

Original Stories in Oral Bible Storytelling Projects

Recommendation

Members of storytelling teams should be encouraged to observe good storytellers in their communities and to learn their communication techniques. They should also be encouraged to practice telling folklore, legends, historical accounts and personal stories in their own languages. These exercises should help the Bible storytellers to:

- Improve the naturalness of the Bible stories that they craft and tell in the vernacular language so that the audiences find the Bible stories interesting and valid for their lives.
- And assist the story crafters in determining the best ways to express key theological terms and other Biblical passages that are difficult to translate in their own language.

A further recommendation is to create the opportunities for the various storytellers to share stories with an archetype similar to the archetypes of the Bible stories that the tellers will be learning. These exercises could help the Bible storytellers to:

- Find and appreciate the intersection between their own stories and the stories of the Bible.
- Identify their own sets of cultural values and norms and to discover that cultural values and norms vary from people group to people group and over time.

Learning Outcomes

Members of the local storytelling team will:

- Develop expertise in telling stories of a wide variety of genre in their own language.
- Discover discourse features and other linguistic tools in the vernacular language that will help them tell stories from the Bible in such a manner that their audiences find the stories sound like their own and are easy to understand.
- Identify implied emic or 'insider' information that needs to be made explicit for an 'outsider' audience to the Biblical story.
- Identify words, phrases and figures of speech that convey significant meaning for specific story themes, archetypes and motifs.
- Identify cultural values and norms as expressed in original stories and the similarities and differences between their culture and the cultures represented in the Bible stories.

Glossary of Terms

- **Accuracy** – Accuracy of a translated spoken or written communication is a measure of how closely the meaning of the translated communication is to the meaning and the impact of the source speech or text.
- **Archetype** – “A plot motif (such as the ordeal), character type (such as the hero), or setting/image/symbol (such as the wicked city) that reoccurs throughout literature and life.” (See Ryken & Ryken, 2007 p. 1884)
- **Clarity** – Clarity in translated spoken or written communication is a measure of the transfer of meaning with regard to the question; “Is the listener/ reader able to clearly understand the meaning that the teller/ writer was trying to communicate?”
- **Discourse Features** – All languages have patterns that help people communicate with each other. However most of us don’t pay any attention to the patterns and may not even know the patterns we use in our native language. For example, we use the conjunction ‘then’ in English to communicate a sequence of events in a story. And we use a person’s full name when introducing them in a story and then we refer to them by their title if they are in a position of respect or by their first name if they are a friend. In English, we tend to repeat information and slow down the pace of giving new information at the important parts of a story. These patterns are not universal from one language to another. People who are learning a story in one language to tell in another language, need to recognize these patterns in both languages in order to tell the story accurately.
- **Motif** – “A discernible pattern composed of similar individual units, either in a single work or in literature generally. Psalm 23 is built around the motif of a shepherd’s daily provision for his sheep. Jesus’ special concern for outcasts and marginalized people is a motif in the Gospel of Luke.” (Ryken & Ryken, 2007, p. 1892)
- **Naturalness** – Naturalness in translated written or spoken communication is a measure of the fluency of the communication with regard to the question, “Does this communication sound/read like a mother-tongue speaker of the language communicating it or does it sound/read like a non-native speaker/writer of the language communicating it.
- **Theme** – “A generalization about life that can be deduced from work of literature. Works of literature usually embody multiple themes. A theme in the story of Cain (Genesis 4: 1-16) is the self-destructiveness of uncontrolled sin in a person’s life.” (Ryken & Ryken, 2007, p. 1899)

Suggested procedure

- Prior to a story crafting training session, ask each team member to come prepared to tell a story based on the assigned theme, archetype or motif that is related to the Bible stories to be crafted during that training session. Encourage them to elicit the story from a good storyteller and then to practice it before an audience.
- Early on in the training session, have the team members share the story that they prepared. Ask the team members to listen to each other’s stories for a particular feature. Do not try to listen for them all but limit the listening activity to one or maybe two features.

- If there are several teams attending the training session, have each team choose one of their stories to share with the larger group. First, the storyteller tells the story to the large group in their own language and then they or somebody else on that team tells it again in the language of wider communication.
- The training facilitator leads a discussion about the feature of the story in focus for that training session and helps the teams to link that feature with the Bible story or stories to be crafted. The benefit of having this kind of discussion among various teams is that they will soon learn from each other as they see the similarities and differences between their local languages and cultures. The facilitator may need to remind the teams that it is not appropriate to evaluate others' language and culture during these discussions.

Features to observe in the original stories

Included in the following list of features are questions to ask the storytellers to help them discover how their language works and techniques that will help them develop their storytelling style. Some of the questions will help them identify cultural values and practices that they may never have considered as unique to their community and may wrongly assume are universal to all cultures.

- Cultural values – What can you say about your community from hearing/telling this story? What does the story say is important to your community? The facilitator needs to mediate this discussion so that it does not become a time for evaluating different cultures. If people want to make a comment about being uncomfortable with their own cultural values, that is fine, but it should not be taken up as a discussion topic. The facilitator can choose to say something like, "We as owners of our own stories have the right to change our lives so that our future stories are changed."
- Cultural differences – How does your story differ from the stories of the other group? What extra information do people outside the group need to know to understand the story? The facilitator should summarize with a few statements like: 'Cultures are different and the cultures of the people in the Bible are different too.' 'Sometimes it helps to add some cultural information to the story so our communities understand the story correctly.'
- Big words – What were some of the important words you used in your stories? Can you use those words for other situations? Identify words, phrases and figures of speech that relate to the Biblical theme, motif or archetype.
- Discourse features – Look for sequences (i.e. and, and, and, and, but...) and head-tail linkage, and clues to the time of the event such as contemporary past, distant past that is prior to living memory, procedure that happens regularly, predication of something yet to happen. Another discourse feature is how to keep track of the characters involved in the story.
- Introducing characters – Generally people can pay attention to three characters in the story and the rest are in the background. Pay attention to how characters are brought into the story and how they are described or kept in focus. How often are their names used or are they given titles? When do you switch to saying 'he' or 'she' or 'the man'? What happens if you, as the storyteller, refer to the character or talk about the character in a manner outside the culturally expected manner? Does it show disrespect, anger, censure, intimacy....? Does it make the audience too uncomfortable to pay attention to the rest of the story?

- Idioms and figures of speech – People tend to use more idioms and metaphors in oral communication than in written communication. Pay attention to which ones are used and for what purposes.
- Opening and closing the story – Is there a prescribed opening like “This is a story about...” or like, “There was a man and his wife....” Does the story have to be placed in time or in location? Is it helpful to place the story in a wider context? What needs to be in the introduction of the story that is told just before performing the story? How do you end stories, with a moral or a summary to a proscribed ending like “This is the end of the story?”
- Creating images – How do you help somebody picture and feel what is happening in the story? How do you describe a person or a scene so the audience can picture it in their mind? How do you introduce fear or grief or other emotions?
- Different Categories of Stories – How do you recognize different kinds of stories or stories that are told for different purposes? How do you know somebody is telling a story to make people laugh or a story to teach a lesson or to give a warning or a story to encourage people or to celebrate a big event or a story to remind people of their common history? When do you add songs or poetry or dance to stories? A facilitator should note that categories of stories or genre are not shared across cultures. It is most effective to ask for stories from categories that are significant to the local storytellers. The temptation is to assume that the most significant division of stories is fiction and non-fiction. For some it may be that the most significant stories told in a community, explain who they are as a belonging identity. The origins of these stories are not as important as the tradition that promotes it. (O’Flaherty (1988:25))

Initial Stories

Here are some ideas for stories to start with:

- If you are meeting in a cluster of teams ask for each team to share a story that identifies their community. In other words, tell us a story that describes something you want the entire group to know about you and your community.
- Share your story of how you became part of the Bible storytelling team. Or share your testimony of how you became a believer.
- Share your favorite story that you heard as a child.

Specific features to listen for: This activity is a good opportunity to get to know each other and also to build the tellers confidence in front of the group. It is important to develop the patterns of listening to each other since they will grow in their expertise as they pay attention to each other and discover what works and what doesn’t work in telling a good story.

Story archetypes, motifs or themes for Select Bible Stories

Genesis 2- The creation story

- **A traditional origin story** – Often origin stories are not stories of how the entire universe was created, but are rather the creation of a significant part of creation such as the first man or woman, the land occupied by the people, an important source of food or an identifying animal.

Specific features to listen for:

1. Is the creative power behind the existence of people and this world identified in the story or not and if it does who or what is the creative power?
2. Another possible feature to listen for is how they place stories in time. “Long long ago” or “In the time before people walked on this earth” or... The facilitator can prompt a discussion about how they place a recent historical story in time. Note that some people do not use dates but will place their stories around in relation to a major event such as WWII or when a certain volcano blew or in the time of a specific national leader.

Genesis 3 – Fall story – (the story in which a serpent deceives the woman)

- **A talking animal story** – The key to juxtaposing these stories with the Genesis 3 story is not to get into long debates or explanations of whether or not people believe their own story truly happened or whether or not the fall story truly happened. Great theologians have debated this through the ages. More to the point may be finding attributes that they typically assign to animals.

Specific features to listen for:

1. How do they typically open stories?
 2. How to introduce characters in the story? Do they describe them first then name them, or name them first and then describe them? Do they introduce all the characters first and then launch into the story?
- **Trickster story**

Specific feature to listen for:

1. Persuasion rhetoric – In their culture and language, how do they persuade somebody to do something unwise or something wrong? In the Fall story in English, the serpent uses a series of questions to place doubt in the woman’s mind.
- **Stories about crime and punishment or evil and its consequences**

Specific features to listen for:

1. How do they pronounce judgment in their language? Do they typically end these kinds of stories with a moral or a proverb?
2. What kinds of words do they have for right and wrong, good and evil, obedient and disobedient? How do these pairs of words differ in meaning if they do?

Genesis 4: Cain and Abel

- **Sibling rivalry stories, more specifically fratricide stories**

Specific features to listen for:

1. What are the cultural expectations for sibling relationships? How are brothers expected to interact? How are family disputes settled? What happens when a sibling refuses to act within the cultural norms?

- **Good brother- bad brother stories**

Specific features to listen for:

1. How does the good brother behave and how does the bad brother behave? What causes a bad brother to behave badly?
2. How do they keep track of which brother is in focus at different stages of the story?

Genesis 12: God calls Abraham

- **Journey stories**

Specific features to listen for:

1. How do they keep track of movement and new locations in their language?
2. How do they keep track of the sequence of events in their language?
3. What purposes do they have for taking a journey: to gain education, to seek better job opportunities, to gain experience to mark the next stage of life or ...?
4. What signifies the beginning and the end of a journey? Are there any chiasmic structures in the language used to indicate a completed journey?

- **Alienation stories** (being a stranger in a strange land)

Specific features to listen for:

1. How are strangers treated in their community? What privileges are they given or denied?
2. What is life like away from their extended family and their community?

Mark 4: 35- 42 Jesus Calms the Storm

- **Miracle stories, more specifically natural phenomenon**

Specific features to listen for:

1. What is considered a miracle among these people and to what or whom do they attribute the cause of the miracle?

- **Stories about near-death experiences**

Specific features to listen for:

1. How do they convey the heightened emotion or fear of such an experience when telling the stories? What kinds of words or gestures do they use?
2. How did such an experience change the life of the people involved? What kind of lasting impact did it have?

Mark 5: 1-20 Jesus Heals the Demon-possessed Man

- **Demon stories, more specifically demon-possession stories**

Specific features to listen for:

1. Are there different kinds of demons and if so give a description of the various kinds of demons. Are some of the demons 'good', meaning do they help people? If so do they help all people or only certain people? And do they always do good? What kinds of powers do the demons have? Are their powers limited?
2. Are there restrictions about how they talk about demons? Are they careful about what they say in front of children or in front of outsiders?
3. Can the storytellers speak the words of demons as direct speech or must they report the words of demons as indirect speech? If so what does a demon sound like?

- **Alienation stories (somebody cut off from family or community)**

Specific features to listen for:

1. For what reasons are people cut off from their family or community? How do the families feel when a member is alienated? What do families do about the situation?
2. How does reconciliation happen in the community?

Luke 10: 25-37 Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan

- **Stories of when somebody unexpectedly did a good deed**

Specific features to listen for:

1. How do they build suspense in telling a story so that the listeners are anticipating to be surprised by the unexpected event? How do they set the scene so that the unexpected good deed stands out for the listener?
2. What makes the good deed unexpected to the audience?
3. What kind of extra information do they need to add to the story in order for somebody outside their community to understand the impact or the importance of the story?

- **Stories of theft or muggings**

Specific features to listen for:

1. In what kinds of situations do thefts or muggings tend to occur? What do people from their community expect to do when they encounter a victim of a theft or mugging? What if the victim is an enemy?

References

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