

THE BIBLE AND ORALITY

There are thousands of languages without a written translation of the Bible. A completed translation in these languages either won't begin or be completed for many decades. There are few, if any, known churches or Christians in these unreached people groups. Many of these languages don't even have a written alphabet. When a written Bible translation does become available most of the people can't or won't read them because they are oral learners. The issue is much deeper than non-readers being unable or unwilling to read; they process information so differently. Oral learners are as intelligent as readers and generally have better memories because they don't rely on paper and pen to remember things. Self test your own level of orality:

Name the objects below:



Readers usually name them as a circle, square and triangle: all abstract conceptual ideas. Oral learners name these shapes by what they resemble: a plate, box or piece of pie. They are more comfortable with tangible ideas.

Another example is found in the following objects. Which object doesn't belong?



An oral learner won't include the hammer as part of the grouping because he doesn't have a "tools" category in his thinking. Although a saw and hatchet will "work" the logs, a hammer won't. You should be catching on by now.

Let's try one more: Which object doesn't belong?



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That's right—the cup! An oral learner immediately realizes that the cup doesn't have anything to do with eating an orange. Even in cultures considered to have high levels of literacy, major population segments continue to operate in a predominantly oral framework. Oral learners use proverbs, parables, history, songs, genealogies, dance and other narrative forms to communicate their most important information. Oral learners do not look to the written word for learning, nor do they respond well to formal education. Instead, their life lessons are learned, and their worldviews are shaped by observation, participation and verbal communication of culturally relevant stories. Oral learners simply do not look to the written word for learning and they cannot be reached with the gospel using expository preaching, written or audible Scripture, and evangelistic tracts. Instead, their life lessons are learned-- and their worldviews shaped-- by observation, participation and verbal communication of culturally relevant stories.

What's in a worldview?

Since oral learners generally don't possess a biblical worldview, a single presentation of the gospel will often be very unconvincing. However, chronological Bible stories, selected and told with respect for the worldview of the oral learner, greatly increases understanding. In essence, these Bible stories build bridges and overcome barriers to a biblical worldview. In time, the Holy Spirit will lead many oral learners to accept the more compelling stories of the Bible over the stories associated with their non-biblical worldview. Eventually, many oral learners accept the saving grace offered by Jesus Christ, the greatest storyteller of all. For many oral learners, the only Bible they will ever have and use effectively will be the one in their mind and heart. This will enable them to meditate on God's Word during personal time with Him, and even take part in devotionals, evangelism, church planting and leadership development. Stories stored in the heart can go where the written Bible can't go. They can cross borders, enter prisons and even homes staunchly resistant to the presence of the written Bible. They become the permanent possession of an oral learner, available for use at all times. Out of necessity, oral learners have much better memories than literates. They can't save their information on paper or computer hard drives. But they can retain, recall and repeat Bible stories with amazing skill. We call this internalization because the Word of God is in them. Some oral learners who hear these Bible stories will become followers of Jesus, and they will share their stories with others who will believe. This begins the multiplication process that will eventually result in a church planting movement.

The initial Bible stories that go into an Oral Bible are systematically selected, translated, and to the local people in their local language and natural storytelling style. The stories are checked for comprehension among the people, recorded and archived to produce an Oral Bible for that people group. As oral Bible stories begin to be retold through a people group, God's Word will exist in a form that can cross borders long closed to the gospel. When oral learners come to faith in Christ through an oral means they are much more likely to want to learn to read. Thus, the potential is there for accelerating written translations and literacy programs so they can finally read God's word in their local language.

What is the Biblical Basis for Using Stories?

Most historians and theologians believe that long before Moses wrote down the first five books of the Bible, the stories were oral. From Creation to Moses, there were at least 2,500 years in which the people verbally passed along the Bible stories we now read in Genesis. Enoch received the spoken Word, and thereafter, walked with God until he was no more because God took him away to be with Him in heaven. When Abraham received the spoken Word, God credited him with righteousness. Likewise, when Isaac,

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Jacob and Joseph received the spoken Word by faith, God found them blameless. Even when Moses preserved the spoken Word in written form, he emphasized the value of hearing the stories of God: “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deuteronomy 6:6, also chapters 31 and 32). Note how Jesus spoke to the crowds, “Jesus used stories when he spoke to the people. In fact, he did not tell them anything without using stories.” (Matthew 13:34 CEV). Jesus used stories because most of his audience was comprised of oral learners. Peter and John were probably oral learners: “When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled (agrammatōi in Greek, meaning “illiterate” or “unschooled”) and ordinary men, they were astonished and took note that these men had been with Jesus.” (Acts 4:13). And so it was that “the word of God spread and the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly.” (Acts 6:7). Church historians tell us that in the 40 years after Pentecost but before the New Testament was written, a church existed in almost every major city of the Roman Empire! It seems that we inadvertently depart from our spiritual roots when we stop telling Bible stories as a way to spread the gospel.

What is an Oral Bible?

When we consider all these facts regarding orality, it makes sense to begin to spread the gospel to these people now by word of mouth in the same way in which the early church was so successful. However, we face an obstacle the early church didn't have. Unlike the early church, very few Christians, if any, speak the languages that are without written Scripture. Bypassing written Scripture translations to begin dissemination of oral Bible stories in those languages will require Oral Bibles for each language. These Oral Bibles will be created by the systematic oral translation and audio recording of carefully selected chronological Bible stories as told by indigenous storytellers from each language group. These storytellers will simply retell in their local language the Bible stories they have been taught. The Oral Bible will serve as a benchmark for preserving the accuracy of the stories until a written translation is completed. Be sure to read the companion article titled, “The Bible and Literacy.” Until then, the Oral Bible will be the primary tool used to train other Bible storytellers.

The introductory story set is comprised of three parts, each containing a series of stories:

- The Old Testament—including creation, the nature of God, His love for human beings, the need for reconciliation with God, and how He deals with His people in preparing the way for the coming Savior.
- The Gospels—including the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and main events from His life and teachings.
- Acts—with insights from the Epistles, including examples of people coming to saving faith in Jesus Christ, the growth of the church, and the promise of Christ's return.

National church planting teams will be trained and supported in crafting and using an Oral Bible for planting churches. The Oral Bible will have an initial set of about 50 stories with an evangelistic theme. More stories will be added later that teach discipleship and leadership as a way of equipping and training pastors and leaders to plant churches. People will internalize the stories by listening to Bible storyteller and/or their own Oral Bible. They will be taught to use pre and post story discovery questions to focus on the biblical principles to be learned from the story.

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Most Oral Bibles will have some of the same general stories. However, each Oral Bible will have special Bible stories to customize the set to the particular worldview of a people group. That way, each story set will guarantee maximum understanding by breaking barriers and building bridges to a biblical worldview. It's important not only to tell the Bible stories correctly but also to tell the stories that best speak to the hearts of people in a given culture. For example, if a culture has a weak understanding of sexual sin, special attention is needed to craft story sets that highlight that issue. In that circumstance, it may be very helpful to include the story of David, Bathsheba and Nathan the prophet. Of course, that story can also be used to teach many other biblical principles such as repentance and that sin has consequences.

The following sample set of Bible stories will be included in most Oral Bibles:

- Satan's Rebellion
- Creation
- First Sin and the Judgment
- Noah and the Flood
- Promise to Abraham
- Tests of Abraham
- Passover
- Ten Commandments
- Promise to David
- Elijah and the Prophets of Baal
- The Promise of Jesus
- The Birth of Jesus
- Early Life of Jesus
- Jesus Heals the Sick
- Jesus Calms the Storm
- Jesus Has Power Over the Demons
- Jesus Raises the Dead
- Lazarus and the Rich Man
- The Passion of Christ
- Resurrection Appearances of Jesus
- Pentecost
- The Ethiopian Eunuch
- Saul's Conversion
- Paul in Prison and in Thessalonica
- The Second Coming of Jesus