

# LOVE STORY

*Also by Glen Scrivener:*

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*The Story of God, the World and You*

**Four Kinds of Christmas**

*Which are You?*

Glen Scrivener

# LOVE STORY

*The myth  
that really happened*

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10Publishing, a division of 10ofthose.com

Unit C, Tomlinson Road, Leyland, PR25 2DY, England

Email: [info@10ofthose.com](mailto:info@10ofthose.com)

Website: [www.10ofthose.com](http://www.10ofthose.com)

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# TRUE STORY

*... When all looked lost, their tragedy turned to comedy: the dragon was slain, the wicked king was overthrown, the quest was completed, the heroes returned, the princess was saved and she married the knight. So they all lived happily ever after. The End.*

What do you make of fairy tales? C.S. Lewis loved them. He spent much of his life studying and teaching the ancient Greek, Roman and Norse myths, and he went on to write some of the most popular fantasies of all time – the Chronicles of Narnia series (*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and so on). In many ways myths were Lewis's life, yet he had mixed feelings about them. He was enthralled by the stories, but at

the same time he considered them as escapism – as *mere* fantasies. One night, though, he had a conversation that changed everything.

On 19 September 1931, Lewis was speaking with his great friend J.R.R. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings*. Mr Narnia was chatting with Mr Middle Earth! At this point Tolkien was a Christian but Lewis was not. In fact Lewis had a big problem with Christianity, namely the Easter story. He could understand that people might believe in a God. He could appreciate that God might want people to live in a certain way. That kind of religion sounded reasonable enough. But that isn't Christianity. Christians insist on telling a *story* – all about God coming to earth to die for his creatures. More than its creeds or rituals or moral codes, it is the Easter *story* that is central for Christians. And that was Lewis's sticking point. He didn't understand how the death and resurrection of Jesus related to the rest of Christianity. What on earth was the point of Easter?

In answer Tolkien directed Lewis back to all the myths he loved. Didn't Lewis appreciate the ancient stories of the dying and rising gods?

Didn't he see how those myths worked on his heart in a profound way? Yes indeed, Lewis was deeply moved by such stories. Well, declared Tolkien, Christianity is the ultimate story of the dying and rising God.

But, Lewis countered, all those stories are just myths. They aren't *true*. In a memorable phrase Lewis called them 'lies breathed through silver' – they are beautiful but ultimately empty.

How would Tolkien respond? Surely he would have to agree with Lewis. No-one could think that fairy tales were real, could they? Tolkien shocked Lewis with his answer: 'No,' said Tolkien, 'they are not lies.'<sup>1</sup> This was earth-shattering for Lewis. If Tolkien was right, then there is such a thing as a *real* fairy tale. There exists a grand story that lies behind all other stories – namely Easter. Easter is the ultimate and original myth – the myth that really happened.

This got Lewis thinking of all the stories he had loved – not only tales of death and resurrection but stories of rags to riches; of defeating the monster; of epic quests; of grand romances; of desperate tragedies; of joyful comedies; of victory snatched from defeat; of

the prince marrying the pauper and the happily ever after. These stories resonate with us across the cultures and down the ages. But why? Is there a reason our hearts are tuned to such realities? Might there be a grand, original story that is reflected and refracted in our little stories? And could this explain the centrality of Easter?

## THE TRUE MYTH

Within a month of this famous conversation Lewis had all but converted to Christianity. He had begun to see the story of Christ as ‘a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that it really happened.’<sup>2</sup> In the Gospels – the biblical biographies of Jesus – Lewis said the old myth of the dying God ‘comes down from the heaven of legend ... to the earth of history. It *happens* – at a particular day, in a particular place.’<sup>3</sup> All the other myths take place in dreamtime – fairy tales happen, as *Star Wars* begins, ‘a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away’. The gods live and die beyond our time and space. However, the Gospels show Jesus living and dying in our

world, under the reign of named rulers like Pontius Pilate.<sup>4</sup>

This historical character sets the Jesus story apart from all others. Lewis later wrote, 'As a literary historian, I am perfectly convinced that whatever the Gospels are they are not legends. I have read a great deal of legend and I am quite clear that they are not the same sort of thing.'<sup>5</sup> Legends are set *once upon a time*. You simply cannot answer the question 'when?' about any detail of a legend. You cannot find out *when* the Norse god Thor married his wife or *when* the Hindu deity Krishna fought Kaliya. Those stories are not set in our world of time and space. By way of immense contrast, the Gospels are detailed accounts of people, places and times. Even as they tell the most wonderful story, they are written as serious history.

So we find in the Bible an unparalleled combination: mirroring the claim that God entered the world as man, we see in the Gospels that a great myth has entered history as fact. There is an anchoring of the great stories in our time and space. Just as the gods sacrifice and come to life, so Jesus gave his life and rose again.

Just as the knight comes to slay the dragon, so Jesus came to defeat the powers of evil. Just as the prince comes to marry the pauper, so Jesus came to win his beloved people. Just as the hero comes to complete the quest, so Jesus came on a mission from God. And as he fulfils all these classically heroic roles, Jesus turns rags to riches and tragedy to comedy. Here is the love story that has really happened!

Lewis had thought of myths as silvery lies. When examining the Jesus story, he found it to be solid gold truth. More than this, he found it to be the fulfilment of all other stories. In Jesus – and in particular in the Easter story – Lewis discovered an answer to his heart’s cry for meaning, joy, hope and love.

In this book we will explore the Easter story for ourselves. We will examine the weekend of Christ’s death and resurrection – events that are traditionally known as the *passion* of Jesus Christ. Christians see Easter as the culmination of God’s great love story. As Jesus stoops, suffers, sacrifices and stands again, he is bringing to fulfilment an ages-long romance. *Love Story* is about listening to that romance again.

# BACK STORY

## SETTING THE SCENE

In the world of comic books, ‘origins stories’ are vital. They set the scene for what follows, explaining where the heroes and villains have come from. As explanations go, genetic mutations, intergalactic warfare and murdered parents are particular favourites.

Easter has its own origins story to set up the drama. In order to understand Jesus and what he came to do, the Bible has thirty-nine books of back story – what we call ‘the Old Testament’. Over centuries the authors wrote about our good beginning, our catastrophic fall and then God’s plan to set things straight. This plan

centres on a promised Hero, a Warrior, a Lover.  
Let me outline the plot in brief.

## IN THE BEGINNING ... LOVE

The first verse of the Bible sets the scene for the coming adventure, and sets it up as a romance: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (Genesis 1:1).

You won't see this at first glance, but the two main terms in this verse – 'God' and 'the heavens and the earth' – are all about love. If you can handle me getting nerdy about grammar, I'll show you two hidden nuggets. Trust me, they're golden!

### 1. 'GOD'

When it says 'God' here in our English Bibles, it's actually translating a plural noun. In Hebrew, the original language of the Old Testament, 'God' is plural, even though it's always attached to a singular verb. So the grammar is communicating that God is a plurality but acts as one. There's something about God that is multiple and something about God that's unified. Later,

Christians would call this ‘the Trinity’. It’s a way of saying that God’s life is both plural and united. There’s something about God that involves three-ness and something about God that involves one-ness. To think of God we need to think of a loving union of three. These three are the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – that’s who God is according to the Bible.

If that’s hard to understand, think of a community. A community is a communal unity. There are ways that a community is plural and there are ways that it is unified. God is a unified community. The members of the community – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – are united together in unbreakable bonds of love. They simply cannot be without each other. Love is not just something that they do, it is who they are and who they have always been.

Here is the origin of all things – love. Before and beyond our world there is a flow, an almighty dance of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The ultimate back story is a God who *is* love. No wonder the rest of the story unfolds as a great romance.

## 2. '... THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH'

In Hebrew, as in all the Romance languages (those evolving from Latin), nouns have gender. For example, if you did any French at school, you might remember that 'sun' (*le soleil*) is masculine while 'moon' (*la lune*) is feminine. Likewise in the Bible 'heaven' is masculine and 'earth' is feminine. We're meant to think, 'Heaven and earth are made for each other. Those two should get together!' Within the first verse of the Bible we see God's romance going cosmic. The love that begins in God, flows out to heaven and earth.

The love story continues when, on the Bible's second page, we are introduced to man and woman. They face each other like heaven and earth, and they are told to unite. In their union they will 'Be fruitful, and multiply'.<sup>6</sup> Through their love the earth will be filled.

In Genesis chapter 2 we learn their names: Adam and Eve. They are made for each other, literally. And when they are brought together, Adam bursts out in the world's first love poem: 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh'.<sup>7</sup> It's a picture of the unity we long

for – unity with God, with each other and with the world. Right from the beginning we get a foretaste of the happily ever after.

As the Bible progresses, it sticks to the romance theme. God says he loves his people with a faithful, marital love. But here is the problem: his people are always going astray. As they turn from the God of love, they are not simply described as ‘disobedient’ or ‘sinful’. More profoundly, they are called ‘adulterous’ and ‘unfaithful’. This is loaded language. We are liable to ask, ‘What – are we meant to be *married* to God?’ Apparently so!

Like earth and heaven, like Eve and Adam, we are called to be united to God in a committed, love relationship. But, as Shakespeare wrote, ‘The course of true love never did run smooth.’<sup>8</sup> While God may love us, the question remains whether we will receive or reject that love. The history of the Old Testament proves a universal rule: in general we reject the love we should receive (God’s) and pursue other loves that we shouldn’t – loves that harm ourselves and others. This is the origin of all our problems.

## LOVE SPURNED

Let me tell you about one Old Testament story that sums up the whole. It's about the prophet Hosea. He lived about 750 BC. Essentially the Lord says to Hosea, 'I've got a treat for you. You're going to experience what it feels like to be me in the great love story.' That might sound exciting, but here's what happened. God says to Hosea:

Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the LORD (Hosea 1:2).

The LORD wants Hosea to share in his own experience. What does it feel like for God to be our God? Apparently it feels like being married to a serial adulterer. So this is how Hosea will reflect God's heart: Hosea must marry a prostitute called Gomer.

Hosea does so and, true to form, Gomer does not stick around for long. Soon she leaves the marital home and returns to, of all places, the brothel. Perhaps Hosea thinks he's done his

best and now he can return to his bachelor pad and watch endless reruns of *Top Gear*. But the Lord tells him no, he's only just begun. God says to Hosea:

Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods (Hosea 3:1).

Hosea actually has to go to the brothel and pay fifteen shekels – the prostitute price – to get his wife back. Can you imagine being Hosea and banging on the brothel door? 'I'm here for Gomer ... I'm her husband ... I'll pay whatever it costs; I just want her back.'

He is vulnerable; he is exposing himself to great shame; he is putting his heart on the line again with a woman who keeps spurning his love. Why should he pay for his own wife? Why should he endure any of this? Because that's what God is like.

God loves us; he commits himself to us; he is like Hosea. But we are like Gomer. We ignore

him; sideline him; and pretend he has no claim over us. In so doing we slink back into the life we've always known. This is what has spoiled the world. We reject God's love and pursue our heart's desires in all the wrong places.

Yet how does God respond? He is the God who pursues us. In fact, as we will see, he will shame himself in order to offer his love again. He will pay for us, redeeming us at great cost, just to have us back in his arms. The whole Old Testament is the promise of a great Hosea – a divine Lover – who will come to claim his people.

## THE BIBLE AS ROMANCE

I don't know how you see God. If people believe in God today, they tend to think of him as an impersonal Force. Or he's a Sergeant Major in the sky who barks out orders. Or he's a Heavenly Slave Driver setting us to work. Or he's a Moral Policeman, investigating our performance. Or he's a Cosmic Headmaster saying, 'Must try harder.' But if we've inherited any of those ideas about God, it hasn't been from the Bible.

The Bible tells a love story. There is a romance with one hero at its centre – the Son of God – and he longs to bring us home.

What we see with Easter is the actual coming of this hero in the flesh. In the ‘passion’ of Jesus Christ we see the ultimate Hosea coming to woo and win back his Gomer.

Jesus comes as a Bridegroom, a Husband, a Royal Prince. His coming is the fulfilment of all the fairy tales. Just as the heroes take epic journeys, so Jesus travels from heaven to earth. Just as they slay the dragon, so Jesus takes on all the forces of evil. Just as they ‘get the girl’, so Jesus wins our hearts. Just as they turn tragedy to comedy, so Jesus triumphs over death and brings us a ‘happily ever after’. Over the next four chapters we will examine four key events in the Easter weekend. From Maundy Thursday to Easter Sunday we will see that these events are part of God’s great romance. This ‘passion’ of Jesus Christ reveals to us that love is at the heart of history, the heart of God, the heart of all reality. The God of the Easter story is not looking for soldiers, slaves or moralists. He’s not looking for good

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intentions, good efforts or good works. He's looking for Gomers to come home.