

# Chronological Bible Storying

By Christel Eric

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*Chronological Bible storying is making God's Word available to Muslim women in exciting, life-changing ways. Christel Eric introduces this method, explaining how and why it is being used so effectively. She also shares her own experiences and gives practical insights into the best ways to use this evangelism and church-planting approach.*

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Medina missed the lesson. On my way home, I visited her small but neatly kept hut. Her husband was there, and I surmised that he was the reason she did not attend. I could see she was burdened. She told me her sister had been sick for a long time, and people were saying she was cursed. Medina asked: "Can a curse make you so sick that you finally die?"

"Yes," I said. "There are curses with great effect, but not every one who is sick has been cursed."

"Why do we get sick all the time?" Medina asked. "Life would be so much easier without all this sickness."

"You are right," I replied. "When God created us, He made us perfect and healthy. But then man disobeyed God. Since that time we get sick—and eventually we die."

Medina interrupted me to tell the story from Genesis 1-3 to her husband. She told it just as she had heard it in the storytelling session some weeks earlier. Suddenly she stopped and asked, "Didn't God promise to send a Savior to redeem us from the consequences and curse of sin? How can I be freed, forgiven and protected from any curse people might put on me?"

As I repeated the stories of Jesus, she was very attentive. Then her eyes changed from sparkling hope to doom. Outside, night was falling; I had to go. Medina accompanied me to the fence. "I know this is the truth," she said thoughtfully. "I want to follow Jesus. I need Him to protect my children and me! But what about my husband? I'm scared."

I knew she had reason to be frightened. My heart was heavy. How can a woman like Medina ever fully accept the gospel and follow Christ?

Early one Saturday morning, two Muslim girls from my Bible study group appeared at my doorstep. Before they even entered the house, one burst out with her question. "Is it true that the Quran and your Bible both tell us that Jesus is in heaven right now?"

Surprised, I nodded. She continued, "In our last session you told us that Jesus is busy preparing a place for us in heaven and is coming back to take us with Him to be with God. When I got home I remembered that Muhammad is still in his grave in Medina, which many Muslims visit every year!" She stopped, not knowing how to continue.

I tried to help her. "Does this bother you? Is that why you came here today?"

Looking past me in deep thought, she continued, "Yes, I asked myself shouldn't we follow the One who is alive, sitting next to God, coming to judge the world, rather than follow a dead prophet, who still waits for his own judgment to come?"

As she continued, my heart nearly missed a beat. "Please help us. We want to follow the living One so that tonight, if we die, we will know we are going to heaven because we have been forgiven."

How were these ladies able to understand and apply scriptural truths in ways that so profoundly impacted their worldview, their religious view, indeed their very lives? These ladies and thousands more throughout Africa are hearing Scripture through chronological Bible storytelling or chronological Bible storying (CBS).

The Bible is God's story to us and is best presented as a story rather than as a collection of teachings. It is a story with a beginning and an end, and should be told in sequence. Chronological Bible storying communicates biblical truths in this way. The Bible stories are narrated in the order they happened. CBS is not primarily for children—it is for adult men and women.

Because the story form is the vehicle by which oral cultures collect, retain, and pass on information, CBS has been especially effective among oral communicators. CBS enables them to learn and gather information in the easiest and most memorable ways. They can become wonderful Bible teachers as they tell the stories to others.

Because CBS starts at the very beginning of the Bible and takes the student step by step in historical progression through the whole story of God’s interaction with man, it is especially effective in communicating the good news to Unreached People Groups. These are groups of people who have never heard the truth and do not understand who God is or what He has done.

The Old Testament stories lay a firm foundation revealing who God is, who man is, and how God desires to relate to man. The stories lead the listener from the wonder of creation, the tragedy of sin, and the fall of man through the history of God’s people and the prophecies and pictures of the promised Messiah. They prepare the listeners to understand the New Testament stories that reveal the climax of God’s redemptive plan. God used thousands of years to prepare mankind for the coming for Christ. We often try to lead someone to entrust their lives to Christ during one single conversation or Bible study. Then we wonder how they could reject the good news of God’s love. CBS does not immediately challenge Muslim beliefs or involve them in debates or apologetics. Instead, it allows God’s Word and God’s Spirit to speak truth into their lives. It enables them to understand and respond to God.

As people hear the stories that make up *The Story*, they identify and become part of them. The stories enable them to understand what God has done, as well as touch their hearts and open their spirits to the work of God’s Spirit. An effective evangelistic set of CBS stories is designed not only to communicate the basic story of God’s redemptive activity, it also allows listeners to interact with Bible stories in ways that challenge and transform their worldviews and religious views.

In order to choose the stories that will best enable a particular people group to understand and be transformed by the gospel, the worker must study the worldview of that people group. The goal of this study is to identify the barriers that presently keep them from faith as well as the bridges that God has provided in their culture to help them hear and understand the gospel. After these barriers and bridges have been identified, the worker chooses stories that confront and remove the barriers and/or affirm and strengthen the bridges. These stories are added to the basic evangelistic set.

The chart below compares some Muslim religious beliefs with biblical truths. Understanding these differences can guide the choice of Bible stories.

<b>Religious View of Muslims</b>	<b>Christian Doctrines Essential for Salvation</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. God is too great to be approached or known by men. He does not act in history, except to set the dates of one’s birth and death.</li> <li>2. God is too great to be bound by His Word or by moral absolutes. He can abrogate and substitute His own word.</li> <li>3. Holiness is not a moral attribute of God; therefore, sin does not have serious consequences.</li> <li>4. Sin can be partially atoned for by works—observing the five pillars, additional fasting, memorizing the Quran, repeating the names of God.</li> <li>5. No Atonement by another person is necessary or possible. Each person will endure his own punishment on Judgment Day; there is no assurance of forgiveness.</li> <li>6. Jesus did not die on the cross. God removed Him beforehand and substituted someone else there.</li> <li>7. Jesus is just a prophet, not the Son of God. God cannot have a son.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. God acts in history and communicates with man.</li> <li>2. God is all powerful, but still faithful to His Word.</li> <li>3. God is holy and hates sin. He punishes sin by death.</li> <li>4. Man is a sinner and is separated from God.</li> <li>5. God loves man and wants fellowship with him.</li> <li>6. Man is answerable to God.</li> <li>7. Man can do nothing to save himself.</li> </ol>

<p>8. Muhammad is the last and greatest of the prophets. He is the seal of all prophets. He has universal status.</p> <p>9. The Quran abrogates and supersedes the Bible as the last and final testament.</p> <p>10. The Bible has been corrupted by men and the original text is lost.</p>	<p>8. Jesus is the Son of God, the promised Messiah, who gave His life on the cross as a ransom for the sins of mankind.</p> <p>9. Man can approach God but can only have true fellowship with Him through the perfect Sacrifice. Fellowship requires faith and obedience to God.</p> <p>10. The Bible can be trusted—the main proof is in fulfillment of prophecies and the transformed lives of believers.</p>
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The Islamic religion does not emphasize chronology except for the fact that Muhammad is the last prophet. Stories in the Quran are recorded in fragmented form in different *surah* (chapters) without reference to their setting in history. Islamic teaching jumps from one topic to another without encouraging the student to dig deeper or look for the truth in a logical way. The chronological approach of the Bible challenges the Muslim mindset. The Word recounts God’s activity and character as demonstrated across thousands of years of history. It repeatedly illustrates through the lives of the men and women of the Bible how God wants to relate to mankind.

CBS is not just another rote learning process. During storying sessions, the storyteller asks questions carefully chosen to help listeners discover for themselves the truths in each story. CBS emphasizes the characteristics of God exhibited in each story. Then listeners can compare the biblical picture of God with the Islamic picture. Hearing and discussing these biblical truths over time enables listeners, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to examine and evaluate their beliefs and to change their views of God, themselves, and their world.

CBS not only answers the standard objections of Muslims, it takes the initiative to share the good news. It gives the worker a plan to follow that helps stay on target instead of being sidetracked by irrelevant questions. The questions help the listeners understand and apply biblical truths in their daily lives.

The story sessions provide a context for building and developing relationships between the storyteller and the listeners. Women like to identify with other women—with their happenings, sorrows, pains, and joys. This is one of the main reasons women are drawn to storytelling groups. As women listen to Bible stories and discuss them with their friends, their worldviews and religious views can be transformed. Each story touches some aspect of their worldview barriers or bridges while communicating a new biblical truth. When the confrontational aspects of the life of Jesus are introduced, their established relationship with the leader and with each other helps women continue to listen to the stories and to process the new truths. This extended learning time is a key factor in helping women grow in their understanding and commitment.

The CBS evangelism story track emphasizes two important biblical truths about salvation: First, sin can only be forgiven by offering the blood of an unblemished sacrificial lamb. Second, throughout the Old Testament God promised to send a special person who would save His people and establish His kingdom. These two truths are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who is both the perfect Sacrifice and the promised Savior. CBS permits Muslim women to understand the necessity of Christ’s incarnation, His divinity, and His atoning death.

Chronological Bible storytelling attracts listeners and keeps their attention. It can be effectively used with groups in conjunction with educational programs like sewing, agricultural or occupational training, community health, literacy, or English-as-a-Second Language classes. It also can be used with students or teachers in school settings. People participating in such projects or classes already have a common interest or purpose and regularly meet. Sharing stories with such a naturally occurring group enables them to hear the same stories at the same time, to talk about them, to ask questions, and to grow in their understanding together. This community-integrated approach can encourage an entire group to make a decision for Christ together as well as to help prevent the

ostracism or persecution of individuals as they become believers. CBS also can be used in sharing with one person, a family, or a small group of neighbors. Instead of just making small talk week after week, a worker can offer to tell stories at social gatherings.

### **Personal involvement**

Urbanization in East Africa typically clusters people on the outskirts of big cities, forcing them to live in very congested, impoverished slum areas. In one such area, Christians started a literacy class. Soon, they were overwhelmed by the number of Muslim women attending and asked me for help. I had just learned about the CBS method and saw this as a great opportunity to try it out.

We chose not to include the storytelling program as part of the official literacy program, but to meet separately on Saturday afternoons at a neutral place (a school) for an extra Bible lesson. We did not want to give the local Muslim leaders grounds to accuse us of deceptively sharing the gospel under the pretence of teaching literacy.

At that time the only CBS material I was aware of was the manual *God and Man* by Dell and Rachel Schultze (Schultze 1991). I generally followed it, but made modifications I felt would meet the needs of the Muslim women involved in the program. For example, I rewrote the lessons from Genesis 2-4 and the story of the offering of Isaac. I also added the story of Hagar and Ishmael. I emphasized the prophecies of Jesus in the Old Testament by making a picture chart. As we went through the New Testament stories, I used the chart to emphasize the exact fulfillment of the different Old Testament messianic prophecies. The Quran has no such fulfilled prophecies, and I found that this evidence of God's inspiration of the Word helped listeners trust the Bible.

In the beginning, approximately 25-30 ladies participated in the CBS sessions every Saturday. However, when the community leader responsible for bringing these ladies together died, the numbers dropped rapidly. After spending a whole year telling the stories, only one person accepted Christ. I was disappointed to say the least! When I asked the younger girls (who spoke English) why they did not respond positively to the stories, they said: "These stories are all so new for us. We had never heard them in this way. Please tell them again. We need more time!"

So the next round of story sessions began. This time I used J.O. Terry's story set *God and Woman* (Terry 1998). At the end, I included some stories from the book of Acts to illustrate how people responded to the gospel, how persecution began, and the price some had to pay to follow Christ. Two ladies made a commitment at the end of this set of classes, which lasted more than a year.

In the meantime the ladies requested that we start a sewing project. They reasoned that if they wanted to follow this teaching, they would have to earn money the "right way." Many of the women were widows or divorcees who were involved in prostitution. Others were involved in drug trafficking. The opportunity to learn a skill was a natural incentive through which a growing number of unbelievers could be exposed to the gospel through CBS.

In the third year of CBS, I included the Daniel story, which made a real impression. I also showed Old Testament films from time to time so that the women could picture the lives of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and the other patriarchs. I ended the CBS classes by showing Campus Crusade's *JESUS* film in the women's own language. What bustling excitement filled my lounge that day as 25 Muslim women watched the crucifixion. Some were crying. Some were sneezing. Some were laughing.

Instead of inviting the ladies to publicly respond to the film, I asked them to write me a note. If they couldn't write, I told them to ask a friend or neighbor to help them. A few days later, Medina came to me with her letter, determined to follow Christ whatever the cost. After her decision, she became very instrumental in encouraging others to believe. When I showed the *JESUS* film another time, the breakthrough came. Four ladies accepted Christ; slowly, others followed.

It was a long process and a challenging one. Fear of husbands and families kept some women from committing themselves even after they knew and accepted the truth of the stories. During this time, two things helped me not to give up: 1) I was following a plan I knew had worked in other places; 2) I had local co-workers who faithfully helped and encouraged me and shared feedback from the participants among whom they lived.

Through this experience I learned many things.

- It is best for CBS classes to meet in neutral places like schools rather than in church buildings.
- The approval and support of a person of influence is very helpful—perhaps vital.

- It is best to keep the format as a class or storytelling time rather than structure the time like a church service. Many Muslim women are shy about singing Christian songs in the beginning. However, teenagers are more open, and you may be able to introduce culturally based praise music earlier in a group of young people.
- Each group has a different concentration span. Some like short stories, others like to listen to two stories at a time. The storyteller must be sensitive to the group.
- As is abundantly clear from my experience, one round of CBS stories might not be enough to enable solid decisions and changed lives.
- Don't lead a group alone—involve a co-worker from the beginning. She will not only provide encouragement and support, she will learn from you and eventually be ready to start her own group.
- It is helpful for national co-workers to visit members of the CBS group in between sessions. This enables you to know what they think about the stories and helps you adapt the sessions to meet their needs and correct any misunderstandings.

### **Multiplication of this group**

When she moved to another area, the first believer in our group started her own storytelling group with the help of one of my co-workers. I have never been there. They have done it all by themselves. These same two women founded a school with more than 100 students—85 percent of whom are Muslim. Three times a week they are telling a set of stories specifically adapted for children in the school. The parents of some of the students are participating in an afternoon adult literacy class. They use a collection of Bible stories titled *Sharing the Message* by LaNette Thompson (Thompson 2003). Other ladies have begun storying groups in their neighborhoods for women who do not participate in the literacy or sewing projects. We provide these groups with tapes of the stories and picture books as well as encouragement and prayer support.

After we had three believers, we began an extra discipleship class for them using a storying set specifically developed for that purpose.

God has used our storying session as a model and encouragement for others. From time to time, different missionaries have observed the CBS sessions before starting a group of their own. One lady combined storying with a quilting class she held with educated Asian women. Others have included CBS lessons in a sports program for Somali refugee girls and women, and in women's sewing classes.

### **Our challenges**

Irregularity of attendance is the biggest problem we encounter in the neighborhood storytelling sessions. Muslim women do not usually attend the mosque on a regular basis but are encouraged to pray at home. A storytelling program with many regular sessions is a challenge for a number of them. Weddings, funerals, sicknesses, and community celebrations also result in frequent interruptions. Another distraction for the women is the presence of children or too many outsiders. We find it best to have separate classes for children when possible and also to limit the number and frequency of outside guests/observers.

People are much more eager to participate in the sessions and more consistent in their attendance when the storytelling sessions are held in conjunction with some kind of project. The incentive of secular learning or training in a valued skill helps sustain interest.

When Muslim women become believers, most do not see the need to attend church. Many prefer to meet with their teachers for individual Bible study or discipleship training. Teaching that believers need to meet together regularly to strengthen and encourage one another should be a priority in the discipleship-storying track.

Another challenge is deciding what to do at the end of a cycle of stories. The group could easily dissolve itself after some have become Christians and the rest decline to do so. In that case, it would be best for the believers to continue as a discipleship group. However, people are usually involved in projects for a few years, so, it may not be easy to just dissolve a group. In such cases the challenge is teaching a mixed group of believers and nonbelievers whose needs are different.

It is important to adapt your teaching style to the needs of the group. In urban settings, especially among teenagers and young adults, you may need to be innovative. We found it helpful to integrate drama, pictures, films, and object lessons to make the stories more interesting and memorable. The use of indigenous music, which captures the major message of each story, also has been effective in a variety of cultural settings.

Whatever methods and teaching resources you use, the most important thing is to enjoy sharing God's Word through stories. Become a good storyteller and demonstrate your trust, joy, hope, and faith in His stories. Let your own convictions be contagious.

Love always finds a way!

## References

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