

# NARRATIVE AND SYMBOL AS A MEANS OF EMBODYING CULTURAL VALUES

BB April 1999

This article considers ways in which oral communities develop symbols or icons which represent themes or values embedded in their narrative history. The formation of icons will inevitably result from the presentation of Biblical narrative, and the Biblical storyteller needs to be aware that such icons will emerge for good or ill, and should attempt to identify problems that may result where Biblical imagery is at odds with imagery already embedded within the target culture.

If the storyteller researches and understands the icons already in use by the target culture, and seeks to encourage the development of Biblical icons and images that represent true Biblical values, then this facet of oral society can work in a very positive way to help the story of the Bible become absorbed into the target culture's psyche in a way which is both powerful and non-threatening.

## **1. Oral communicators build abstract concepts and values on narrative foundations.**

One very basic premise of storying is that oral communicators learn and conceptualize ideas through telling stories, not by discussing and manipulating abstract concepts. This is true even of many developed societies.

Hatcher (1998) discusses problems that Korean Christians have in conceptualizing abstract propositions such as are contained in our Western creeds and articles of faith:

“... the fact that Korean churches' creeds and the articles of faith are translations of Western formulations of doctrine obscures the relationship of those doctrines to contemporary Korean life since these carefully constructed theological statements are abstract and propositional in form...”

Hatcher goes on to show how such concepts need to be rooted in narrative stories. He continues...

“The first goal of a structured study of biblical passages is to give a group of Christians an opportunity to encounter and build narrative roots through which the conviction of a particular article of faith may be understood and become their own conviction. The study is centered on biblical passages because they provide narrative roots that the church has traditionally understood to be normative for faith and practice. These narrative roots provide an opportunity for Christians to encounter and experience afresh what God has revealed in the flesh of biblical history and to weave their own stories in with this revelation.”

## **2. Narratives have functional value**

In an oral culture, narratives are not told just for enjoyment, or even for education, but have a functional role in maintaining the values and cultural norms of the community.

Histories of oral cultures are full of tales of courage and victory in battle, examples of man-hood to be admired and emulated, stories that encourage modest behavior on the part of the women and children. If the womenfolk need a lesson in submissiveness, or children need to be taught to defer and honor their elders, there will be a stock of appropriate cautionary tales to warn of the consequences of stepping outside the moral standards set by the tribe.

Children learn what is appropriate behavior by hearing stories that exemplify various aspects of cultural behavior, and are encouraged to emulate that behavior. They learn by following patterns that are set for them in the oral history of the tribe.

OT narrative history had much the same function. There are stories that provide examples to be emulated - the example of Joseph who forgave his brothers instead of taking justified vengeance - the example of Job and his patience in the face of adversity. Also there are stories that warn of consequences in the case of inappropriate behavior - "Remember Lot's wife!"

### 3. Concrete symbols serve as the embodiment of values/lessons contained in the narrative.

Of particular interest however in this present context is Hatcher's assertion that study of Biblical narrative should lead to the formation of concrete symbols through which abstract concepts and articles of faith may be understood:

"Stephen Bevans, reflecting on the theology of mission, emphasizes the significance that images have for forming a person's interpretation of reality and for guiding their conduct. He quotes John Shea as saying that "images are not so much what we see as what we see through." They become concentrated theologies that integrate a person's understanding of a wide spectrum of theological themes and patterns (1991:46)."

"Joachim Wach claims that "the symbol is the primary means of expressing the content of any experience which we call religious." A symbol conveys the meaning of an experience of divine reality in a way that can be explained, acted upon, and serve as a way to integrate the fellowship of the Christian community (1964:43)."

Steffen (1998) covers similar ground, arguing that oral communicators not only learn through narrative stories, but that they use symbols, (the term is defined by Leslie White as "a thing the value or meaning of which is bestowed upon it by those who use it"), which are incorporated into the culture as expressions of cultural values and shared ideals and experiences.

To give some Biblical examples, symbols may take on many forms such as:

Personalities	JEZEBEL	evil
	JOB	patience
Places	SODOM	immorality/depravity
	SINAI	the law
Animals	LION	strength
	LAMB	meekness/humility (also atonement)
	DOVE	Holy Spirit
Plants	VINE	God's husbandry
	CEDAR	stateliness/splendor
Objects	AARON'S ROD	priesthood
	MANNA	God's providence
Colors	RED	life-blood, sacrifice
	WHITE	purity

The point is that the symbol receives meaning/significance through being related to a narrative. The symbol is a *concentrated form of the story (or stories) to which it relates*, or to look at it in another way, an icon which represents a story in the same way that an icon on the desktop of a computer represents the program to which it relates. Clicking an icon on the computer opens the program. Invoking an icon in the context of oral communication brings into play the narrative to which the icon refers.

The parallel can be taken a step further in that the icon is essentially a functional object. One clicks an icon on the computer desktop in order to open a program that is needed to fulfill a specific task. Similarly in oral communication one invokes an icon or symbol in order to achieve an end; perhaps to reinforce a cultural value, or to encourage a certain behavior.

A concrete example - imagine that you as a parent wish to encourage your child to brush their teeth regularly. You could adopt an authoritative approach: "You WILL brush your teeth or else...!". You could adopt a scientific approach: "If you don't brush your teeth bacteria will grow and eat away your teeth and gums...". Or you could try the storying approach: "Uncle Albert never brushed his teeth and by the time he was 30 all his teeth had fallen out".

Here you have a story, with an intended function - to encourage (or maybe frighten!) your children into brushing their teeth. However once your children are familiar with the story, you don't need to re-tell the whole story every time you want to create the effect. All you need say is, "Remember Uncle Albert!". "Uncle Albert" becomes the icon which invokes the story in order to create the desired result.

<p><b>ICON</b> Remember Uncle Albert</p>	
<p><b>STORY</b> Uncle Albert never brushed his teeth and by the time he was 30 all his teeth had fallen out</p>	<p><b>LESSON</b> You need to brush your teeth</p>

We can apply the same pattern to innumerable Biblical examples. Here are just two:

<p><b>ICON</b> Remember Lot's wife</p>	
<p><b>STORY</b> Rescue of Lot and his family from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah... Lot's wife looked back and turned into a pillar of salt.</p>	<p><b>LESSON</b> Don't look back to the old life but keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.</p>
<p><b>ICON</b> Behold the Lamb of God.</p>	
<p><b>STORY</b> Passover celebration OT sacrificial system Isaiah 53 - suffering servant</p>	<p><b>LESSON</b> Jesus is the perfect sacrifice and atonement for sin</p>

#### **4. Pros and cons of the formation of icons from narrative text**

In an oral society, icons will automatically be created from shared narratives and come to have meaning and function by common consent and usage. We will not need to make any effort to create icons, rather we need to be aware that icons will be created, and to try to ensure that those which are created from Biblical narrative are appropriate, and that the meaning they come to contain is based on a true understanding of the Biblical text.

The formation and use of icons can be a very positive and powerful tool in our storying strategies. Icons provide a shorthand and pithy way to remind the hearer of lessons/values contained in a narrative (Biblical or otherwise) in order to encourage appropriate response and behavior. The formation and use of icons from Biblical narrative may provide people with ways to invoke Biblical values in daily life in ways which are appropriate in keeping with their own cultural patterns and learning methods.

However it is worth noting some problems that may occur with the formation and use of icons from Biblical narrative:

##### **PROBLEM 1 - The icon invokes the wrong value/lesson because the meaning of the narrative has been misunderstood.**

For example, Jonah is, for the average Englishman, a symbol of bad luck. “He’s a Jonah”, implies “keep away from him, things always go wrong when he’s around”. The real lesson of the Jonah narrative has been missed, and the icon has come to represent a value which is not representative of the real story.

The storyteller must be aware that icons will be created from the narrative for good or ill, and should seek to preempt the formation of icons by offering appropriate symbols and making sure that the meaning attached to them is truly representative of the Biblical narrative.

##### **PROBLEM 2 - The icon becomes detached from the narrative and loses its meaning altogether.**

This is less likely to happen in the formative stages of Biblical storying, but does happen when the narrative to which the icon relates is forgotten and the connection is lost. For example, there is a line from a hymn that reads:

“Here I raise my Ebenezer”

If the reference doesn’t convey any meaning for you, then it’s because the icon has become detached from the narrative to which it refers. (See 1 Samuel 7:12).

##### **PROBLEM 3 - The icon is already in use, with a meaning that conflicts with that contained in the Biblical narrative.**

It may be the case that a symbol is already being used to represent some cultural value, and is too deeply embedded in the cultural psyche to be meddled with. For example, in the people group with which we are most closely involved, the color purple has special significance. The precise significance is protected as a tribal secret, but whatever that significance is, it is not that for which it serves in Biblical narrative. In such cases the symbol (in this case the color purple) should if possible be avoided altogether.

More difficult will be cases where a Biblical character or event has been distorted in the target culture's own religious teaching. The narrative of Adam and Eve in the Garden may already be known, but the story may be symbolic of cultural values/concepts which are at odds with the Biblical values contained in the narrative. In this case one must seek to retell the story in such a way that the symbol of Adam and Eve is able to take on a new Biblical value.

Note that it is not easy to change the values of symbols that have already been embedded in the culture and psyche of the community. In Mexico many Indian tribes that (superficially) adopted Catholicism simply substituted new icons for the same cultural values. Before Catholicism came they were sun and moon worshippers, the sun and moon being icons for their most powerful animistic gods. Those icons have been replaced by God and Mary, but the new icons point to the very same cultural values and religious ideologies, and in practice nothing has changed.

Steffen argues forcefully that storytellers need to carefully research the narratives and symbols used by the target community before they begin crafting stories that will illustrate Biblical truth and symbolize Biblical values. Failure to understand the symbols already in use by the culture may result in serious miscommunication and misunderstanding of the Biblical narrative.

#### **PROBLEM 4 - for many complex Biblical values/concepts, one icon will not be enough**

Hatcher states:

“There is a danger that the contextualization of an article of faith may be limited to one biblical image to the neglect of other significant biblical images. When this occurs, it is easy for the apprehension of the divine reality to become distorted by the limitations of the image that has become the centerpiece.”

Using a very helpful simile, Hatcher suggests that building up multiple images or symbols to represent a concept (he uses the illustration of holiness, which has a variety of different facets) is like viewing a room from the outside through different windows:

“Each image then becomes like a window looking into a room of a house. There is much in the room that can be seen from the perspective of the window, but there is also much that escapes from view. By going to another window, a new configuration of the room will appear that will likewise disclose and limit the perception of the room. The more windows that are looked through, the more adequate the perception of the room will become as the view from each window modifies and fills out with new insight what the views from other windows could not see.”

The Noah story, for example, provides the image of the Ark, which may become an icon for the concept of salvation. However there is much more to the concept of salvation than that one image can provide. The overall storying process should provide as many images as possible to capture different aspects of the concept of salvation, in order to create a comprehensive and multi-dimensional picture.

On the other hand, one narrative may provide a number of icons representing different values/concepts that are contained in the same story. For example, here are some potential icons from the story of Noah:

**NARRATIVE**  
Noah and the flood

**ICON**  
the flood

**ICON**  
the ark

**ICON**  
the rainbow

**CONCEPT**  
judgment

**CONCEPT**  
salvation

**CONCEPT**  
God's faithfulness

Looking for different potential icons from the story will help to maximize the potential for teaching Biblical values and concepts. Moreover if an icon representing salvation can be found in many different stories this will help to build up an overall and comprehensive understanding of the concept.

### **5. Implications for the storyteller**

1. Recognize that your audience will inevitably latch onto images from Biblical narrative that will serve as icons to represent their understanding of the values/concepts contained in the story.
2. Preview the stories in order to identify potential icons. Research the culture of your target audience to identify icons that may already be in use. Ascertain the meaning/significance of these icons in the target culture to identify possible clashes.
3. When you tell the stories, focus on images that may serve as icons and seek to preempt your listeners by relating them to the values or concepts that would be appropriate.
4. When you review the stories, review the images.
  - Have those images become symbolic of particular concepts or values in the minds of the audience?
  - If so, are the meanings the images have attained appropriate in view of the meaning of the narrative text?
5. Encourage the use of these icons in personal interaction and daily life, in ways that other cultural icons would be invoked. In this way, the values embodied in the icons may be absorbed into the culture and lifestyle of the community in ways that are appropriate to the culture, and non-threatening.

(Brian Bull)