

A deeper, wiser story (1 Kings 3:5-12)

The left/right/center narrative helps us avoid difficult work.

by [Willie James Jennings](#)

July 28, 2017

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Our political quagmire is not exactly a conflict between left and right. It's about our inability to think beyond those categories in the first place—to articulate our political, social, cultural, and even theological realities in some other way. Even those who know better—who know that it is a fiction to see a world divided into two and to negotiate it with cognitive maps charted that way—yet play the game of framing matters in terms of liberal and conservative.

These categories help us bypass difficult work. They also promote a more amenable activity: entertainment. Seeing the world in terms of left and right means seeing it as a spectator first, not a participant. This way of seeing is less about placing other people in boxes and more about placing ourselves in a cinematic reality in order to be seen and heard. Our complex histories are difficult to articulate quickly and easily. So instead we present ourselves and the realities we inhabit in a left/right—or left/right/center—world. Along with providing a tidy framing for people's voices, this enables a facile kind of storytelling—one that declines to reach into the waters of history to touch the deeper streams that flow through us.

This way of seeing the world is manageable, it's thought provoking, and it does not make all that significant a claim on us. Like a good movie.

Ethics formed within this framework aims at only one task: mediation between left and right. The ethical work is to get the two sides talking and listening, working together for the common good. Whether this can or should happen is beside the point. The framework itself denies the real work that must be done.

That real work is deep and consistent storytelling. It brings us back to the histories we have yet to learn to live in fully, to understand their trajectories, and to analyze their continuing influences—the histories of race and conquest, capitalism and violence, land seizure and forced animal extinction. Of course, histories are always contested, but at least to engage in telling them, talking about them, and understanding them brings us into different ways to frame our realities.

In 1 Kings 3, King Solomon recognizes the massive task of trying to govern a people. He asks for wisdom to discern good from evil. He draws the conclusion that he needs wisdom by reckoning with his father's legacy and his place within it.

We need people who think from such reckonings, who seek to understand the legacies of the western world in their fullness—and then map their realities not in terms of left/right/center but in terms of who benefits and who loses from accumulated wealth formed by accumulated violence. We need ways of talking clearly and patiently that show we understand the histories we are in and the stories we yet perform by our actions. The hard work of talking together begins with tracing the histories out loud (familial, local, regional, national), and then joining those histories to other histories (financial, military, geographic, social, cultural, political), and then asking the painful questions: who benefited, who was advantaged? Whose lives were strangled away, cut off, and lost?

There has not been much patience for such difficult work, because it always ends up requiring that we not just comment on social, economic, and geographic structures but actually try to change them. Yet the wisdom we need at this moment will only come when we resist left/right/center framing and do the work of serious storytelling. While many Christians have enjoyed the typical framing, it denies the nature of our discipleship. Christians are always called to remember, in depth and detail. We should be the ones calling for an end to the cinematic framing of our realities, the ones who invite people to reflect on the continuing legacies of accumulation formed through violence and death.

Of course, anyone who talks this way will hardly escape being labeled liberal or conservative. But they will at least make things far more interesting.