Introduction to Spina’s Thesis

Throughout the biblical story the reader is confronted with an overarching metastory. Defined by Frank Anthony Spina, a metastory “refers to a sweeping narrative that reflects a fundamental worldview and thereby subsumes all of the smaller stories.”¹ Many know the biblical metastory in one of its shortest and most simplistic forms: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. But Spina draws out a more specific metastory that permeates the pages of Scripture from beginning to end: the exclusivity and inclusivity of the biblical story. This, of course, is the crux of his book The Faith of the Outsider. One might mistake the Old Testament as solely exclusive due to God’s choosing of the people of Israel. However, God’s choosing of Israel was purposefully exclusive.

The prominent exclusivity of the Old Testament is no doubt offensive to a society with an inclusive, justice-seeking way of life — notably, the present 21st Century. However, Spina works to clear up the confusion regarding Israel’s chosenness: “Israel was not chosen to keep everyone else out of God’s fold; Israel was chosen to make it possible for everyone else eventually to be included.”² Therefore, according to Spina, God’s ultimate purpose for exclusion is in fact inclusion. This is undoubtedly a paradox, but Spina reminds us through the pages of Scripture this theme is prominent and clearly presented.

Spina’s thesis concerns the outsider’s inclusive place in Israel’s history. He defends this by contrasting individuals in both the Old and New Testaments, making his case through

² Ibid., 6.
studies of seven specific individuals in the biblical story. Six of these individuals come from the Old Testament: Esau, Tamar, Rahab, Naaman, Jonah, and Ruth. The last individual arises from the New Testament: the Samaritan Woman at the Well. Spina sums up his outsider and insider theology stating, “Sometimes these outsiders show more faith in, a greater sensitivity to, or a greater understanding of Israel’s deity; on other occasions they do something that promotes the agenda of Israel’s God, their outsider status notwithstanding.” In addition, many times the outsiders reflect what an insider’s actions should be, while an insider contradicts the very belief and faith they supposedly subscribe to. Moreover, many of these individuals find themselves in the direct line of Jesus Christ, the Jewish messiah. This certainly makes for an interesting perspective on the story of Scripture, highlighting well the providence and purposes of God in accomplishing His perfect, inclusive will for His creation.

Summary and Evaluation

Spina does well building his argument by spending time in the appropriate Scripture passages of specific outsider individuals. Spina presents each story in a way that defends his key argument concerning insiders and outsiders using firm biblical evidence. His interests first bring the reader to Genesis 25; the birth of Jacob and Esau. From Jacob and Esau’s birth the Lord made clear that the younger of the brothers would serve the older. As they grew up “Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents.” (Gen 25:27). As the story progresses Esau works toward becoming the outsider

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3 Spina makes clear in pages 137-144 that the New Testament does not harbor only one specific story that relates to exclusivity and inclusivity. Rather, he states early, “...to say the New Testament has its own version of the outsider motif does not go far enough, for the very essence of New Testament thought it rooted in the conviction that God’s designs for Israel have come to fruition in what God did in and through Jesus, Israel’s messiah/Christ. Thus the outsider theme is not incidental in the New Testament but at the core of its central message” (Ibid., 137).

4 Ibid., 10.

5 “The Lord said to her, ‘Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger’” (Gen 25:23). All Scripture references, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the NIV.
while Jacob remains an insider. It would appear God’s exclusion of the eldest brother is an arbitrary one at best. Spina does well to clarify that there is no clear reason to choose Jacob over Esau: “Jacob is not his brother’s moral better. Jacob is more wily than Esau, more manipulative, and without question more attuned to the future; but he is no exemplar of brotherly love.”

Jacob and his mother swindle Esau out of his birthright and blessing, alienating Esau from the family of promise. Esau wishes to kill his brother Jacob for the wrongs done to him. Years later when the brothers are headed on a path straight for one another, Jacob is worried his brother might retaliate against him. Instead, as Spina notes, “Esau’s actions as he approaches his brother let us know immediately that this reunion will not only be peaceful but conciliatory and constructive.” Spina does well to analyze the four verbs used in succession that make Esau’s intent clear. This unconditional acceptance overwhelms Jacob so much that he actually claims to see the face of God in his brother Esau (Gen 33:10). Spina again highlights the insider-outsider motif in his closing statements on Jacob and Esau: “In the end, Esau utterly surprises us by acting exactly the way one would have supposed the ancestor of God’s ‘chosen’ people should have acted: with acceptance, forgiveness, and graciousness.” It’s easy to note the irony of the circumstances these two brothers find themselves in — an insider looking to an outsider for gracious forgiveness.

In his second attempt to apply this insider-outsider motif, Spina turns to the plight of Tamar. From the very beginning Spina makes sure to note the foreign nature of Tamar’s heritage, contrasting it greatly with that of Judah’s. Spina does well to provide valuable literary and historical background regarding the stories he highlights. In the case of Judah and Tamar he

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7 Ibid., 24.

8 “But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him” (Gen 33:4, ESV).

connects Judah’s timeline alongside his brother Joseph’s, providing a parallel track for the story to run on.\(^\text{10}\) Spina’s word studies generate intrigue and develop character profiles of those in the stories he retells. For instance, “The town Chezib is derived from a Hebrew root (kzb) that denotes deception or falsehood. Later in the narrative we will see that Judah is, without question, a deceptive man, which the name of the town cleverly foreshadows during this episode.”\(^\text{11}\) Having tricked a lustful Judah into conceiving with her, Tamar’s actions save the line of Judah and, ultimately, the line of Christ. Judah acted rashly and unlike an insider would have been expected to. Spina clearly presents Tamar on moral high ground above Judah, going as far as to state: “This outsider, whose legal and social resources were very meager, does more for the future of God’s people and therefore the whole world than does the insider Judah...”\(^\text{12}\) Although Tamar is first presented as a marginalized outsider, she finds insider status in the way she takes initiative.

The story of Rahab and Achan is a real role reversal. Rahab’s circumstance and her character are a kind of metaphor for the people of Canaan — she’s an outsider. Spina says, “Rahab’s name and occupation, plus the sexual innuendoes scattered throughout the story in which she appears, all call to mind the strongly ‘Canaanite’ character of the episode, not so much in ethnic terms but in religious terms.”\(^\text{13}\) However, Rahab quickly finds herself moving toward insider status as she encounters the spies of Israel. Not only does she protect them, but she even confesses the name of YHWH, claiming “I know that the Lord has given you this land” (Josh 2:9). Spina makes an interesting observation about Rahab’s faith that might be easily overlooked: “Incredibly, it looks as if Rahab is more confident that YHWH will deliver as promised than Joshua is. If Joshua had been that certain, would he have dispatched spies in the first place?”\(^\text{14}\)

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 38.
\(^{11}\) Ibid., 41.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., 51.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., 56.
\(^{14}\) Ibid., 59.
insider-like action is held in stark contrast to Achan. Just as Rahab is the quintessential Canaanite, Achan is the quintessential Israelite. They are near opposites. Achan’s sin against God is so extreme that he has reversed roles with Rahab. Near the end of Spina’s argument for Rahab’s inclusion, he reaffirms his insider-outsider motif, saying, “Just as Rahab’s confession of faith got her and her family included, Achan’s violation of faith got him and his family excluded.” If a Canaanite can be grafted into the people of Israel, an argument can certainly be made that all nations could come to be insiders by faith.

Spina too reviews the stories of Ruth and Naaman, but for the sake of time and space this response will now shift its focus to the one insider Spina focuses on: Jonah. Rather than focus primarily on the storyline of the outsider, Spina chooses to instead spend time on an insider — a prophet of God. Spina’s early observation of Jonah is an apt one: “The disconnect between his beliefs and his actions could not be more pronounced.” In this story there are several outsiders who begin to exhibit a change of heart. Rather than one contrasting individual matched to Jonah, as is Spina’s typical formulaic observation, this time we have many … a whole kingdom in fact! Spina makes it clear that it is hard to discern the true faith of the crew aboard the ship, but he does propose “they are beginning to manifest an inkling of Israelite faith in line with their fledgling Israelite theology.” Jonah is anything but interested in visiting Nineveh, sharing the prophecy he has been tasked with, and awaiting their response. As the story progresses the people of Nineveh repent and God relents. But this leaves Jonah unhappy. As an insider Jonah views his faith as one of exclusivity. Spina words Jonah’s disposition well:

For him [Jonah], insiders are insiders and outsiders are outsiders. Though he never once deviates from an orthodox point of view, his impoverished faith and pitiful behavior after the Nineveh episode illustrate that he has never been able to embrace fully the radical nature of a gracious God, a God who has constituted insider Israel

15 Ibid., 71.
16 Ibid., 104.
17 Ibid., 106.
precisely for outsiders such as those in Nineveh. Jonah is orthodox, but he never quite gets to the place where he realizes what that orthodoxy suggests: in the end, God wants insiders and outsiders to be part of the same divinely constituted community.\textsuperscript{18}

As much as Jonah thinks he is appropriate in his sulking and distaste for Nineveh, he only moves himself further away from God. The story ends with Jonah angry about a plant and wishing he was dead (Jonah 4:9). He has clearly missed the greater inclusive purpose God has for the exclusive people of Israel.

Lastly, Spina analyzes the story of the Samaritan woman fetching water at a well. However, things are vastly different in this outsider’s story. This Samaritan woman finds herself conversing with a Jewish man — in fact, the Jewish messiah. The long standing tension between the Jewish people and Samaritans was no doubt on her mind. Spina accentuates, “In the Gospel of John, no outsider would have been any more unlikely than this Samaritan woman.”\textsuperscript{19} And yet, this Samaritan woman is found to be even more open to Christ’s offering of “living water” (John 4:10) than Nicodemus, a ranking Jewish insider (3:1ff). While the most unlikely of people to find faith in Christ, “this outsider, with whom Jews were not supposed to have any dealings at all, is about to become, in effect, a Jew herself — religiously speaking.”\textsuperscript{20} Because of her faith, many more Samaritans came to believe in Christ (4:39-42). This extreme example of an outsider became an evangelistic insider.

Near the end of the book Spina rephrases his thesis: “...the biblical witness, from start to finish, emphasizes that God chose one people, an insider faith community, with the express purpose of eventually including all the world’s people in a single community oriented toward one God...”\textsuperscript{21} God’s overarching purpose for having an exclusive relationship with Israel was inclusive.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 116.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 157.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 157.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 137.
Through Israel all nations may be blessed. The gospel is an inclusive message that breaks down both ethnic and social barriers. Spina has done an excellent job of defending and arguing his insider-outsider motif thematically through Scripture. This motif does seem to permeate Scripture deeply, again and again crying out that God’s exclusive plan for his people has an inclusive purpose for the world.

**Personal and Ministerial Application**

For much of my life I would probably consider myself to have been a *Christian Insider.* I grew up in a church-involved, Christ following family. I participated in what are generally thought of as appropriate gatherings. I believed many doctrinally true things. I came to know Christ as my personal Savior in my elementary years. I have tried to live a morally upstanding life that honors the Lord. But nearly every day I witness outsiders who, quite frankly, are doing many of the same things I am. In fact, many times they do more. More for the poor, more for the marginalized, more for the single mothers, orphans, and widows. They do more fighting for social justice when true injustices occur. They are involved, take action, and are serious about making change for “the better.”

It has always been interesting to me that some unregenerate, non-believing people do good things for people. Considering we live in such a self-centered society, it is much easier to ignore problems than to respond ... especially if they don’t have an effect on one directly. These people might be considered outsiders to the Christian faith. They don’t know the God that created them, died for them, and longs to be in relationship with them. But God can still use the outsider to do insider work.

I find many parallels between the Jewish people of Scripture and Christians in present day. We both believe we are God’s chosen people, the people of Israel by divine covenant and Christians by the death of Christ and the establishment of the new covenant. But another parallel
I find is in our action. Sometimes, we make the wrong decisions. Occasionally we act deceptively toward our own brothers and sisters. We sometimes try to take control because we feel we know better than God or are scared of the future. We'll disobey God because of our selfish desires. We won’t go or serve because we don’t believe others are worth it. We hold contempt or prejudice towards others because they “aren’t us.” Time and again, we act like insiders that do not deserve that status. Yet, some outsiders display a readiness and willingness to serve, a propensity toward faith and belief, a longing for inclusiveness in the Kingdom.

For the past few weeks my wife and I have been volunteering at The Bridge Homeless Assistance Center in downtown Dallas. I have been in contact for the past seven weeks with the outsider. And I can say that I do believe I have seen the face of God as Jacob once said of Esau. As ministers of the gospel, future teachers, administrators, missionaries, or any host of other faith-based positions, we have the responsibility to reach the outsiders. After all, the biblical story is laced with these stories. Time and again outsiders expressed their faith in the insider’s Lord. They weren’t turned away or shunned, they were welcomed in by God and used for his glory. This book has helped me in many ways. In particular I think it will help me better remind myself and others that God has an exclusive and inclusive purpose for us. We are exclusive because of our belief in him and the work of Jesus Christ. But we should have an inclusive mindset that seeks to share and teach of the free gift of grace that can only come from God. Our reach should not extend only to the end of where we feel comfortable. All people are worthy of hearing the gospel and knowing Jesus Christ. Scripture points to Christ’s inclusive mission (Acts 1:8). This paradox lives fully in Scripture: God’s exclusive plan for Israel is working toward His inclusive plan for the world (Gen 12:1-3).
The Outsider begins with a seemingly straightforward investigation into the gruesome murder of a young boy. But when an insidious supernatural force edges its way into the case, it leads a seasoned cop and an unorthodox investigator to question everything they believe in. Plot Summary | Add Synopsis. Usually stay away from King TV adaptations as they almost always don't transfer well. In steps the outsider. Great great acting I was hooked from the first episode. This is good quality TV you wont be disappointed. In his book The Faith of the Outsider the Old Testament scholar Frank Spina makes a "close reading" of this insider-outsider motif in the Bible. He begins with the unpopular reminder that it is impossible to ignore the presence of what scholars call the "scandal of particularity" throughout Scripture. In the Old Testament, Israel alone is God's elect people: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth" (Amos 3:2). Israel is not only God's special insider community; as Spina notes, "it is the only insider community." All other nation