

1-1-2013

Hermeneutics and the Methods of Oral Bible Storytelling for the Evangelization and Discipleship of Oral Learners

Jennifer Jagerson
Biola University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalarchives.apu.edu/gcrj>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jagerson, J. (2013). Hermeneutics and the Methods of Oral Bible Storytelling for the Evangelization and Discipleship of Oral Learners. *Great Commission Research Journal*, 4(2), 251-261. Retrieved from <https://digitalarchives.apu.edu/gcrj/vol4/iss2/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by APU Digital Archives. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Commission Research Journal by an authorized editor of APU Digital Archives. For more information, please contact mpacino@apu.edu.

VOL. 4 • NO. 2 • WINTER 2013
**HERMENEUTICS AND THE METHODS OF ORAL BIBLE
STORYTELLING FOR THE EVANGELIZATION AND DISCIPLESHIP
OF ORAL LEARNERS**

251

Jennifer Jagerson

abstract

The methods of oral Bible storytelling are expanding in influence for proclamation of the Gospel, discipleship, and church planting on the mission field. Such strategies are essential to reach those from primarily oral cultures where few have strong skills in literacy. As these methods are implemented, it is of critical importance to insure that they equip nationals with the fundamental skills of biblical interpretation. The author will demonstrate that at the level of proclamation and early discipleship, oral methods are able to effectively empower non- and semi-literates in the practices of robust inductive Bible study of the narrative texts of Scripture.

As a member of a church planting team in South Asia, I remember writing home about what felt like a daunting and insurmountable task. How are we meant to share Christ with these people we have travelled so far to reach? Then I began to hear rumors about a new strategy that was being used by another organization. The stories of the Bible were being told in a way that not only engaged the listeners, but also immediately prepared them to take others through the story for the purposes of evangelism and discipleship. Some fellow teammates and I went to a training. Excitement began to mount. What if this was a way?

indigenous church plant. Our national friends had many stories to share about the results, but one was particularly powerful. “Priscilla” came up to me with joy radiating from her eyes. She had been praying for months that the Lord would give her a way to share the Lord Jesus with her neighbors. The storytelling training gave her a way to do so, except instead of sharing with three or four people as we suggested, she had shared with a few dozen. She would go into a home with a plate of cookies that we had all baked together and the promise of a story. This was a communal culture, so when her neighbors saw the whole plate of cookies, it never occurred to them to keep them all to themselves. They went out and gathered half the neighborhood to come listen. A women’s Bible study of about twenty women from a least-reached people group emerged from her faithfulness. While it is always difficult in those settings to determine how much is genuinely understood when the Gospel is proclaimed, at one point in the study that spring, twelve women raised their hands to accept Jesus as their Savior.

252

The training that my team and our church plant received was through the International Missions Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. Since then, a number of groups have taken up the cause of oral methods, developing the original strategy in their own distinct ways. The purpose of this article is to explore the degree to which oral Bible storytelling methods are able to effectively equip nationals with fundamental principles of Bible interpretation as understood by those with an evangelical commitment to the Word. As oral learners learn to tell stories from Scripture, are they being given the principles and tools necessary to understand the meaning intended by the authors and the Author? Are they learning to apply those lessons appropriately?

I believe they do. However, the mere question might be problematic for many missiologists who are concerned about imposing western models of learning and thinking on indigenous people groups. The central question seems to be whether there are universal principles that are important for reading God’s Word and whether they can be distinguished from the assumptions and priorities of particular cultural groups, including (and perhaps especially) those of the West. Paul Koehler addressed these concerns in his *Telling God’s Story with Power*:

. . . Western theological categories are largely incompatible with the cognitive styles of oral learners. It is safe to assume that any theology that grows authentically from an oral culture will look and sound different from ours.

This does not mean that context has equal weight with the Bible in development of doctrine. Rather, it respects the fact that Christian believers in many cultures have grappled with the same biblical truths and discovered how

Jagerson: Hermeneutics and the Methods of Oral Bible Storytelling for the E to best express them in their own countries. It is important to grant this

freedom to our hearers instead of imposing our own preconceived outcomes.¹

Koehler's quote reflects the general sentiments of many in the orality movement. It should be noted that these are not issues of major doctrinal differences that relate to the essentials of the Christian faith. The orality movement has a strong commitment to the authority of Scripture and the orthodox beliefs of the evangelicalism. For example, the International Orality Network subscribes to the strongly evangelical doctrinal commitments of the Lausanne Conference.² With these commitments, however, comes a certain underlying assumption that while there are many aspects of culture that ought to be honored in the process of world evangelization (such as oral learning styles), the very nature of proclaiming Christ suggests the need for a particular sort of shift in worldview. Commitment to a particular Scripture as the exclusive, divinely-inspired revelation of God to humanity is a necessary and significant change in belief if faith in Christ is going to have any real meaning. Basic assumptions about how to interpret the text of the Bible are of similar importance. If oral Bible storytelling becomes a primary means, or even more significantly, *the* primary means by which a people group will be evangelized, disciplined, and established in church plants, then this issue takes on an even greater level of critical importance.

253

Open dialog and honest assessment are critically important at this stage of the strategy. If it is being done well, then something of tremendous importance is happening and ought to be promoted as such. However, if there are weaknesses or distortions, the eternal significance of this subject requires that they are addressed. The orality movement has sought chiefly to do the work of initial evangelism and discipleship. In light of this, a narrow but important learning goal has been identified for this article: Do oral Bible storytelling methods have the necessary components to effectively teach non-literate and semi-literate learners the basics of proper exegesis of narrative texts? If it can be demonstrated that this goal is being achieved, then the discussion can widen to addressing more complex issues such as the teaching of other genres or training pastors.

The standard that will be used to measure the effectiveness of storytelling for teaching proper exegesis will be addressed by comparing the teaching of a particular storytelling method with the objectives of an upper division undergraduate college course entitled, "Methods of Bible Study," as taught in the spring of 2012 to students at Biola University, a highly respected Christian institution of higher education. The objectives of this course are to:

¹ Paul Koehler, *Telling God's Story with Power* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2010), 41.

² <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/lausanne-covenant.html>.

1. Grow in enjoyment of and appreciation for personal Bible Study, being open to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.
2. Develop specific skills of inductive Bible Study; observation, interpretation, application, and edification, while recognizing their interactive nature.
3. Learn fundamental principles of studying the Scripture within a grammatical, literary, historical, and cultural context.
4. Show competence in the use of reference tools to aid Bible Study.³

Whether the first objective can be met through oral strategies is a matter of observation and reflection more than academic evaluation. The fourth objective is one that is meaningful in a Western literate setting, but it is an unrealistic goal for unreached people groups. Final comments on this will be offered later. The bulk of concern for our purposes here are objectives two and three. To further understand these objectives, two textbooks on biblical interpretation will be utilized. The first is a classic by Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks titled, *Living by the Book* (1991). The professor of the course uses it as a personal reference for the course. The second is *Grasping God's Word* by J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays (2005). It is the text assigned to the students. Because both texts are evangelical and like-minded in their presentation, the majority of references will be taken from Hendricks unless the Duvall text has something unique to offer.

While there are a number of organizations that offer training in storytelling, it seemed necessary to focus on one method as a case study. Simply the Story (STS), an organization that is effectively implementing oral storytelling methods in numerous countries all over the world, was chosen for this task. STS offers week-long training sessions in Bible storytelling that are entirely oral. No pens or paper are allowed, even when the workshops are conducted in a literate setting. The entire process of the STS workshop and methodology are also expressed in a workbook that is given to the participants but not for use during the actual sessions. The following details of the methodology can be found through either resource.

In the course of the week-long workshop, participants will go through the process of preparing to teach at least one or two stories. This includes learning a story well enough to tell it accurately. They will then learn to observe, interpret, and apply the meaning of the text through a series of questions that are posed by way of personal analysis and group discussion. Once this process has been completed and the participant is equipped with a proper inductive understanding of the text, they are immediately taught to guide a small group of fellow learners

³ Dave Keehn, Syllabus: Methods of Bible Study BBST 320/CEED 320, 2012.

Jageron: Hermeneutics and the Methods of Oral Bible Storytelling for the E through an entire lesson. Participants learn to replicate their developing skills in others as they work together to actively engage the storytelling process themselves. By the end of the week, participants are sent out for field experience in the local community. It is a pedagogy that teaches the learner not only what the Bible says, but also how to enact the Bible's commands.

The following graph explains each step of the STS method while demonstrating which critical aspects of inductive Bible study is addressed in each stage as described in the texts for the undergraduate level course:

Content of Steps in the Simply the Story Method	Interpretational Principles
<p>Step 1: Introduction and Storytelling</p> <p>Introduction: As they prepare, the storytellers are trained to identify any important issues of cultural or historical context that should be included as part of a short introduction to the story. This might include: issues of immediate context of the story, the place of the story in the biblical narrative, specific historical or geographical references or that need to be explained, or clarification of doctrinal concepts such as the Trinity.</p>	<p>Good interpretation considers the historical, cultural, geographical, and theological context of the passage.⁴</p> <p>It is important to consider how the story relates to the purposes of the book it is in as well as its place in the meta-narrative of Scripture.⁵</p>
<p>Storytelling: The leader tells the story using vocal inflections and moderately dramatic physical actions to promote memory. In preparation, they are taught to know the story well enough to have given a dynamic equivalence of each sentence of the text, carefully attending to the meaning and progression of the story as provided by Scripture.</p>	<p>Dramatizing the text engages and instructs the listeners in ways that mere reading will not.⁶</p> <p>Reading through the text in several translations helps engage the imagination and observe different ways of understanding the text.⁷</p>
<p>Step 2: Volunteer Retelling</p> <p>A volunteer is asked to retell the story as accurately as possible. Sometimes the group is broken into twos so that everyone has a chance to retell the</p>	<p>Steps 2 and 3 address many of the same interpretational goals:</p> <p>It is critical to insure that the text is accurately understood without distortion.⁸</p>

⁴ H.G. Hendricks and W.D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 227–228.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 61–62, 319.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 103–104.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 203.

<p>story. Participants may be asked to act out the story in their own right.</p>	<p>It is helpful to go through the story repeatedly, listening to it, reading it, and speaking it out loud.⁹</p>
<p>Step 3: Storyteller Lead-through</p>	
<p>The storyteller leads the entire group through the story one more time, asking questions along the way to clarify for accuracy and to engage the whole audience in participation of the story.</p>	<p>One way to engage the text for personal ownership is by acting it out or, paraphrasing it in one's own words.¹⁰</p>
<p>Step 4: Spiritual Observations</p>	<p>Observations: Meditating, pondering, and prolonged exposure of the mind to the text by moving through it slowly is an important spiritual discipline for depth of comprehension (Josh. 1:8; Prov.23:7; Ps. 1:1–19; 119:97).¹¹ The meaning must not derive from subjective or relativistic assumptions but from the stated realities in the text itself. (204–205).¹²</p>
<p>This stage contains the processes of both observation and interpretation. They first identify the overall situation (setting, context, and problem) of the story. A series of inductive questions are then continually recycled as the participants move slowly through small portions at a time, anchoring their comments directly to the text. Each small section of verses are is addressed with three sets of questions: 1. What was said and done?, 2. What choices did the characters make or not make? What other choices could they have made?, and 3. What was the immediate impact of those choices? Were there any following consequences? Each of these questions are is intended to be exploratory, presented in a dialogical style that promotes at length discussion, critical thinking, and an imaginative consideration of the story among the participants. The groups moves slowly through the entire text, piece by piece, until the end. They will have looked at each character in-depth all the way along, including the</p>	<p>A number of things that are important to consider, such as the conflict and tensions that make up the plot.¹³ The grammatical structure (which tells who is doing what to whom with which object at what time and for what purposes) is also critically valuable for understanding the point of story.¹⁴ Relatedly, connecting terms such as “but” or “therefore” help explain the developing meaning.¹⁵</p> <p>The literary structures of chronology, biography, geography, and history are also important considerations.¹⁶</p> <p>The cause and effect of the relationships between these many variables demonstrate the intended meaning of the text.¹⁷</p>

⁹ Ibid., 81–84.

¹⁰ Ibid., 123.

¹¹ Ibid., 110–113.

¹² Ibid., 204–205.

¹³ J.S. Duvall and J.D. Hays, *Grasping God's Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 311.

¹⁴ Hendricks and Hendricks, 115–117.

¹⁵ Ibid., 55.

¹⁶ Ibid., 118–119.

¹⁷ Ibid., 57.

role God plays in the story. This process encompasses both the process of deeply observing the content of the passage and interpreting its meaning.

The authors exhorted their readers to pursue the story thoughtfully and imaginatively, asking who, what, where, when, why, and to what purpose.¹⁸ They were to look at the emphasis of Scripture by considering how much volume or space something is given in the text, any stated purposes, the order it is presented in, occurrences of repetition, and how concepts relate to each other by contrast and comparison, giving a general idea and moving to specific examples, or comparing the behavior of characters.¹⁹

The story shows rather than tells the point it is making, so they observe what it is showing.²⁰

Interpretation: -Narrative texts require looking at: (1) the plot, or the spiritual or physical movements in the story that show the problem and how it is solved, (2) the characterizations of each person in the story (including God), their roles, and how they relate to each other, and what we might do instead, and (3) how this story is true to life in terms of the problems and the lessons learned.²¹ It is important to:

“barrage the text” with questions from many angles and know the cause and effect between the content of and its meaning.²²

(See introduction section above to see more ways issues of interpretation are addressed in terms of history and culture.)

¹⁸ Ibid., 91–95.

¹⁹ Ibid., 143–156.

²⁰ Duvall and Hays, 306.

²¹ Hendricks and Hendricks, 211–212.

²² Ibid., 223–224.

Step 5: Application	
<p>The three or four major lessons taken from the story in Step 4 are addressed in the application section through another series of questions with the goal of applying them as close to the personal lives of the learners as possible. The first question is broad and non-threatening. "Do things like this every happen in our world today? The answer is yes or no. The next question brings it in a little bit closer: "Can you tell me a story about how something like this happens in the world or in your neighborhood?" Discussion is encouraged, allowing for longer answers to deeply consider what the biblical text has to say about contemporary situations. Then an invitation for more personal application is given: "Has something like this ever happened to you or someone you know?" A discussion generally ensues that gives participants an opportunity to give testimony to the meaning of the lesson and the personal direction it provides in an immediate way.</p>	<p>Once the author's intentions for the text have been carefully interpreted, it is appropriate to move into applications for today.²³ The two main questions for application are: "How does it work for me?" and "How does it work for others?"²⁴ One must know the text, know himoneself, and relate these things to how they he interacts with one's his relationship to God, himoneself, and others.²⁵ One observes the principles that arise from the text, finds circumstances that parallel them, and makes as specific an application as possible.²⁶ The final step is meditating on the thoughts that emerge from these reflections and putting them into practice.²⁷</p>

The steps delineated on the chart demonstrate that the basic stages of the hermeneutical process are imbedded in the teaching methodology of STS. A participant must remember not only the titles of each step, but also what their purpose is, what the proper inductive questions are, and what the order of the stages are to effectively interpret and teach the story. Since the workshop is entirely oral, all of this must be committed to memory. Motivation to know these steps and skillfully navigate them is exponentially intensified by the constant requirement to put into practice by leading and being led by one's fellow participants.

An exhaustive explanation of the STS model was no more possible than a comprehensive overview of biblical hermeneutical principles. However, it seems clear from these rough outlines that the oral methods of the STS model makes

²³ Duvall and Hays, 180–182.

²⁴ Hendricks and Hendricks, 41.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 292–298.

²⁶ Duvall and Hays, 215.

²⁷ Hendricks and Hendricks, 299–301.

Jagerson: *Hermeneutics and the Methods of Oral Bible Storytelling for the E* significant strides in honoring appropriate methods of inductive Bible study. The ability to equip non-literate learners in tribal and village communities in developing countries with this level of interpretational skill and teaching in the early stages of their faith journey is a profoundly positive advance for missiological efforts. The relative ease with which these skills can be transmitted in their own language by members of their own people group is an important advantage as well.

Further discussion is necessary about the potential weaknesses of oral methods, real or perceived, and the impact these might have on the field (not to mention the future of the movement). For example, there are aspects of interpretation that are addressed in textbooks that cannot be addressed outside of a literate format. Reading and rereading the text of Scripture, writing it out in outline form, and developing a chart to highlight its major themes fall outside the realm of what is possible for oral learners. The question for biblical scholars is the degree to which these must be pressed as necessary elements of good interpretation. Here are some questions for consideration: Does learning the story so that it is so comprehensively retained in the head that it can be evaluated deeply without the aid of writing or visuals have merit of its own? Perhaps it meets some of the goals that charts and outlines are designed to address at an oral level and in the oral manner of processing reality. Perhaps methods such as outlining serve to slow literate learners down so they will attend to the details of the text in a manner that oral learners do by necessity. What literate exegetes do externally with laptop, pen, and paper, non-literates must imprint and contain in their minds at peril of losing it altogether. An important discussion can be had about what is gained by oral methods and what is lost in this area of interpretation.

259

Similar thoughts arise about the interpretational concern regarding barriers between the biblical era and the current age because of vast differences in culture, language issues, and modernization. Literate learners tend to bridge the divide through scholarly resources such as commentaries. The fourth objective of the Bible Studies Methods course was to make sure the students knew how to use those resources. Some questions that those ministering in developing countries with highly relational, oral cultures might pose are these: Who is more likely to understand on an effective, comprehensive level the deep implications of the famines of Canaan: a North American or an Ethiopian? Who will better grasp the vulnerability of a woman who has lost her husband: a European careerist or a family living in an Indian village? Who will better know the frightening levels of tension and threat that can be imposed by national or religious enemies: someone whose closest experience of terrorism took place through his television set on 9/11, or someone who hails from a nation where his family lies under subtle threat at all

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 4, Iss. 2 [2013], Art. 8
times? Many of the regions that oral Bible storytelling was designed to reach
would have all three of these concerns as very real possibilities.

Perhaps many of the literate resources that have been developed to create
bridges between those living in the modernized economies and the Bible are not as
necessary for those who hail from cultures whose reality is much more close to the
reality on the ground in the stories of Scripture. In fact, the perspectives of those
who live where the demonic realm is accepted as a regular factor of everyday life,
idol worship is a norm, and the great hopes and fears of life remain ever close to
the edges of poverty and loss might be a valuable resource to help westerners
understand many of the deeper implications of the Scriptural narrative. These
comments are not meant to act as definitive statements, but as early suggestions
towards a broader dialog.

260 Some additional aspects of interpretation are important for the oral Bible
storytelling community to note. Cultural issues emerge in the text that have no
obvious contemporary meaning without the help of literate resources. Providing
understanding of the context of each story within its book and the larger biblical
meta-narrative is a further challenge. These are legitimately important goals for
training methods as they continue to develop, not because they meet the subjective,
culturally-biased demands of westerner scholars, but because they honor the
fullness of God's Word. Is it possible to teach a paradigmatic story from each book
of the Bible that makes clear to the oral learner what the big picture of the book is
about? Might these paradigmatic stories be used to knit together the larger picture
of God's overarching historical work to help insure a strong understanding of the
meta-narrative? May the dialog between committed Christians of different fields
continue to strengthen each other for the best of excellence in these eternally
significant matters.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Duvall, J. S., and Hays, J.D. *Grasping God's Word*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005.
- Hendricks, H.G., and Hendricks, W.D. *Living by the Book*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1991.
- Keehn, D. Syllabus: Methods of Bible Study BBST 320/CEED 320. Unpublished work, 2012.
- Koehler, P. *Telling God's Story with Power*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2010.
- Lovejoy, G., Evans, S., Hall, A., Payne, D., Ponraj, S., Snowden, M., and Willis, A. "Making Disciples of Oral Learners," Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 54: Pattaya, Thailand, 2005.
- Miller, D. *Simply the Story: Inductive Bible Study "Oral Style"*. Hemet, CA: by the author, 2011.
- Ong, W. H. (1988). *Orality and Literacy*. New York: Routledge.

Jagerson: Hermeneutics and the Methods of Oral Bible Storytelling for the E
Snowden, M. (2012). "Are We Training Our Pastors Wrong? Or How Can We Train Pastors?"

Retrieved from: http://conversation.lausanne.org/en/resources/detail/12316#_page_1.

Willis, A., and Snowden, M. (2010). *Truth That Sticks*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

Jennifer Jagerson served for several years on a church planting team in Southeast Asia. Prior to this enriching experience she worked in urban ministry and as a public school teacher in Southern California. She has an MA in Education from Azusa Pacific University and an MA in Biblical and Theological Studies/Diversified from Talbot School of Theology at Biola. She is currently pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies at Talbot.