What is a Metanarrative and Why Does it Matter?

Video Transcript

Most things we read are fairly self-contained — they are short and have a clear purpose and message that is woven tightly into a cohesive, linear presentation of the information or story.

Simply put, most things we read are straightforward in terms of their stories or narratives. There are other examples of writings or stories, however, that are more complex and nuanced.

If you read Leo Tolstoy’s War and Peace, for example, and someone asks you what it's about, there are a number of possible responses you might give. You could say it's a novel full of romances and war. At a more formal level, you might say it is a collection of five different narratives about five different aristocratic Russian families living through the war against Napoleon between 1805 and 1814. Both of these descriptions are accurate.

Explaining the story or narrative of War and Peace is challenging, because it is not a traditional novel. It's a vast narrative, covering a span of years and a host of characters and events. In addition, the novel lacks a common protagonist to tie its stories together. The work also includes multiple forms of storytelling and writing, ranging from straightforward fictional narrative to philosophical essay.

In the end, a novel like War and Peace is best explained by the overarching narrative that binds its many different, smaller stories into a cohesive, global framework.

In other words, it is best explained by a master narrative, or a story that explains the other stories.

Another word for this kind of master narrative is metanarrative.
Metanarrative is particularly important when dealing with works that combine many smaller or local stories, as well as different forms of narrative and writing. The Bible is another example of such a work. It contains a wide variety of forms — history, law, prophecy, wisdom literature, poetry, gospels, letters, and an apocalypse. It also has countless characters, multiple points of view, and often, little apparent connection between one book and another.

When Christians read the Bible, however, they do so using a metanarrative framework that connects the individual stories to a larger narrative. Unlike other literary metanarratives, this master narrative also serves Christians as an explanation for human existence and the meaning of life. It's a narrative that begins with divine Creation, moves to humankind's Fall from grace, and culminates in the Redemption of the world and its eventual Restoration.

As you think about those broad components of the Christian metanarrative of the Bible, you might also think about how you have seen that or other metanarratives applied in the world around you. In other words, what are the master stories or frameworks that you see people using to make sense of things and to find meaning in the narrative of life?

**About this transcript:**

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