

“An excellent resource for anyone teaching or preaching the Bible. While written for teachers of children, the Waltons provide clear and accurate exegetical understanding of the major stories of the Bible that will strengthen any teacher or preacher.”

Craig Williford, President, Trinity International University

“For too long, Christians have been taught Bible stories as stand-alone episodes that provide moral instruction and encouragement based on imitating human characters in the stories. John and Kim Walton provide welcome correction! The opening chapters show us the *real* reason for teaching Bible stories—the revelation of God himself—and the big picture of the Bible, into which all the individual stories must fit. Not only teachers of children but anyone who uses Bible stories to teach others should examine his or her use of narrative passages by the guidelines in this book.”

Starr Meade, Christian school and home school teacher; author,
Mighty Acts of God and *The Most Important Thing You'll Ever Study*

“Wow! What a resource! The Waltons provide us with an invaluable tool for the person who teaches the Bible to anyone of any age in any context. The Waltons focus on the biblical story, keeping it God's story, making God the hero of every story, just as the original writers intended. This work is a gift to Sunday school teachers, curriculum writers, and parents who want informed, rich perspectives on the stories within the biblical metanarrative. The Introduction alone provides a vital background for reading the Scriptures. For a scholar like John, with his expertise in Old Testament studies, and someone with the experience of Kim to corroborate on a work of this magnitude is a timeless gift for the teaching ministries of the church of Jesus Christ.”

Scottie May, Associate Professor of Christian Formation and Ministry,
Wheaton College; co-author, *Children Matter*

“Ted Ward once asserted that ‘Christian education is neither.’ For generations, the church has outsourced responsibility for Bible learning and faith development to curriculum publishers. However, responsible publishers have never presumed that their material can be much more than introduction to the Bible. If Christian education is impoverished, the church, not the publisher, is responsible. This book looks like a curriculum. It is not. It is a description of a method, with abundant examples, that may assist congregations to become ‘hermeneutical communities’ exercising responsible use of Scripture as they design learning experiences for the people of God.”

Linda Cannell, Academic Dean, North Park Theological Seminary

“Few Bible specialists discuss the idea of teaching children biblical content. Even more unusual is a world-class scholar giving detailed attention to what and how children should be taught from Scripture. John Walton, with assistance from Kim Walton, does this and more. They examine 175 specific Bible stories, offering focus, application, context and background, interpretation guidelines, and mistakes to avoid in teaching youngsters. This is a monumental work, well worth the attention of every educator—including parents—who wants to teach the Bible to children. A serious Bible expositor and editor of a five-volume commentary on the Old Testament takes up the task of guiding those who teach children scriptural content. John and Kim Walton provide invaluable insight, guidelines, and cautions to educators (and that includes parents) who teach children biblical content. Every church—and every teacher of children—should have a copy and make reading it a top priority.”

Don Ratcliff, Professor of Christian Education, Wheaton College;
author, *ChildFaith: Experiencing God and Spiritual Growth
with Your Children*

“In an effort to make the Bible relevant to children, too often curriculum writers and parents have focused on the wrong issue, which does violence to the text as they seek to make it relate to children. Bible scholar John Walton and his wife, Kim, have responded with this volume that speaks directly to the well-intentioned but nevertheless abusive use of the Bible, offering succinct insight into biblical stories, helping parents and teachers find the actual meaning of the text to enable responsible teaching. I highly recommend this excellent book for those who want to teach the Bible insightfully to children and to adults. They help us all to take the text seriously, letting it speak as God intended.”

Perry G. Downs, Professor of Educational Ministries,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“All too often we who teach children have come to the Bible with an agenda. We come with a lesson in mind and then search for a Bible story that might be used as a sort of ‘proof text’ for the lesson with nary a thought of the real intent of the passage. This is a wonderful resource for parents and teachers to help them remain true to the biblical text while providing valuable help in communicating truth to children. It can be used as a supplement to classroom curriculum or as a guide in teaching children in the home. I recommend this book to everyone who understands the importance of clearly and accurately communicating God’s Word, especially to the youngest of God’s family.”

Diane Jordan, Director of Children’s Ministry, College Church,
Wheaton, Illinois

.....The

Bible Story Handbook

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A Resource for Teaching
175 Stories from the Bible



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JOHN H. WALTON & KIM E. WALTON

 **CROSSWAY**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

The Bible Story Handbook: A Resource for Teaching 175 Stories from the Bible

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Why Do We Teach Bible Stories?

Everyone has a story.¹ Our lives are a collection of stories that we share with others to tell people who we are. Our stories concern our past, our present, and our future. When we first meet other people, we communicate a part of our story to begin to “get to know one another.” As we become better acquainted, we tell more of our story and hear more of our friends’ stories. When deep relationships develop, we want to learn every detail of the story of the one who means so much to us, for through this process we grow to know him or her intimately. When asked whether we know a particular person, we demonstrate our knowledge by identifying something of that person’s story. It might be, “Yes, he is from Montana,” or “Yes, she works for the law firm down the street.” We know people and are known by them through stories.

God also has a story, found in the Bible, by which he has made himself known to us. If we want to know God fully and intimately, we will immerse ourselves in his story. If we want to lead others to knowledge of God, we will tell them God’s stories beginning in their early childhood. By knowing God’s story, we come to know what he is really like and how we might expect him to act.² As with an intimate companion, we want to hear every part of the story again and again.

God tells us his story so that we can understand him; he could have simply given us a doctrinal statement or a list of his attributes, but this would not have been sufficient. “God is good”—fine, but how does that goodness play out in specific situations? Does God’s goodness mean that his actions will always seem good to me? If we had only a list of attributes, we would not have a very good idea of how these work out day by day. But stories! With these we can see how God’s qualities are demonstrated in perfect balance, governed by his wisdom and holiness, in numerous situations. God tells his story through human authors. This is what we mean when we say that the Bible is “inspired”—God-breathed. The Bible is not ultimately valuable because it gives people ideas about what God is like. Everybody can offer their ideas, but why should we believe them? The Bible is unique because in it God is telling us his own story. We can rely on the accuracy of its portrayal of God and accept it as an authoritative portrayal if we believe that it comes

¹Sections of this article have been adapted from J. H. Walton, L. D. Bailey, and C. Williford, “Bible-Based Curricula and the Crisis of Scriptural Authority,” *Christian Education Journal* 13 (Spring 1993): 83–94. Used by permission.

²Tim Stafford, *Knowing the Face of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 194–201.

from God, for God does not misrepresent himself. We might call it God's authorized biography.³ By affirming this authority of the Bible, we likewise affirm its right to speak to us. Not only does it have the right to speak, but it is right when it speaks. We are not free to tinker with the picture of God that the Bible gives. We cannot pick and choose the parts we like or don't like. If we accept the whole, we leave ourselves no room to second-guess God or to believe that we could do better if we were God.

When we affirm the authority of the Bible we also affirm our readiness to submit to it. This means that we accept unflinchingly the story of God and picture of God presented in the story. If we embrace the Bible's story and picture of God, we say that we believe it. God's story is not something that we can keep at arm's length; if we accept the Bible as God's own account of himself, we will also understand that he has made us to be in relationship with him and to be like him. If we truly believe this, God's story will change us. If we are unwilling to change, we don't truly believe.

We tell Bible stories so that students of all ages can know God better. As they come to know God through his stories, they will know better how to be in relationship with him and how to imitate him in their lives. This means that our primary concern in teaching any story from the Bible is to explain what the story tells us about God. Unfortunately, the curricula taught in our churches often are not written with this in mind. Consider the following example:

As usual, Sunday morning had been hectic—dropping off kids to their classes, getting the baby settled in the nursery, trying to find five different people concerning one thing or another, not to mention trying to make islands in all of this for productive learning and reflective worship. But now the family had finally gathered around the table for Sunday dinner. This was important family time for distilling the most positive and significant aspects of the Sunday morning experience.

“What was your story about today?” I ask my three-year-old.

“Cain and Abel,” he answered. I began to feel concern, wondering how such a sensitive story would be presented to three-year-olds.

“Well, what did you find out about Cain and Abel?”

“God made their bodies” came the nonchalant reply. I quickly affirmed the truth of this but pressed for more.

“What did Cain and Abel do?” I queried, probing to find out how the issue of sacrifice had been handled.

“They didn't do anything,” was the reply.

³Perhaps even an autobiography with ghost writers.

As it turned out, my son had been neither forgetful nor inattentive. The story card sent home confirmed that (thankfully) neither sacrifice nor treachery had been discussed at this tender age. The point of the lesson was, “God gave us bodies.” I was left to muse about what this curriculum was indirectly teaching my son about interpreting the Bible when stories were manipulated in this way. He was being raised in an evangelical church that used an evangelical curriculum, but would he learn how to interpret the Bible properly if the curriculum that shaped his education often ignored the actual teaching of the text and manipulated the stories for its own purposes? What was he taught that morning from Genesis 4 that conveyed the authoritative teaching of God’s Word?

What he learned was true, but that is not enough. The issue here is not just truth; the issue is authority. The lesson (“God made our bodies”) was biblical, but did the lesson carry the authority of the Bible? To answer this question, we have to ask whether it was the author’s intention in Genesis 4 to teach that God made our bodies or whether that was simply something that the curriculum wanted to convey. The Bible, as God’s Word, teaches with authority and demands the reader to submit to its authority. What we teach as human beings, be it valuable, sincere, challenging, and/or true, does not carry the same authority. Using a Bible story means nothing if it does not commit the curriculum or teacher to teaching what the Bible teaches in the story being used.

Our task is to enable God’s revealed truth to flow out of the Scriptures into the lives of men and women [and children] today. . . . To expound Scripture is to bring out of the text what is there and expose it to view. . . . The biblical text is neither a conventional introduction to a sermon [or lesson] on a largely different theme, nor a convenient peg on which to hang a ragbag of miscellaneous thoughts, but a master which dictates and controls what is said.⁴

If the Bible is used only as a jump-off point for one’s own educational objectives, the Bible’s authority is bypassed; if a passage is not being used to teach what the Bible is teaching, the teacher stands only on his or her own authority. In truly Bible-based lessons, the purpose of the biblical passage must guide the lesson development process. The focus of the story, the teaching aim for the unit or lesson, and the application must all grow out of careful interpretation of the passage. Teachers must hold educational considerations, such as developmental issues and teaching methodology, in proper relationship to the teaching of the text. This means that some passages of Scripture

⁴J. R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 138–39.

will be inappropriate for younger age groups (e.g., Cain and Abel for three-year-olds) because of their focus; likewise, certain concepts one might desire to teach may not be presented in Scripture in a form appropriate to all ages.

There are many valuable things we can learn from a given passage of Scripture, but not all of them are things that the Bible is trying to teach.

The first task of the interpreter is . . . the careful, systematic study of Scripture to discover the original intended meaning. It is the attempt to hear the Word as the original recipients were to have heard it, to find out what was the original intent of the words of the Bible.⁵

Only the things that Scripture intends to teach carry the authority of the text. For example, we can learn much about leadership by studying Nehemiah. In the end, however, there is no indication that the author of Nehemiah was preserving and presenting his material so that readers could be instructed in leadership. Because of this, the authority of Scripture is not being tapped when leadership is taught from the book and life of Nehemiah.

Leadership is an important quality, one worth learning about, but one may just as well learn about it from the lives of Abraham Lincoln or John Calvin. There is no special merit in learning it from Nehemiah simply because his story is in the Bible whereas the others are not. The Bible is unique because it teaches with the authority of God; in the case of Nehemiah, we learn, among other things, that God fulfills his promises of restoring the city of Jerusalem and that he sovereignly carries out his plan through Nehemiah's submission. God used Nehemiah's leadership, but that does not mean that Nehemiah's was the best possible leadership, approved by God in every way. Nehemiah's success does not authorize his example as a biblical model for leadership. The model itself has no authority. If, above anything else, we tell Bible stories to convey the Bible's authoritative teaching to students, then our focus should not be on Nehemiah's leadership.

For someone to claim biblical authority for his or her teaching, he or she must use the Scripture as the author intended it to be used. If the teacher desires to equip children to submit to the Bible's authority, the teacher must model a proper method for identifying what the Bible, in its authority, teaches. Too often the teaching objectives are rooted in issues that the text is not really addressing. We cannot legitimately impose a grid on the text in order to extract a desired lesson that the Bible (in that place) is not teaching.

⁵Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 21.

A text cannot mean what it never meant. Or to put that in a positive way, the true meaning of the biblical text for us is what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken.⁶

We can only attach authority to a lesson that the text is intentionally teaching; the reader must look to the text to determine what that teaching is. This last statement is methodologically important. Too often we assume that if the principle we want to teach is demonstrably biblical, then it is legitimate to teach it from any passage, even where it is, at best, a vague tangent. Yet this approach damages our ability to hear the text. If a teacher intends to be Bible-based in his or her approach to a text, it would be disappointing if he or she did not teach what that text was teaching. The authoritative teaching of Scripture must be a major part of the teaching objectives for each week.

Some would object to this, saying that we must be more creative to make the text relevant for our day and for the lives of the students. This implies that the text is somehow sterile and obtuse and that curriculum writers must identify appropriate application. We must tread carefully here, for we cannot apply a passage unless we properly interpret it. We will not find the significance of the passage by asking, “What does it mean to me?” (inviting all sorts of random associations and personalized reflections), but by asking, “What are the present-day implications of what the biblical author meant?”

We want to know what the Bible means for us—legitimately so. But we cannot make it mean anything that pleases us and then give the Holy Spirit “credit” for it. The Holy Spirit cannot be called in to contradict himself, and he is the one who inspired the original intent. Therefore, his help for us will be in the discovering of that original intent, and in guiding us as we try faithfully to apply that meaning to our own situations.⁷

Much modern-day biblical teaching demonstrates the popular notion that application must involve action. We all know that something must be put in practice to be learned and remembered, but it is not unusual for this idea to be taken to what might seem the next logical step: if some teaching is to be relevant and practical, it must be able to be put into practice in the short term—today, tomorrow, or at least sometime this week. This approach is too short-sighted, however, for we know that worthwhile pursuits frequently require a long-term perspective. Years of training are often necessary

⁶Ibid., 27.

⁷Ibid., 26.

to prepare for a particular profession. If someone wants to be an athlete or musician, he or she must be willing to invest long years of practice. People do not train for a marathon in one day and then run it at the end of the week. When we imply that godly living through biblical interpretation has to be accomplished in the short term for it to be practical, we devalue it and diminish its chances of success.

Biblical application cannot be limited to “action points” for the coming week (though if there are some, that is fine). More importantly, we have to think about “belief points.” Much biblical teaching involves belief; as we learn stories, our belief should be affected. If our belief is affected, our behavior should change. If our belief has not been affected, then any change in our behavior is likely to be superficial and temporary. We learn what to believe not just so that we can act on it this week but so that we have it firmly in our minds to draw on at need. Pianists do not learn scales so they can perform scales. Instead, as the scales become second nature they can apply the principles of the scales to much more complex pieces. They have to learn the scales well enough that their fingers know them without thinking, because in a performance they do not have the luxury of thinking about each note or sequence.

Application is much the same. We learn what we should believe so that right beliefs become part of us. We may then draw upon them at need. Much of the Bible, then, is intended to give us belief points. Furthermore, we may now recognize that the focus of these beliefs that we are learning is God. We are not learning an ethical system, though informed belief of God should result in a sound ethical system. The Bible is about God, and we should have as our desire to know him and to be like him.

We must realize that the Bible’s teachings about God convey certain implications for us. We cannot be exposed to God’s character without response. What in my life must change? What attitudes must be adjusted? How does my worldview need to conform? These are the questions of application for adults. Often for children it is not a matter of changing, adjusting, or conforming but of developing a worldview centered on a well-informed picture of God. Teachers and curricula must use the stories of Scripture to inform the child’s perspective in age-appropriate ways, but they still must allow Scripture to speak rather than squeezing it through educational grids.

We want our students to be conformed to the image of Christ and their behavior to have been embraced as a way to imitate God. We accomplish this by helping them know God better, not by telling them that they should obey because Abraham obeyed. The text is relevant because it reveals God to us and thus enables us to understand what he desires from us.

The Bible is intrinsically relevant to everyone because it is God's self-revelation. To neglect or ignore the authoritative teaching of the text as the author intends it is to take the first step toward relegating to the text an irreversible irrelevance. It is only relevant insofar as it is authoritative. We dare not think that we can bypass its authoritative teaching and somehow improve its relevance. Even if we could, it would be too great a cost to pay, if authority were sacrificed.

We tell stories from the Bible so that students will:

- learn God's stories
- know God
- come to know God better and therefore know better what to expect from him
- learn what to expect of God so that they know how to respond to him
- learn to respond to God so that they come to understand what it means to be imitators of God
- learn to be imitators of God so they can be in ever closer relationship with him
- come to be in ever closer relationship with God so that they will know how to serve him and be his representatives—salt and light in this fallen world

This whole sequence is important; if we try to race to one part or another without laying the foundation of what has come before, we will foster instability and confusion in our students.



Is There a Right Way or a Wrong Way to Use Bible Stories?

Many parts of the Bible, especially the ones we often use for Bible stories, are narratives. Narrative always shows us characters; some we admire, others we despise, but all play a role in the story. In narrative we engage the concerns of life through the characters and the events that surround them. Such encounters inevitably prompt us to think about our own lives, situations, and decisions. In these ways narrative can impact us, shape us, change us, motivate us, and inspire us.

Biblical narrative does no less, for in this way it is like all literature. The biblical narratives are not different from other narratives because of anything

distinctive about their mode of storytelling. “Scriptural” narrative is not necessarily better narrative—its characters purer or more highly developed, its complex levels of interaction with the life and mind of the reader somehow more sanctified. The stories of the Bible are “Scripture” (rather than just narrative literature) because their pages reveal God and thus carry authority. Through the narratives (as well as the other genres) we receive an utterly true picture of God, the primary actor in the narrative of the world he made for the people he loves. If we teach only the elements of narrative, we degrade the Bible to the status of literature (only). When we teach the God of the Bible, we elevate the Bible and honor it as Scripture. A Bible story can be used incorrectly if we fail to move beyond the narrative and the normal function of narrative to arrive at the message that makes the text authoritative Scripture.

Failure to clearly see the scriptural agenda compromises one’s ability to convey this depiction of God through curricula and teaching. Instead, the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, is often treated as merely a tool for developmental and behavioral objectives.

“Bible stories” tend to be weighted too much on the anthropocentric. Biblical narrative all too often is searched for moral examples that can be followed or shunned, as the case may be. Biblical history thus is dissolved into a number of instances of human conduct, moral or immoral. The historical context within which the events are placed by the biblical author tends to be ignored. When a straight line is drawn from “then” to “now,” the uniqueness of the biblical events as instances of God’s self-revelation is in danger of being overlooked. The nuances of meaning placed in the biblical account by the inspired authors fail to get their due, for everything turns around the supposed “lesson.” Biblical events tend to be lifted out of their redemptive historical context by being made into timely paradigms of moral behavior.⁸

When we use a text such as Genesis 41–46 to teach that Joseph is a good example of how God wants us to treat others in competitive situations, we violate the integrity of the narrative. The students miss the central teaching of the narrative section, which concerns the providence of God. Sometimes this may result from genuine puzzlement over the meaning or significance of the text. Other times it merely demonstrates how thoroughly our commitment to developmental and behavioral issues eclipses our commitment to sound

⁸Marten Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 4.

hermeneutics, sometimes compromising how clearly we convey the authority of the text.

This must change. The Bible does not intend to focus our primary attention on Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Hannah, David, Nehemiah, Esther, Mary, or the disciples. These are the bit players; God is the focus. When we apply the Bible to our lives only through the role models we find in the characters, we miss out. The message of Daniel 1 is not that since Daniel ate healthy food, you should eat healthy food too. Such an emphasis is not teaching what the Bible is teaching. When this approach is used, human wisdom masquerades as God's authoritative word, and in the process we can easily miss what the Bible is really teaching. In this Daniel passage, for instance, the point is the sovereign protection of God. Sunday school lessons must not focus on the human actors at the expense of God's self-revelation.

This is not to say that Scripture's teaching has nothing to do with the human characters. The authors of the Bible note Abraham's faith and Job's righteousness. Though we certainly desire to emulate these commendable examples, they must not take the focus off God. Each of these narratives seeks to reveal something about God. The characters are the witnesses that testify to God's work, in their lives and circumstances, to his nature as he interacts with them, and to his plan. They point us to him; that is their role. The problem with teaching about the "heroes and heroines of the Bible" is that the hero of the Bible is God. All people have flaws, even at their best. We dare not obscure the view of God to elevate human heroes.

If a teacher uses the biblical narratives to accomplish his own educational agenda and never gets down to what the Bible is actually teaching in its use of those stories, then the teacher cannot claim that his lesson is Bible-based, for such lessons have no biblical authority. For instance, if a teacher decides to use the story of Hannah taking Samuel to the temple to teach that we should be happy to go to church, what has she achieved? The relationship between the Bible story and the objective is oblique at best, for the experience of Samuel going to the temple in that context has no correlation to the children's experience of going to church. Furthermore, the intent of the narrator of that section of Scripture has nothing whatever to do with teaching about going to church. As a result, the lesson has no basis in the Bible and carries no intrinsic authority. Worse still, in teaching the lesson this way, what has the teacher conveyed to the students about the use of Scripture in their own lives? The model they observe has suggested they may use the text indiscriminately, twisting Scripture to support something that may be true but is not taught in that particular passage. Curriculum is at least partially to blame for this sort

of distortion that persists among adults, for they are merely imitating what their teachers have consistently modeled.

When, for example, a “behavioral grid” is placed on the text, it may be used to teach a biblical virtue such as obedience. It is natural, then, to begin by looking for a story to teach obedience. The difficulty arises when there is no commitment to use only a passage that intends to teach obedience. As a result, lessons may end up using the story of Joseph being sent by his father to find his brothers and build an entire lesson around Joseph obeying his father. In the same way, the story of the feeding of the five thousand is used to teach that children should share (like the little boy who shared his lunch, John 6:9), and the narrative in which Abraham and Lot divide the land (Gen. 13:9–12) is used to teach that children should give others first choice. While obedience, sharing, and graciousness are commendable virtues that need to be taught, they are not the subject of these texts. Therefore, these lessons model a faulty method of interpretation that suggests we can ignore what the text is actually teaching.

Another flawed approach to interpretation, evident both in Sunday school lessons and in the church at large, suggests that rather than having a single meaning, a given text may teach many different principles, and that the interpreter is responsible to continually bring to light more of these innumerable principles. For example, a teacher freely uses Daniel 6 (Daniel and the lions) to teach primary-school-aged children about worship but just as readily uses the same passage to teach third and fourth graders about courage, and fifth and sixth graders about responsible action. This handling of Scripture threatens biblical authority. All principles are not equally valid. Though we might be able to learn innumerable things from a passage, the passage is not teaching everything that anybody sees in it.

One need not have a seminary degree to discern what the biblical passage is teaching. It is often stated in one form or another by the author, or it can be deduced from his selection, arrangement, or emphases. Where it is not clearly stated, there may be differences of opinion, but as long as one is attempting to identify the authoritative teaching of the text using the material within the text, it is not hard to capture the general thrust.

Teachers must not allow the Scripture to become static and abstract. Certainly curriculum is designed to make the Scriptures come alive in the life of the receiver. Sunday school curricula ought to help people think theologically—to ask, “How ought we live in the world today in light of the gospel?” The curriculum serves as a bridge between the Scriptures and the learner by

illuminating the meaning of the biblical text and helping the learner discern its implications for everyday life.

Unfortunately, many so-called Bible-based lessons often mismanage the text at the point of application. In attempting to connect Scripture to life, an inattentive writer may fail to distinguish between the meaning (author's original intended meaning) and significance (the relationship between that meaning and the world of the reader) of the text. Lessons too easily jump from "What does the text say?" to "What does it mean for me?" without first asking "What did the author intend to convey?" For example, a lesson from Esther observes that Haman's negative feelings determined his actions toward Mordecai. The application focuses on how students should treat people they don't like—try to understand others better so they will be more able to love them. The lesson jumps from the action of the narrative to the context of the learner without reference to what the author intended to convey. This is an erroneous approach to Scripture, one that is responsible for much of the endemic misuse of the Bible in contemporary Christianity.

Basic to perceptive application is accurate exegesis. We cannot decide what a passage means to us unless first we have determined what the passage means. To do this we must sit down before the biblical writer and try to understand what he wanted to convey to his original readers. Only after we comprehend what he meant in his own terms and in his own times can we clarify what difference that should make in life today. . . . Application must come from the theological purpose of the biblical writer.⁹

People have learned to think that in order to make the Bible relevant, it is acceptable, necessary, or even desirable to subject Scripture to our "grid." For example, a teacher might use Jonah's poor attitude toward the Ninevites to warn students against the evils of prejudice—an issue that the text does not address. The forced "relevance" of this application misses the ever pertinent point of the narrative—God's compassion toward sinful people.

Such a handling of Scripture is at worst an insult to God, for it seems to imply that what he has revealed of himself is irrelevant. The teacher's task in application is to recognize and communicate Scripture's relevance rather than to make Scripture relevant. It is unnecessary to generate role models, invent typologies, or extract hidden mysteries to create an artificial significance.

⁹Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), 90–91.

Conclusion

Teaching that is truly Bible-based must not merely use Scripture but must allow the text to set the agenda, to speak for itself. Sunday-school teachers must commit to the same careful handling of Scripture that an expository preacher uses to prepare his sermon.

Is there a “wrong way” to teach a Bible story? Indeed there is. If we set our own agenda above that of the text, we are teaching the story wrongly. If our teaching does not align with the authority of the text, we have strayed from what is most important to the inspired author. It is not important to the author of John 11 (the raising of Lazarus) that Jesus had friends. It is not important to the author of Exodus 3–4 (the burning bush) that Aaron is willing to help his brother. It is not important to the author of John 6 (the feeding of five thousand) that the boy shared his lunch. If we teach these things, we are telling the story wrongly because we are substituting what we want to teach at the expense of the biblical author’s message. A story is told rightly when we can confidently claim that it represents the intention of the author and the authority of the text.

As we have worked with teacher training and curriculum evaluation over the years, we have noticed five common fallacies that draw a lesson away from scriptural authority:

- 1) **Promotion of the trivial.** A lesson is based on a passing comment within the text (Josh. 9:14, they did not consult the Lord), a casual observation about the text (Moses persevered by repeatedly appearing before Pharaoh), or even a deduction from the text (Joshua and Caleb were brave and strong). We are not teaching the Bible properly if we teach virtues that the specific text does not have in view.
- 2) **Illegitimate extrapolation.** The lesson is improperly expanded from a specific situation to all situations. For example, Exodus 3–4 shows that God commanded Moses to do a hard thing and helped him do it, but the lesson taught from the text is that God will also help you do a hard thing—anything of your choosing. In such cases, we pass by the teaching of the text in favor of what we want to say, thus neglecting biblical authority.
- 3) **Reading between the lines.** Teachers or students read between the lines when they analyze the thinking of the characters, speculate on their motives, or fill in details of the plot that the story does not give. When such speculations become the center of the lesson, the authority of the biblical teaching is lost because the teaching is supplied by the reader rather than by the text.

- 4) *Missing important nuance.* This occurs when the lesson pinpoints an appropriate message but misses a connection necessary to drive the point home accurately. It is not enough, for instance, to say that God wants us to keep his rules; we must realize that God has given us rules to display his character and to show us how we ought to respond to him in our actions.
- 5) *Focus on people rather than on God.* The Bible is God's revelation of himself, and its message and teaching are largely based on what it tells us about God. This is particularly true of narrative (stories). While we tend to observe the people in the stories, we cannot forget that the stories are intended to teach us about God more than about people. If in the end the final point is "We should (or shouldn't) be like X," there is probably a problem unless the X is Jesus or God. Better is, "We can learn through X's story that God . . ." The tendency to focus overly on people also shows up in questions such as "Who are the Goliaths in your life?" The text is more interested in "Who is God in your life?"

The third commandment warns us not to take the name of the Lord in vain. Interpreters often read this as a warning against profane language or insincere oaths made in God's name. While we should avoid these actions, the command is more concerned that we not abuse God's authority by appropriating it for our own purposes. If we were to use someone's credit card to make purchases without his approval, we would be guilty of misusing his financial authority. If we present something as God's Word when it is not, we are misusing God's name. Students of the Bible expect their teachers to present the authoritative teaching of God's Word as given by the inspired authors. If we substitute this teaching for some idea we think is important, students don't know the difference. We are then violating the third commandment because we have attributed God's authority to what is really only our own idea.

FAQ

- 1) Aren't you getting a little too picky about what we teach?

One cannot be too careful when dealing with the authoritative Word of God. When we teach the Bible, we are teaching more than simple truths—we are explaining what God's Word teaches. We must distinguish that from our own agendas. The same faulty methodology that results in slight deviation from the text can also result in serious abuse. We all know that there are abuses; we have

to develop methods that will help us identify what is abuse. This calls for careful discernment and consistent criteria.

2) How can we be confident about identifying what the biblical author intended to teach?

Our confidence comes from careful method as we deal with the biblical text. We believe that God is an effective communicator and that the authors the Spirit used were therefore enabled to be effective communicators.

3) If I follow your suggestions, I will be letting go of a lot of teachable curricula that can guide children toward right behavior. Why should I do this?

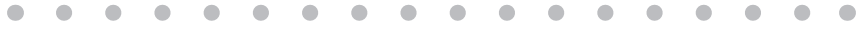
The reason such a choice should be made is that teaching the Bible cannot afford to become just good education with sound objectives. We have a responsibility to submit to the Word of God by teaching the lessons behind which it places its authority. You can teach good behavior but pick your stories wisely; teach it because of who God is, not because of how some character acted.

4) If what you present in this book is correct, then there are a lot of misguided curricula out there. How can this be so?

Many curricula and teachers who seek to teach the Bible have a clear idea of education and biblical values, and they do an excellent job at incorporating those elements. But many are less certain about exactly what to do with biblical narratives—particularly those of the Old Testament. It takes education and training to learn the methodology and develop the expertise to identify the authoritative teaching from the Bible, and those with this background often choose other career paths.

5) Are there any good curricula available?

“Good” and “bad” are not simple labels. Many of the curricula have been developed by competent educators who know children well and who know how to execute a lesson. Furthermore, they are godly people with a good grasp of biblical values. In this book we are leaving those matters in their competent hands. We focus particularly on the issue of how to get to the Bible’s authoritative message. Curriculum houses are usually not well equipped to succeed in this area. They have people to check the theology, and that is good. But methodology is another matter.



The Big Picture of the Bible

When we tell Bible stories, we should always contextualize these stories within the Big Picture of God’s plan as it is revealed in the Bible.¹⁰ This Big Picture answers the question, “What is God’s purpose for our world and what part does the Bible itself play?” Some people might think that the Big Picture is Jesus or salvation from sin. These are certainly important elements of the Big Picture and central to the Bible’s message, but is there more? Perhaps as we consider the nature of the Bible and the themes that permeate its pages, we can fill in this “Big Picture” a little more.

The Bible is God’s self-revelation, and, as such, it enables the reader to know God more fully. This process, however, is not intended to merely expand the reader’s knowledge. We know God by experiencing his attributes. While there is some virtue in being able to list God’s attributes, those attributes must become the framework of our worldview. Our perspective on ourselves, our society, our world, our history, our conduct, our decisions—everything—should be knit together by an informed and integrated view of God. The Bible’s objective is not transformed lives, though knowing God should transform one’s life. The Bible’s objective is not the adoption of a value system, though a value system would certainly be one outcome of authentically knowing God. The Bible is not a collection of role models, dusty hymns, and obscure prophetic sayings—it is rather God telling his own story.

This story of God begins with creation. The text is more concerned with the beginning of God’s plan than the beginning of the world. God made everything just right to set his plan in motion. In that sense, creation is simply the introduction to history. God initially assures his sovereignty by the act of creation. While this effectively denies any claim to sovereignty by other deities, the purpose of the text is not to argue against the pagan polytheism of the day. Rather than denouncing other deities and refuting other worldviews, the Old Testament offers its breathtaking view of the character and sovereign action of the one true God.

The Old Testament is only secondarily concerned with the political or social aspects of history. Instead, the narrative recorded in the Old Testament is primarily interested in God’s revelation of himself to people in the past.

¹⁰Much of this article is adapted from Andrew Hill and John Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 21–24. Used by permission of Zondervan.

This observation is illustrated in the names of God that permeate the pages of Scripture. These names portray God as holy, almighty, foremost of beings, the cause of all that is. Yet he is also a God who hears, sees, and provides. The habitual rebellion and feeble-mindedness of humankind stand in sharp contrast to the patience and grace of God.

Just as creation flows into history, so history flows into prophecy. God's plan was initiated at creation, progresses throughout history, and will continue until all is accomplished. By seeing God's plan worked out in the past (the Pentateuch and the Historical Books) and projected into the future (Prophetic Literature), we can begin to appreciate the unfathomable wisdom of God, who is worthy of praise and worship (Psalms and Wisdom Literature). Therefore, we should view the Old Testament, and indeed the whole Bible, as a presentation of God's attributes in action. We can know who God is and what he is like by hearing what he has done and intends to do. This is a "theocentric" approach to Scripture—God is at the center of it all and therefore ought to be our focus as we study and teach his Word. Once we know who he is and what he is like, the appropriate responses should be worship, commitment, and service.

The Plan: God with Us

What is this plan that spans the scope of creation, history, and prophecy? We find it communicated throughout the pages of the Bible. From the beginning, God planned to create a people among whom he could dwell and with whom he could be in relationship. We should not suppose that he *needed* a place to live or that he had some psychological need for companionship. His plan emerges naturally, expressing his character as a creative, relational, and gracious being.

This plan is reflected in the initial setting of Eden, where God's presence existed in what we might call a cosmic temple; in this garden he placed people who could be near him and who could come to know him. God's plan was disrupted by the entrance of sin through human disobedience—what we call "the fall." Humans thus destroyed their relationship with God and forfeited the privilege of being in God's presence as the first couple was driven out of the garden.

The rest of the Bible recounts God's program to restore his presence to his people and enable them once again to share a relationship with him. We can offer a brief overview by identifying the seven stages of God's presence.

Stages of God's Presence

Eden

Covenant

Exodus (Burning Bush/Sinai)

Tabernacle/Temple

Incarnation (Immanuel)

Pentecost

New Creation

In the account of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9) we find the people engaged in a project that attempts to reestablish God's presence on earth. The tower was provided as a means for God to come down and take up his residence in the people's city and receive their worship. Unfortunately, this initiative was motivated by a flawed conception of deity, a conception which displeased God (for more information see pp. 49–52). The next chapter of Genesis introduces God's own initiative as he establishes a covenant with Abraham. Through this covenant, God purposed to reveal himself to the world (explained in the next section). He chose one family among whom to dwell and with whom to develop a relationship. This second stage is the first step of the reclamation project and involved revelation and relationship.

God's presence reaches a new level as he appears in the burning bush to Moses to reveal his name (i.e., his character and nature) and the next step of his plan (i.e., deliverance of Israel from Egypt). His presence is demonstrated through the plagues and temporarily evidenced in the pillar of cloud and fire. It finally descends to the top of Mount Sinai, where he indicates how his people can be in relationship with him (the Law) and preserve his presence (the rituals and other instructions regarding the tabernacle).

In the next stage God actually initiates a means to establish his presence on earth. The tabernacle is a place of God's dwelling, and many aspects of its design invoke the images of the garden of Eden. By keeping the law and observing rules of purity, the people can enjoy relationship with the God who has come among them. This stage of God's presence eventually transitions to the temple built by Solomon, where it resides through the remainder of the Old Testament. The momentum of God's program, however, suffers a serious setback when the rebellion of the Israelites finally causes God's presence to leave the temple, which is consequently destroyed by the Babylonians (in Jeremiah and Ezekiel). With their exile from the Promised Land, the Israelites lose the covenant benefits, and their relationship with God hangs in the balance.

Though they eventually return to the land and rebuild the temple, the next stage of God's presence comes in the pages of the New Testament, as God sends his Son, Jesus, in human flesh (the incarnation) to reside with humanity (Immanuel, God with us) as a sort of human tabernacle (John 1:14). Through Christ, God's presence thus becomes available in a whole new way, and the relationship is made available at a whole new level—Christ has paid the penalty for sin and provided a permanent mechanism that allows us to be in relationship with God.

Though Christ ascended to heaven after the resurrection, he promised that his presence would not be taken from us: he sent the Comforter to take his place. Thus the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost marks the beginning of yet another stage in the availability of God's presence—now within his people—and a relationship based on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, God's presence resides in his people, both individually (1 Cor. 6:19) and corporately (1 Cor. 3:16)—we are the Temple. The veil that restricted access to God's presence has been torn (Ephesians 2); relationship is now available to all who seek it.

The final stage remains in the future; it is described in Revelation 21:3, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God." In the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21:1) there will be no temple because "its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" (Rev. 21:22). God's throne will be in the city (Rev. 22:3).

Consequently, we would conclude that the Big Picture focuses on access to God's presence with the people he created (eventually through Christ and the Spirit) and relationship with God (made possible through Jesus and guaranteed by the Spirit). We are "saved" not only from our sins but into a relationship with God. The promise of eternal life assures us that this relationship will not be broken by death. Relationship is the goal, salvation is the means, and eternity is the scope. We should focus more on the goal and less on the means and the scope. Our approach to the stories of the Bible ought to focus on how each one helps us to understand God and his plan better.

Old Testament





1. God Created Light (Genesis 1:1–5, 14–19)

Lesson Focus

God is the creator; all things were made by him.

- God made our world to function by time.
- Light and the heavenly bodies regulate time.
- God has brought order to our world.

Lesson Application

We know that we have a great and powerful God by the world that he made.

- God is the master and creator of our time.
- The sun, moon, and stars do his bidding, so we believe that God is in control of our world.

Biblical Context

The book of Genesis tells us how God prepared a place for the people he created and how he has entered into relationship with them. Genesis 1 reveals that God ordered the world so that it would be just right for people and also determined to live among them. God began to order the world for people by creating time. Verse 1 is most likely an introduction to the story, and verse 2 indicates that the story begins when there was no order; however, the presence of God's Spirit also indicates the potential for development.

Interpretational Issues in the Story

Light and time (Gen. 1:3–5). In Genesis 1:5 God calls the light “Day” and the darkness “Night.” Thus, we learn that day and night are the creative focus, since they are named. God has spoken a *period* of light into what had previously been darkness (v. 2) and named the period of light “day.” This rotation of periods of light and darkness (day and night) constitutes time. We see then that nothing material is created on day one. It is a function—time—which shows God bringing order to his world. This is why it is important to see that in verse 2 the account begins without order (not without matter). Though material is inevitably involved, the focus of the narrative is function, not material.

“Good” (Gen. 1:4, 18). The word *good* can have many connotations. Here it refers not to moral goodness but to functionality—it worked just right.

We know this because that which is not good (Gen. 2:18) is simply not yet fully functional, rather than morally corrupt.

Evening then morning (Gen. 1:19). This reverses the way we would say it, but only because the account starts with darkness (v. 2); God then introduces the period of light to set up regular transitions. The first transition from the period of light to the period of darkness is evening.

Sun and moon created after light (Gen. 1:3–5, 14–18). Many have noted the apparent problem of light being created on the first day and the bearers of light on the fourth day. Even young students might ask this question. In our view, days one through three involve the establishment of the major functions by which the world operates (time, living space, weather, and vegetation/food). In contrast days four through six install functionaries. Functions are prioritized over functionaries in the order rather than following a material chronological order.

Background Information

Ancient audience. Genesis was written in the ancient world to an ancient audience, even though it contains truth for all. Nevertheless, it talks about the world in the terms that were important then. The point is that this is not a scientific account.

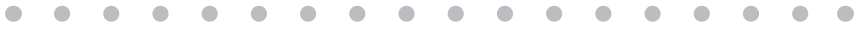
Separation. Since separation was an important creative activity throughout the creation literature of the ancient world, it is no surprise to find it so often in Genesis 1. To separate things from one another is the first important step in giving them individual roles.

Signs and seasons. The heavenly bodies provided signs for the agricultural calendar and for orientation in travel. Most parts of the world do not have four seasons. The seasons referred to in the biblical text are agricultural seasons (plowing, planting, harvesting) and the seasons of the religious calendar.

Mistakes to Avoid

Do not try to turn this into a science lesson, for such an emphasis misses the point entirely. Science today explores the natural world. Biblical faith affirms that everything we call “natural” is the handiwork of God, but that does not mean that we need to convey the handiwork of God as expressed in the Bible in natural terms (e.g., “Here is where God did the Big Bang”). Speak of the Bible’s message in the Bible’s terms: God set up and designed our world to work the way that it does. He did this for the people he would create. He set up time and put us in time. He controls time.

God’s act of speaking is important because it shows his control. But the fact that “God spoke and it happened” leaves a lot unspecified: what God speaks could come about instantaneously or gradually; what God speaks could come about in startling, unexplainable ways or in ways that can be tracked and understood step-by-step. All of it is the work of God. Teachers should avoid trying to resolve the question with the opinion that the response was instantaneous. The length of the day is, of course, disputed, but there will generally be no need to get into this issue for elementary-school-aged children. Our commitment should be to focus on what the text is focused on rather than mixing in our opinions on controversial issues. The message of Genesis 1 is that God is the one who made our world work.



2. God Created the World around Us (Genesis 1:6–13)

Lesson Focus

God is the creator. All things were made by him. No one but God could create the world.

- God made our world to function with weather.
- God provided places for us to live (dry land).
- God created ways for food to grow.
- God has brought order to our world so that we can live in it.

Lesson Application

We know that we have a great and powerful God by observing the world that he made.

- We believe that God has set up the weather under his control.
- We believe that God provides food for us by the way the earth works.

Biblical Context

The Genesis story is about God entering into relationship with people whom he created to be in relationship with himself. Genesis 1 shows how God created an environment perfectly suited for human habitation. The first three days are about the major functions that characterize the world around us: time, weather, and food. God designed the world with all that humans need to survive and thrive.

Interpretational Issues in the Story

Expanse (Gen. 1:6). Understanding this word presents one of the most difficult issues in the chapter. The King James translation, “firmament,” followed the Latin interpretation of earlier times, conveying the idea that the sky was solid and held back waters. This interpretation was widely believed until just a few centuries ago. We know differently now, but that does not change the language of the text, which reflects an ancient worldview derived from appearances. But there is no need to get into this issue or fret about it. In the story-telling it is sufficient to talk about the sky. The point is that God set up weather mechanisms, regardless of how they are described. The “waters above” simply describe the source of precipitation (the sky) in nonscientific terms. Remember that the Bible tells about creation in relationship to how people thought about their world in ancient times. The “waters above” are not the clouds, mist, and fog, and the “firmament” is not invisible. In the ancient world they believed that the rain was held back by a solid sky.

Separated and gathered (Gen. 1:6, 9). Separating and gathering were acts of creation in the ancient world, because in this way distinct identities were set up. The focus is on order and function.

“According to its kind” (Gen. 1:11). This comment is not intended to give botanical taxonomy but to indicate that God set up a world where everything reproduces itself rather than something random growing. A plant grows and drops seed, and the same thing grows again. In this way farming can take place and food can be grown.

Background Information

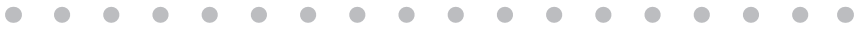
Waters that were above. In the ancient world everyone believed that since water came down (in the various forms of precipitation) there must be water up above the sky. If water is up there and doesn’t come down all the time, something must hold it up. As a result, everyone in the ancient world believed that the sky was solid and held back heavenly waters.

Mistakes to Avoid

Do not try to turn this into a science lesson, for such an emphasis misses the point entirely. Science today explores the natural world. Biblical faith affirms that everything we call “natural” is the handiwork of God, but that does not mean that we need to convey the handiwork of God as expressed in the Bible in natural terms (e.g., “Here is where God did the Big Bang”). Speak of the Bible’s message in the Bible’s terms: God set up and designed our world to

work the way that it does. He did this for the people he would create. He set up time and put us in time. He controls time.

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3. God Made Animals (Genesis 1:20–25)

Lesson Focus

God created each animal according to his special design and purpose.

- Animals are part of God’s plan for the world.
- God gave the animals the ability to multiply and fill the world.
- Each animal reproduces the same kind of animal.
- God made animals of all sorts to serve different purposes.

Lesson Application

We believe that God is very wise from the special way he made each animal.

- We believe God’s wisdom is expressed in the diversity of creatures.
- We believe God’s wisdom is expressed as we observe how each animal is designed for its environment.

Biblical Context

The book of Genesis tells us how God prepared a place for the people he created and how he entered into relationship with them. Genesis 1 shows how God created an environment perfectly suited for human habitation. The first three days relate how God set up the major functions that we experience as we live on earth (what we would describe as time, the water cycle, and the plant cycle). Days four through six explain the roles and positions of those

who inhabit the cosmos. The text does not indicate why God created animals to fill our world but affirms that he did, whatever his purposes.

Interpretational Issues in the Story

“*Let the waters swarm . . . let birds fly*” (*Gen. 1:20*). Here the language focuses on the realm God is filling but does not express the mechanisms God uses.

Great sea creatures (*Gen. 1:21*). In the ancient world people believed in creatures that represented a threat to the ordered cosmos. The book of Job describes such creatures and speaks of God’s control over them (Job 40–41); Psalms occasionally speaks of God’s victory over them (Ps. 74:13–14). Here in Genesis there is no conflict between God and these creatures—they are just another of God’s works.

“*According to their kinds*” (*Gen. 1:21, 24*). This comment is not intended to give zoological taxonomy but to indicate that God set up a world where creatures would be able to reproduce to populate their space.

Background Information

Domesticated animals were essential for the life and survival of ancient peoples. The birth of sheep and goats enlarged the herd and provided for another season of supply (milk, meat, and clothing). Sometimes they viewed wild animals as threats associated with chaos; at other times they saw them as simply mysterious. In all cases, the animal kingdom reflected God’s provision and wisdom.

Mistakes to Avoid

When discussing the animals, some might be inclined to suggest that prior to the fall there were no predators. Such a conclusion might be supported by the idea that all was peaceful and harmonious, with lion and lamb living side by side (from passages such as Isa. 11:6–8). Further evidence might be that all was good and that there was no death. These are all arguable. When the apostle Paul writes that death came by sin, he was addressing the question of why *humans* are subject to death. Death came to humans because they were cut off from access to the tree of life. However, Paul had suggested that death was absent from the rest of creation. There is death involved as cells regenerate, as plants drop their seed for new to grow, as animals eat plants, when fish eat flies, and when birds eat worms.

There is no place to draw the line here to rule out predation. A lion

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