

## THE ORAL BIBLE CONCEPT

What is an Oral Bible? It is the Bible portions that a person can recall from memory and retell with reasonable accuracy. An Oral Bible is one which the possessors know as “oral tradition,” that is, a Bible known by stories, passages, proverbs and memory verses that have been heard and remembered and can be told to others. An Oral Bible exists only orally. It is not written down. It is not *The Oral Bible* as it is neither a fixed Bible nor a complete Bible as it depends upon how much is learned and how much is remembered. But to those who remember the words of the Bible it is to them just as much a Bible as written Bibles are to the literate. There can be limitations and problems with an Oral Bible as we will examine later.

Perhaps a better name might have been a “Memory Bible.” But the term “Oral Bible” was used early in the development of the present day Chronological Bible Storying methodology and experience and it has become popularized in use. Not everyone is in agreement about what an Oral Bible consists of, nor do they agree on how an Oral Bible should be acquired, or even if it is truly “Bible.” Anyone who has read or heard portions of the Bible and remembered them has in effect an Oral Bible. Any circumstances in which there is no printed Bible, or a Bible cannot be read or heard in recorded form, forces us to resort to the Oral Bible in our memory to recall the words. The Oral Bible of a group is always greater than that of any one member of the group. This is a significant factor for giving an Oral Bible to a people group as members of the group all contribute to the group’s Oral Bible.

Paul Hiebert comments: “Although print is excellent for storing knowledge, it is not the only means...nonliterate societies have a great deal of knowledge and store it in

other ways. They use stories, poems, songs, proverbs, riddles and other forms of oral tradition that are easily remembered.”<sup>i</sup>

To go back in time to the Bible days it is apparent that what we know today as biblical history from even the earliest days of the patriarchs was handed down from generation to generation as oral stories. Even those who were not among the Israelites, like Rahab in Jericho, had heard the stories recounted of what God did during the Exodus. “We have *heard* how the LORD...When we *heard* it, our hearts sank and everyone’s courage failed...” Joshua 2:10, 11 NIV, *italics mine*) Beginning with the giving of the Commandments and laws the Israelites had much to remember. God did instruct the people to write the commandments on the doorframes and gates of their homes, but he preceded this with the instruction that the commandments were also to be upon their hearts. (Deuteronomy 6:6, 9)

The consequences of forgetting these oral commandments of God and the history of God’s providence were pointed out in the Book of Judges:

“...another generation grew up, who neither knew the LORD nor what he had done for Israel...They forsook the LORD...They followed and worshiped various gods of the people around them. They provoked the LORD to anger because they forsook him...” (Judges 2:10, 12 NIV)

Later the psalmist began his oral recitation of Israel’s history with these words: “...listen to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in parables...things we have heard and known, things our fathers have told us...we will tell the next generation.” (Psalm 78:1, 2, 3, 4 NIV)

It is said that in Bible times those desiring to become rabbis must be able to recite the Torah seven times without error. Jesus had obviously learned the Old Testament scriptures and had them in his Oral Bible for he quoted God's words in Deuteronomy when tested by Satan and from Moses and the Prophets when he explained on the road to Emmaus why the Messiah first had to suffer and then enter into his glory.

In the video of the survival of the Church in Mainland China an elderly pastor who survived the persecution lamented that he had not learned more Scripture before the Red Guards came to take away the Bibles to destroy them.<sup>ii</sup> There are still places in the world today where it is not popular or permitted to have a Bible (the book) in one's possession. Among the *Kui* lay leaders of the Khond Hills in India, former missionary Calvin Fox instructed the men to leave their Bibles at home and to take the stories and other passages in their hearts as they went to teach agriculture. Radical reconversionists would have zeroed in on their visible Bibles but could not see their Oral Bibles.

My use of the Oral Bible term came about innocently as I noticed that in South Asia where I was teaching the Bible stories and related Scripture passages the listeners were learning them and could recall them. In fact, many of the pastors and evangelists I was teaching in five day Bible Storying training were either nonliterate or possessed a very low literacy level of up to three or four years in rural schools. But during the week of training, after hearing the Bible stories told and repeated several times, the participants began to recite the stories and recall the memory verses. At the close of the training when they returned to their people, most of them took with them no notes but they did take a collection of Bible stories and related Scriptures in their memory. I mused that these nonliterate leaders were possessing an Oral Bible that was composed of

all the Bible stories and verses they had heard told and repeated many times that week. I fondly recall one nonliterate young lady who came without a Bible. All week she listened to the stories and scripture passages. During the night sessions when we had storytelling practicum she reproduced the stories almost verbatim as I had told them through my interpreter. At the end of the week as I blessed each one to send them off, the young lady said to me through my interpreter, "I am now going back to my village. I am going to tell my people all that I have heard this week." We had covered some sixty stories that week as well as a number of memory verses. She possessed an Oral Bible.

I shared this observation with my International Mission Board teaching colleague Jim Slack as we taught Chronological Bible Storying in West Africa and later here in the U.S. Jim picked up on this concept and formalized it into a list of guidelines which I have adapted slightly:

#### Giving the Target People an Oral Bible

##### *Realities:*

1. An Oral Bible becomes the permanent possession of an oral communicator and cannot be taken from him.
2. An Oral Bible is in the oral communicator's most compatible learning and communication format.
3. An Oral Bible is not an obvious possession and can be taken across delicate borders and into delicate places.
4. An Oral Bible will be culturally seen as a document similar to other documents that oral communicators possess and therefore more easily accepted as a cultural document within that culture.
5. An Oral Bible can be used at anytime and in anyplace.
6. Possessors of an Oral Bible can evangelize disciple, train leaders and plant churches anywhere and at anytime.
7. An Oral Bible possessed by a true oral communicator can be adapted and rearranged to fit the particular situation that the oral communicator faces.

##### *Guidelines for Giving the Oral Communicator an Oral Bible:*

1. Research adequately the story style of the target people and attempt to prepare each story in that style. Maintain the story style within each story.
2. Prepare each story as a "told story" and not a written story that is told.

3. Word choice is critical and the story should be a close replica of the biblical text. Do not take liberties and modernize the story.
4. The chronology ... should be carefully maintained.
5. Tell each story. Do not read the stories. Obviously, those who are in the early stages of language learning will read the stories until they can tell them.
6. Avoid the use of exposition (outlining, listing and commentary) during the stories.
7. Each dialog session following the story should regularly include a rehearsal of the story by the participants wanting to obtain an Oral Bible. Multiple telling of the same story in the same way enhances memory.
8. Each pre-story time should include a retelling of the previous session's story.
9. Participants should be encouraged to tell each story in chronological order to others as often as possible.
10. To gain maximum retention and accuracy in repetition, there is a minimum and optimum amount of time allowed between each story in the chronology. (*Too many stories too quickly can lead to story confusion and mixing, too long between stories allows fading to occur which affects story connections—JOT*)
11. The dialog session following the story is critical. It is important for a participant to understand the story and to work through his worldview because of the story.
12. Ultimate acceptance and retention of the Bible story depends upon the work of the Holy Spirit as He places the Bible story among the people as holy "literature" equal to or greater than any that exists among the people.
13. The story must be seen as appropriate for all ages and not just good stories to tell children. Telling the story to children is one avenue for the story to pass into and among the people, but the Bible story cannot be seen as a story only for children. Early on, attempts must be made to lodge the Bible story among the adults of the target population. <sup>iii</sup>

Beyond the issue of orality, why then is the concept of an Oral Bible important?

Access to Scripture is an existing need in much of the unevangelized world today. The lack of translated Bibles or even Scripture portions in every spoken language is as pressing as the major issue of orality. There are two issues behind the lack of translated Scriptures. One is the fact that Bible translators are working diligently to provide accurate translations to the major spoken languages. Whole Bible translation is a time consuming task often requiring many years to acquire the language accuracy needed for key terms. Even if a translator were available today for every spoken language it would still take years to provide complete Bibles. Among many of those who lack Scripture in their spoken language is the fact that their language is an unwritten language. It is only

spoken. So the language must first be reduced to writing before a written translation can be made. Then the speakers of that language must be taught literacy so they can read their own language. While this may appear to be a better long term solution, there are disturbing reasons against it. Many of the elderly will likely not be able to acquire the necessary literacy to read a book. Among many of these nonliterate peoples are those with declining or failed eyesight so reading is difficult to impossible, though listening to recorded Scripture is a possibility. Among many of the Muslim peoples women are seldom educated so remain nonliterate. It has been pointed out in some areas of East Africa that people groups are reverting to nonliteracy as a way of saving their culture by keeping the young people at home and reducing the influx of foreign ideas. Among some of the Muslims of West Africa nonliteracy is considered to be a virtue as it is believed their Prophet was himself nonliterate. Still it is a worthy long range goal to provide written translations for each language as a way of stabilizing the Bible content as the written account can be referred to as a base that those who are literate can read and share. But an Oral Bible is readily available to the generations now as the Bible stories are taught to evangelize, disciple and train emerging church leaders.

The Oral Bible reality grew out of the Bible stories and memory verses being taught in the process of evangelizing nonliterate people groups and in giving nonliterate leaders a basic theological training. The story track for evangelizing is generally a chronological track that progresses from Creation stories to the Ascension or beyond as needed. Following this initial track, as listeners respond to the invitation to believe on Jesus as their Savior, are the stories that model for them the New Testament Church in Acts. Without getting into all the options for discipling, there are many ways to connect

teaching from the Epistles to earlier stories as illustrations as well as simply teaching the Epistles passages as part of a narrated teaching. In an ideal Bible Storying strategy which teaches from Creation to the End Times it is conceivable that as many as 80-90 stories and passages might be learned. Among nonliterate leaders the pilot for *Tell the Generations* theological training model in Africa taught 135 Bible stories to seventeen nonliterate men who were tested on their successful recall of the stories as well as the ability to apply the stories to real life situations and needs.<sup>iv</sup>

How much Bible is really needed for an Oral Bible? The obvious answer is as much as the people can learn. But realistically it will be limited. Oral learners are very practical in what they remember. Since they cannot write and make notes, they tend to remember things that are practical as well as interesting and relational. Practical is what they see applying immediately to their lives and needs. Interesting and relational are those things which relate to their sex, culture, occupations, caste or position in life, and their social and interpersonal dealings. Generally stories are easier to remember and recall than factual lists and explanations that are organized according to a Western logic. Several related stories are easier to remember as each individual story leans upon the preceding story and the following story. Carryover of characters, themes and other threads link the stories and help to stabilize them.

At some point an equilibrium will be reached where fading of the earlier stories is balanced with learning of new stories. To keep the stories from fading requires exercising the previously learned stories by frequent retelling the stories to others among the people group, and refreshing the stories periodically by someone who has access to written Scripture. One way that many oral peoples remember things is to put them into

song format and sing them. This is happening among many oral peoples as they do put Bible stories and teachings into songs which they sing as they work in the fields. In Togo missionary Patsy Eitelman related an incident that happened to her as she was telling Bible stories. Her pastor had accompanied her but was preoccupied with writing as Patsy told the stories. Later when Patsy asked why he was doing some work while she told the stories the pastor explained that as Patsy was telling the stories he was writing songs that told the stories. He reminded Patsy that his people remembered things better when in song. One report said that seventy-five traditional style songs had been prepared and recorded to go along with Old Testament stories.<sup>v</sup>

One of the misconceptions is an Oral Bible must be a *verbatim* Oral Bible. Yet the Oral Bible that we literates possess is not a *verbatim* Oral Bible. Concern has been expressed about what might happen when a people have been given an Oral Bible and later there is a Bible translation in their language published and they are taught to read it when they are sufficiently literate. If there are differences, will they be confused or call into question which is the true Bible? This does not seem to be a problem as a general rule, though it could be a problem among those, particularly some Muslims, who have a *verbatim* memory practice, and who are already preconditioned to memorize their holy book. This possibility is being addressed by networking with Bible translation agencies to provide proper translation of at least the needed key Bible stories for a storying strategy until a more complete whole Bible translation can be done in due time. This should help to alleviate any problems with differences between the initial Oral Bible and a later written Bible.

In the chronological storying process the whole Bible is not communicated initially but as selected stories which form a story outline based on the Redemption Story, the emerging New Testament Church, and discipleship themes. The Bible Storying strategy deals with each teaching objective and the necessary scripture portions of the Bible to accomplish each objective. The initial objective is to evangelize a people, then plant a church, start believers on the road to discipling and maturity, and begin training leadership to continue the process of evangelism and maturing in Christ. In the typical Chronological Bible Storying strategy which does cover the entire Bible as a range, but not every story along the way, some 90-100 stories and passages might be covered. This varies somewhat due to worldview issues related to key Bible truths that must be dealt with along the way. But it will give a fairly comprehensive outline of the Bible while dealing with major themes of God's sovereignty, the broken relationship due to sin, the consequences of sin, the promise of God to restore the broken relationship through a Promised Descendant, the temporary covering of sin before the Promised Descendant came, the prophecies about the coming Promised Descendant as the Messiah, and the fulfillment and qualifications of Jesus as the Promised Descendant followed by his suffering, death, resurrection and return to the Father. The following stories from Acts for church planting, the framework of Paul and pastoral writers' witnessing and communication with new believers as they admonished and corrected in the Epistles, and finally the victory story in the End Times bring to closure an Oral Bible. Among some peoples their Oral Bible may have a strong genealogical theme as the listeners have an interest in the generations of Bible characters as well as their own genealogies. This, too, provides a thread to help maintain story accuracy and relationship.

Just as the Oral Bible is initiated orally, it must be refreshed and corrected orally. Frequent repetition of the Bible stories by the person storying in the course of the lessons, and the repetition of the stories by the listeners as part of the storying session all help to refresh listeners' Oral Bible. This repetition of stories by the storyer must be incorporated into the planning for each storying session and modeled often so that it becomes a natural part of each storying session. While it is tedious for the literate Westerner to repeat stories again and again, it is generally not onerous for those who are oral to hear them repeated. By asking the listeners to retell Bible stories, either as part of the pre-story dialog review, or in the beginning of the post-story dialog, opportunity is given for participation by the listeners both to tell the stories as well as to hear them repeated.

Now a word about preparing Bible stories for telling to oral learners. The Bible as a book is literature. As literature the text is presented accurately in all details, in good grammatical form as well as a form interesting to read and that does not appear overly redundant to the literate reader. This is good literature. But when this same text is given to the typical oral learner the presentation now becomes "oralized" as it is recreated as it is told. In becoming oralized many of the facts and details that are not understood and seen as important to the story quite often are eliminated in the retelling. Read the story of King Saul's unauthorized offering of a sacrifice in 1 Samuel 13 and think about how much of the numerical detail, proper names, geographical names, perhaps even the confusing use of both "Israel" and "Hebrews" to refer to Israel might be simplified by an oral learner in remembering the story and retelling. Before you object to this thought, think of how much of this detail that you would retain in your memory and be able to

recall in telling. There are other places where it is helpful to make slight changes when giving a Bible story to oral learners. The usual literate practice in quoting speakers is to begin the quote, then identify the speaker, then continue the quote. This is generally confusing to oral learners and usually does better as an unbroken quote following a clear statement of who is speaking to whom using proper names, even if this is clear to the literate when only pronouns are used. Here is an example of the antecedent problem: “Then, because so many people were coming and going that they (*the disciples*) did not even have a chance to eat, he (*Jesus*) said to them (*the disciples*)...So they (*the disciples*) went by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.” Mark 6:31, 32 NIV (*insertions of proper names mine*) Some of these issues may be resolved already in local translations. But if going from English through an interpreter it is most helpful to use proper names even if doing so seems overly redundant. How much factual detail to simplify can be quickly ascertained by telling a Bible story to an oral learner and asking the person to immediately retell it and see how much detail survives the retelling.

Giving an Oral Bible is usually a “shadow strategy” that follows evangelizing a people by telling the chronological list of Old Testament and Gospel stories that continue through the Acts church planting stories and then stories related to the Epistles for discipling and ending with End Times stories. In other words, the Oral Bible happens because of the storying strategy to evangelize. Another way in which Oral Bibles are intentionally given is to provide some Scripture, however limited, immediately to a people who presently do not have access to Scripture in their language nor literacy to read a Bible. Projects have been underway for several years to make this happen. This writer consulted on a project in Guatemala among the *Todo Santos Mam* people who

have an unwritten dialect of the Mayan *Mam* language family and who are largely nonliterate. The stories were selected beginning with an evangelism objective and put into simple Spanish for telling to local *Mam* speakers who then retold the stories in their *Mam* dialect which was recorded and reviewed by several *Mam* speakers and even back translated into Spanish for checking accuracy. A series of audiocassettes are made available to responsible persons who will play them for their people to learn the stories. This process will be repeated many times in future years to provide immediate Scripture until such time as Bible translations and literacy come to a people. The Bible stories of God and Jesus in the written Bible become *their* stories of *their* God and *their* Jesus to confess *their* faith, bring more among *their* people to saving faith, and to worship and praise the God and Savior whose stories they know and tell. There are risks in giving an Oral Bible. But the rewards are immense for those who learn the stories.

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<sup>i</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids; Baker Book House, 1985, p.32).

<sup>ii</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, “*Winter Is Past*” (International Mission Board video).

<sup>iii</sup> [http://chronologicalbiblestorying.com/resources/cbs\\_resources\\_part\\_3.htm#giving%20an%20oral%20bible](http://chronologicalbiblestorying.com/resources/cbs_resources_part_3.htm#giving%20an%20oral%20bible)

<sup>iv</sup> Grant Lovejoy, “*Report on Tell the Generations Leader Training Program*” (International Mission Board, unpublished preliminary report).

<sup>v</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *The Commission* (International Mission Board, April, 1995).