
Chronological storytelling - a case history¹

Translating a Story-tellers' Bible for storytelling

By CeliaB

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About five years ago we began working with a local partnership, made up of individuals from a number of agencies with a heart to reach our target group with the message of God's Word. As the partnership began to grow and to assess ways in which we could reach our target audience, a Chronological Storying workshop was organized to evaluate this methodology as a viable means of reaching into this isolated community.

During the workshop we learned the basic principles involved in the strategy; looked at the people group's worldview to identify barriers to the gospel and bridges that might be used; examined the standard "core story" set, and added further stories that we felt necessary to cross the bridges and climb the barriers. Finally we practiced telling one of the chosen stories to each other in the language of the people we wanted to reach.

Our partners, from several different agencies and nationalities, were excited at this new approach and were ready to begin the task.

However, there was one great weakness in the strategy—as yet there was no Scripture in the target language and little awareness among our partners of the translation principles or key terms that were needed to translate the stories into the local language. Also, despite knowing that this was an oral society, we had no access into the community and little knowledge of how to tell a story appropriately.

We were concerned to help our partners embark on their storytelling strategy as soon as possible, yet we needed to ensure that their telling was undergirded by adequate preparation and authoritative Scripture translation.

After the seminar team had left, we gathered as a partnership group to assess the situation and decide on our next move. The partnership team looked to us to prepare the stories for them to learn and so we were able to help them understand the significance of the task that we had embarked on. At the same time we needed to give them something they could do immediately to keep their enthusiasm and also prevent them from just going out and doing their best (or their worst!) with whatever language skills they had.

¹ This article is a revision of: CeliaB, 2003. 'Chronological Storying – A Case History.' *Scripture in Use Today* 6:2-7.

This was our strategy:

- We set up a second workshop to reassess the Old Testament (OT) story set that we had identified for the evangelism track, and also to choose OT stories that would be needed for other tracks (discipleship, church planting, persecution, character building, end times) that would come into play further along the line.
- We agreed to translate the selected passages and produce a Story-tellers Bible, which could be used as a source for Chronological Storying.
- At the same time we encouraged our friends in the partnership to begin studying the stories chosen in their own mother tongue, and from national language cassettes, so they could go out and practice in the local area (though not in the target language).
- During the year we ran other seminars to introduce the importance of using appropriate key terms as well as keeping our partners informed of progress in the translation process.

As we had no direct access to the people group, we chose to first do a translation in the national colloquial dialect (also an oral language) so that we could work out the exegetical and key terms issues before doing a CARLA [Computer-Assisted Related Languages Adaptation—a translation software for use with related languages] draft into the target language. The CARLA draft then went to a mother-tongue translator through an intermediary, who cleaned it up and sent back a much improved version in the target language.

A year or so later we had Scripture portions concerning Adam and Noah translated, consultant-checked, and ready for our partners to use.

At this point we met some confusion. The team had been expecting us to write the stories so that they could memorize and tell them. We had, in fact, given them an underlying translation from which to craft their stories and no one was sure how to do that!

We ourselves were driven to reassess our strategy and look at the reasons for translating straight Scripture passages. Why not just translate in story form and save our partners the job of crafting their own stories?

Here are some answers we came up with:

- Stories need to be individually crafted according to the social context in which they are told, whether to educated or non-readers, parents or children, men or women.
- Stories may be told in full in a group study session or be condensed to fit a short five-minute opportunity with a casual acquaintance at a coffee shop.
- Stories may be reworked to emphasize different theological principles. For example, the Noah story may be told to highlight God's judgment against sin, or salvation, or God's promise.

- Perhaps most important of all, the storyteller needs to craft the story according to his own personality, so that it comes from his heart as a spontaneous expression of his faith in God, not as a formalized text.
- The underlying text serves as a check on accuracy and a reference to the use of correct phraseology and key terms. It may also serve as a resource for other media of expression such as cassette recordings or radio broadcasts. If the same text is used as a resource for storying, then this should ensure consistency in the use of appropriate terminology.

This development led us to prepare further training materials to help our partners use what we called the Story-tellers Bible in order to craft and tell their own stories.

The whole process has taken three years so far, though perhaps two-thirds of the Old Testament set is now ready for consultant-checking. We expect the OT set to be available within the next year and are planning a New Testament workshop to identify the NT stories needed to complete the Story-tellers Bible, which is prepared with the following characteristics:

- Includes all the stories needed for all the chronological storying tracks (as chosen by the partnership group)
- Avoids ecclesiastical terminology
- Respects the sensitivities of the majority religion
- Contains no extra-biblical material (e.g. dramatization or explanation)
- Gives the big picture of OT history and chronology
- Links genealogy from Adam to Christ
- Fully consultant-checked to give an authoritative translation of Scripture...
- ...but *not* intended for distribution in written form
- Presented in short memorizable passages
- Linked by optional recapitulation paragraphs to the stories that have gone before.
- Is a translation and not the told stories themselves
- Is the accurate Scripture source from which the actual told stories can be crafted
- Is in spoken language at a level that is acceptable for a Holy Book but still understandable to the majority

From a Bible translation point of view, the Story-tellers Bible is a mini-Bible, which can easily be filled in as the church grows and demands a more complete translation. From our partners' point of view, it gives them the means to use their chosen strategy of chronological storying

with reliability, accuracy, and greater impact than would have been the case had we not been willing to serve them.

Chronological Storying is not an easy option; it is a long term strategy and takes commitment and hard work from all concerned. Moreover, it needs to be underpinned by a solid, reliable translation in the target language.

Although it was not our original intention to produce a translation in this format, we feel that the strategy has been more than worthwhile for all concerned and believe that this is a tool that others may be able to use.

2009 update

The whole project has evolved since we began in the late nineties. In fact the original CARLA translation became a translation in its own right and we already have testimony to the power of the story being used on radio and in an interactive web broadcast - something we could never have dreamed of! The target translation has taken much longer than we had hoped because of the difficulty in access, but just recently we have been able to test record the Adam story and hope now to work with someone who will be able to take the series to completion.