught and learnt in theological schools?

**How to Read Stories?**

How should we then read stories, above all, stories in the Bible? I have a few suggestions to make, derived not from biblical or theological scholarship, but from other disciplines.

**First**, stories have to be read archaeologically. What do I mean? In archaeology there is a particular thing called “in situ”. In an archaeological dig, you are required to leave whatever you find, be it a potsherd, a nail, a clay pot, in a layer of the earth or debris in which you find it. The purpose is to determine the age of your find, its use, its function, etc., with the help of the entire layer in which it has been left for centuries.

Applied this to stories, we have to read them, especially Bible stories, *in situ*, that is, to read it the way you find it in the Bible so that you can identify the age, the purpose and function of the story. If you misplace it, then you are bound to misinterpret it, distort it and eventually misunderstand it. Unfortunately this is what we routinely do in the study and exegeses of the Bible and the history of Christianity.

**Second**, a story has to be read anthropologically. Over the centuries, not only in the West, but here in Asia, Christians and pastors have developed the habit of ascribing the Bible and their faith to God, forgetting that stories are very human to the core. What we read in stories are human struggles with life and death before they can be taken as divine stories. Stories, in actual fact, are stories of hope and despair, stories of joy and suffering, stories of life and death, of people. They reflect human longing for something that is beyond or surpassing human finiteness. The stories in our Bible are no exception. If they are read as divine stories from the very beginning, our reading is either redundant or futile, for we already know their outcome. But stories with happy ending are exceptions rather than the rule. It is also true with the stories in the Bible.

To mention Karl Barth again. I remember his small book called *The Humanity of God*. It contains the lectures he gave to Swiss pastors late in his life. I often wonder what his *Church Dogmatics* would turn out to be if he re-wrote it with *The Humanity of God* as the preface. Did he not change in the mid-course of his work on *Christian dogmatics* to *Church Dogmatics* in the aftermath of struggle against the Hitler regime in the 1930’s?
Unfortunately, a more “mature” Barth did not have the time to write his dogmatic with totally guided by the “humanity” of God.

Third, we have to read a story knowing that particular historical situations create particular stories. If there were no history, there would be no stories. History essentially is not an idea or concept, but a series of happenings identifiable with particular persons, particular places and particular times. Originally, stories have to do with particular persons, places and times. It stands to reason, therefore, that stories have to be interpreted in light of particular persons, places and times. Read Plato’s Dialogues. Could these Dialogues be read apart from the historical situations prevailing in Athens in those days? Or could one understand what Confucius said and did in The Analects apart from what Confucius had to face in his time?

Are stories in the Bible exempted from this general relation between history and story? I do not believe so. Take Genesis 12:1, for example. This has become a standard text for theologians and pastors who emphasize that Abraham left his home in response to and n obedience to God’s call, not bothering to suspect if here might be historical and personal reasons as to why Abraham had to leave Mesopotamia for Palestine. This example alone makes us sit up and think.

Fourth, a story has to be read culturally. This is of utmost importance for us in Asia because of the ways in which relations between Christianity and Asian cultures are debated, always with Asian cultures ending up a loser.

To be frank, I have never come across anyone who is “cultureless” or not endowed with culture from birth, not even Christians. I have never encountered anyone not having inherited cultures of his or her parents, cultures of his ancestors. God did not create a cultureless world, not least human being without being bearers of his or her culture. Even the author of John’s Gospel had the theological insight to say: “the word became flesh (read history, culture) and dwelt among us”(1:14).

It is a matter of fact, then, a foregone conclusion, that a story has to be read culturally. The same thing applies to the stories of Bible. How can one understand the Leviticus without knowing something of the culture of ancient Israel? There is this curious story in the book of Exodus in which Moses is saved from being killed by God. The story goes like this:

During the journey(on the way to Egypt), while they(Moses and his company) were encamped for the night, the Lord met Moses, meaning to kill him, but Zippora(Moses’ wife) picked up a sharp flint, cut off her son’s foreskin, and touched him (Moses)with it, saying, “You are my blood-bridegroom.” So the Lord left Moses alone. Then she said, “Blood-bridegroom by circumcision.” (Exodus 4:24-26)
This is a Jewish religious culture of circumcision in story. If you do not know this story is told to explain that culture, your theological imagination would run wild, as generations of pastors have done. How important it is, then, to read stories, including stories in the Bible, culturally.

Fifth, stories contain contemporaneous implications. Let me emphasize that stories that have no contemporaneous implications would be like a "mid-summer dream" vanishing without trail as soon as one wakes up from sleep. One can imagine there are countless stories fallen into oblivion and vanished from human memories.

Why do we call some literature classic? Certain literature is classic because it has implications beyond its time and place. Take Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice for instance. She wrote it in 18th century English suburbs, but it is still widely read today. Why? Because it is contemporaneous, its implications for us post-modern men and women in workplace, in social circles, are still very valid. Stories without contemporaneous significance will vanish without a trace.

Stories in the Bible are, of course, innately contemporaneous, otherwise it would not be read by Christians, if they read them at all. But the Bible is fast losing its contemporaneous implications because most Christians and pastors make a short cut of it.

A story’s contemporary meanings cannot be fathomed until it is explored archaeologically, anthropologically, historically and culturally. We live in a age of fast food. Christians and pastors want to make the Bible a fast food, eager to get to the meaning for today, bypassing the other efforts we mentioned. Without these efforts, they can only distort and misread the Bible. This is what is happening in Bible study sessions and on the pulpit today. Reading a story requires a lot of patience and perseverance. But Jesus said, “those who endure to the end will be saved” (Matthew 10:22). Reading a story, we must read it to the end, Bible stories or not!

Sixth, and only after exerting all the efforts mentioned, a story can be read religiously. Human being is by nature endowed with religious propensity as well scientific curiosity. Why is there this universe? How did it begin? When did it come into being? Why is there me? Why are there other human beings? Why is there evil in the world? Lots of questions! Questions such as these are religious as well scientific questions. These questions cannot be answered by texts. Texts turn answers into creeds, doctrines, even dogmas. These questions have to be answered through stories.

God of Stories

That is why in the beginning were stories, not texts. God is the God of stories, not of texts. It is this God of stories that empowers human being to tell stories. Stories expand human visions, while texts delimit it. Stories deepen human awareness of mysteries of life and death, whereas texts restrict it. Stories enable human being to traverse space and time, but texts confine us to a certain space and time. Stories create companies of friends and fellow travelers, while texts make friends into strangers, even enemies. Stories from ordinary folks, stories old and new, ancient and
contemporary, east and west, South and North, are theological in nature, reflecting divine-human struggles. When our Bible is read and searched as consternations of stories of women and men who try to make sense of the world that does not make sense, that give account of human communities full of strife, then it opens up visions of a merciful God who created heaven and earth, whose word become flesh and dwelt among us. In the beginning, therefore, were stories, not texts, for God is the God of stories and not of texts (2011/11/23).