

# THE BIBLICAL STORYTELLER

January 2017

A Network of Biblical Storytellers, Int'l. Publication



**LIVING THE STORY IN THE LIFE CYCLE**

# LIVING THE STORY

## in the Life Cycle



**Dr. Phil Ruge-Jones**  
Keynote Speaker

### Theme Stories

Luke 2:41-52

The Boy Jesus in the Temple

Genesis 18:1-15

The Promise to Abraham and Sarah

Luke 2:25-38

Simeon and Anna

### EPIC TELLING

A Luke Narrative

# 2017 Festival Gathering of Biblical Storytelling

AUGUST 2-5, 2017 Near Washington, DC

registration [www.nbsint.org](http://www.nbsint.org)

THE BIBLICAL  
STORYTELLER

*The Biblical Storyteller* is a publication of the Network of Biblical Storytellers, Int'l., an ecumenical, international, non-profit organization of scholars, clergy, and laity whose mission is to encourage everyone to learn and tell biblical stories. We provide and develop resources for telling biblical stories through audio, video, and digital technologies as well as telling them face-to-face.

The Network of  
Biblical Storytellers, Int'l.  
at Christian Theological Seminary  
1000 West 42nd Street  
Indianapolis, IN 46208  
1-800-355-6627

Donna Marie Todd, Editor, NC  
www.donnamarietodd.com

Ellen Handlin, NBSI Coordinator  
nbs@nbsint.org 1-800-355-6627

Linda Schuessler, TN  
Copy Editor & Proofreader

Andrew Howe Gwynn, NC  
Contributing Editor

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***Please remember the Network  
in your will!***

## Why the World Needs the Stories You Hold

I gave a TEDx talk this year and as I did my research for that presentation, I became convicted that we, as storytellers, must claim our power NOW.

The biblical stories you have internalized deep into your heart have incredible power. I know you know that, but I want you to really think about how you can use that power. If you're reading this, you're doing so as a literate person. If you're reading this, chances are you are a person of faith. If you are a literate person of faith who views the world through a myopic lens, your lens, like mine, reflects life back to you through a strong core belief system—a system that is maintained with a carefully selected, supportive community of similar people.

It's human nature. But our faithful and educated myopia keeps us from seeing two rather significant facts:

The first is that, across the world, fewer and fewer Christians attend church. In the UK, it's 11%; in Australia it's 9%; Spain leads the Euro-pack at 21%. A Pew Research Center study in 2013 stated that 49% of Americans do not attend church. If they're not in church, how can they hear the Bible?

The second fact is that the US is rapidly becoming post-literate. A comprehensive study by the US Dept. of Education in 2013 showed that 32 million adults in the US can't read. In case you're wondering, that's 14% of the population. The study also found another 21% read below a 5th grade level, and 19% of high school graduates (who aren't counted in that adult population) can't read. The National Newspaper Association's own member statistics show that 400 daily newspapers in the US have closed their doors in the last 20 years. Sir Ritchie Calder, a professor at the University of Edinburgh and a special advisor to the UN, recently said that nearly half of the



Donna Marie Todd, Editor

world's adult population cannot read. Think about that!

At the TEDx talk I gave this year, there was some initial eye-rolling when the emcee announced "the storyteller." (Most were there to hear the living-architecture social scientist and the globe-trotting, farm-to-table chef from TV.) But, my talk was well received. I was able to share what I know about how stories help us understand each other and how they help us make sense of life. The stories of the Bible were originally told from one heart to another in a very unstable and dangerous world. Now, our world is increasingly dangerous and unstable. Many of the adults in our world either can't read at all or can't read well enough to comprehend things like public policy, reports on climate change, canned food labels or the voting records of elected officials. The majority of people across the world do not attend church and therefore aren't in the pews to hear the Bible.

The people in our post-literate, post-churched world need YOU to tell them God's stories. YOU, and the stories you hold in your heart, are urgently needed NOW because the world is increasingly a dark and scary place.

NOW is the time for YOU to give voice to the Bible's stories. So many people need to hear that God is with them, right NOW, in everything they face.

# Living the Story in the Life Cycle

an interview with Dr. Philip Ruge-Jones  
2017 Festival Gathering Keynote Speaker

**Q. Phil, you received your doctorate in systematic theology. Tell us a little about what that is and how you use it to study the biblical texts or compositions.**

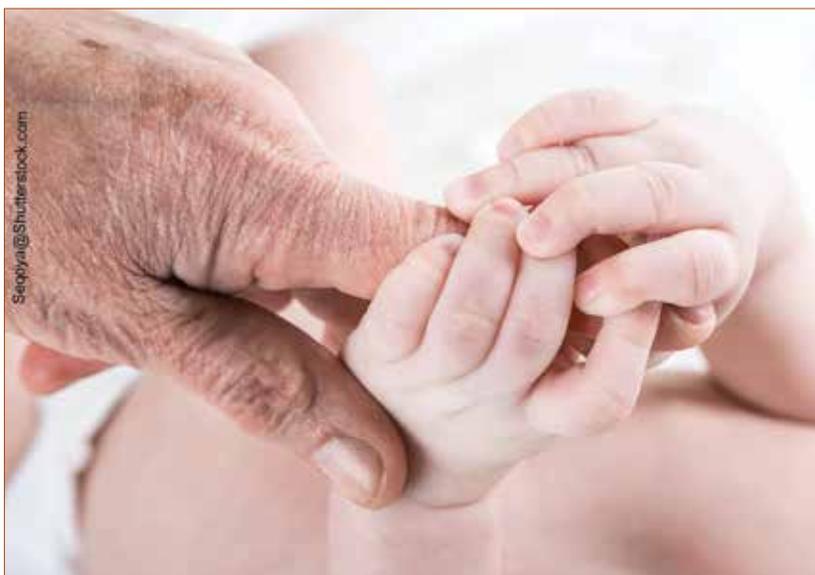
A. Christian theology has traditionally had a variety of things that it focused on: the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament, the history of the faith community, the challenges and gifts of the present moment and how to engage contemporary people ethically, faithfully, and effectively.

At its best, systematic theology listens to those who study each of these areas, and then speaks faithfully and coherently of the wisdom they might carry together. However, its great temptation is to hold too tightly to its own conclusions and then bend all these other witnesses to what it already thinks. A closed system of faith forgets God's mystery and betrays truth. It also excludes those voices that don't fit into its inspired truth and often inflicts violence on those labeled "other." Deeply engaging the Scriptures through biblical storytelling has helped me avoid some of that temptation. Storytellers know that narratives open up to reality in a variety of ways that sometimes even surprise us as we are telling them. So I will never write a multi-volume set on systematic theology, but I do

hope some day to write a book whose title promises a less rigid approach, *Thoughtfully Eclectic: Diverse Witnesses to the God of Love*.

**Q. You were a full professor at Texas Lutheran University and taught theology there. Was biblical storytelling a part of your students' coursework and if so, why?**

A. I have performed in many classes,



because I see student energy levels rise immediately when I begin storytelling. But every two years I have taught a course where students learned the art of biblical storytelling using the Gospel of Mark as our composition. (Tom Boomershine has convinced me to speak of "compositions" instead of "texts" and sometimes I even remember to do that.) For a whole semester we'd work on the stories together and by the end, each of the 15 students told

four stories so that together we told the whole Gospel. This class had more laughter and tears than any other I taught. The students' relationship with the Bible changed as they engaged it personally and publically. They sowed their story in the spaces within the biblical story and grew tremendously in the process.

**Q. How has biblical storytelling informed your own work as a scholar?**

A. Every aspect of my research has been shaped by biblical storytelling. I am more deeply aware of audience when I speak and write. I am not quite as concerned as I once was with conceptually capturing some truth that I stumbled upon; rather I want to provoke a response that moves a particular audience in healing

directions or at least toward noticing their own brokenness. I wonder about the journey God's story takes us on more than a particular destination we are all supposed to arrive at. I attend more to affective dimensions of life in God's presence and promise. I approach the Word of God as a living reality that speaks anew to new contexts and brings renewal. I allow other people to point out the ways my telling may bring healing, but also to

help me see the ways my telling may bring injury. I learn to adapt and begin again. I believe our bodies matter in our experience of the sacred. I could go on and on, but that may be enough for now.

**Q. You are a scholar, the convener of the NBS Scholars' Seminar, and a published author. You are one of the leading scholars in biblical performance criticism. But you are also a very fine storyteller. As you prepare the keynotes for the 2017 Festival Gathering, and work with the theme scriptures of Genesis 18:1-15 (*The Promise to Abraham and Sarah*), Luke 2:25-38 (*Simeon and Anna*) and Luke 2:41-52 (*The Boy Jesus in the Temple*) what is capturing your imagination or heart in these stories?**

A. This is still germinating. But this much I can say. Since the day after the last Festival Gathering I have visited these stories nearly every day in the early morning. (I missed two days so far when I was focusing my energy on

are enriching these stories with life.

A friend's struggle to conceive enters into my telling of Abraham and Sarah's longing; a wise woman's witness shapes my telling of the prophet Anna's revelation; my own losing track of Jesus in the disappointments of life blurs into the anxiety felt by Mary and Joseph when they lost track of Jesus. I'm only a third of the way though my time marinating (to use Dennis Dewey's word) in these compositions and am amazed at the variety of ways that they impact me in the midst of the diverse development of my days. I look forward to unpacking this journey with you in August. I already have about twenty pages of recollections and observations written down from this journey.

**Q. You have used biblical storytelling in worship and you have used it in your teaching and research. Obviously you are committed to biblical storytelling as both a scholar and an artist. Why do you think biblical storytelling**

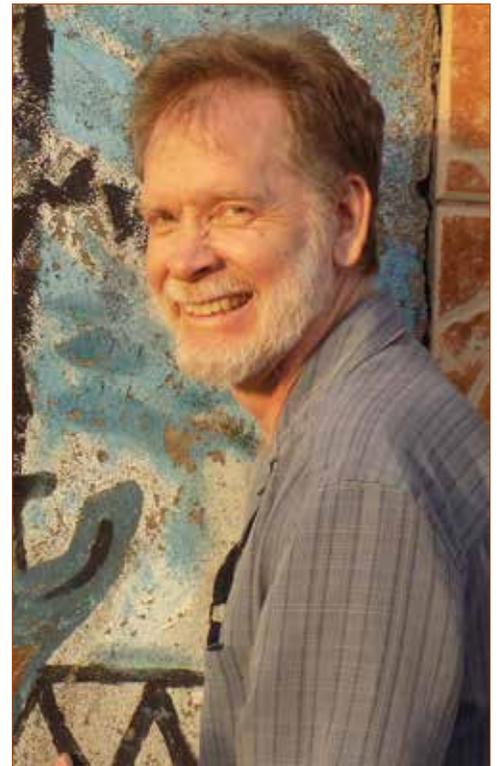
**is so important? What do you think it brings to worship and biblical study that other method-**

I cannot skip difficult sections or deal with phrases in vague ways. I need to find true ways of telling them after taking them seriously in all their details.

a performance of the Gospel of Mark.) I have worked on internalizing each story in turn for about a month and a half, going through it once or twice every day, while visiting the other two stories at least a couple of times each week. When Sarah's story became solid I went on to internalizing the narrative of Jesus in the temple. And then five weeks later, I began taking in Simeon and Anna. Now, months into this process, I know all three compositions well and carry them with me wherever I go. In turn, my everyday experiences

**ologies don't?**

A. Three things come immediately to mind: First, biblical storytelling is the best interpretive practice I have found. I must deal with every phrase of the composition and get it to fit in my mouth. I cannot skip difficult sections or deal with phrases in vague ways. I need to find true ways of telling them after taking them seriously in all their details. Second, I find biblical storytelling an engaging way to share what I have discovered in a composition.



Students or people in the pews attend to the tellings. When I move from explanation to performance, the energy in the room changes. Finally, biblical storytelling is the most important, transformative spiritual discipline I have found. The Word becomes a living Word that transforms my own living. Part of this transformation is the forging of community through shared storytelling which I have experienced in the Network of Biblical Storytellers, Int'l. Understanding God's living Word, sharing that Word, being transformed by that Word—these gifts make biblical storytelling my daily incarnational practice.

*Philip Ruge-Jones was Professor of Theology at Texas Lutheran University in Seguin, Texas. He has served as the convener of the NBS SEMINAR for the past several years. He is a storyteller and scholar who has taught courses to university students in the area of biblical performance criticism. His books include "The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media" which he co-edited with Holly Hearon.*

*He earned his B.A. from Lawrence University, his M.Div. from Luther Seminary and his Ph.D. from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in the area of systematic theology.*

# New International Mission Trips Planned

Fulfilling Our Mission: "To encourage everyone to learn and tell biblical stories."



One of the great joys of attending the annual international Festival Gathering of Biblical Storytelling is to meet and hear storytellers from across the globe! And, according to Network of Biblical Storytellers, Int'l. (NBSI) Director of International Relations, Juliana Rowe, the need to take the art of biblical storytelling abroad is great.

More people than we can imagine in many parts of the developed and undeveloped world have yet to experience Bible stories being told. They have yet to "hear" them as they were meant to be heard. In the handful of countries where NBSI has taken the spiritual art of biblical storytelling, the hearers and learners show a sincere appreciation and hunger to hear more!

Juliana says, "That was my first experience with The Gambia Christian Council on my pioneer mission to that country. Eyes were glued on me, wide open, mouths almost dropping when I stopped speaking as if to say, 'That's what this is? We want more!' What they 'heard' for the first time was the scripture where Jesus encountered the mother of the sons of Zebedee."

Members of NBSI hold many internalized Bible stories. Why not join forces with a mission team to share them freely? It is a wonderful experience. It

is one of the most spiritually rewarding ventures ever. You can support NBSI missions by becoming a member of a mission team, committing to pray for a team while they are on the mission, and by sending a monetary donation to NBSI with "international missions" in the memo line. These missions to Haiti, India and Cameroon are being planned for 2017 and 2018.

## HAITI MISSION 2017

Rev. Dr. Tim Coombs, Team Leader

NBSI is getting ready to launch its follow-up to last year's Haiti mission trip. The next trip is scheduled for April 24 through May 2 of 2017. The estimated outlay per team member is around \$2,500. Once again, NBSI will be "piggy-backing" on the efforts of our partners, MURR International, led by Gethro Auguste.

The NBSI team provides the educational component of the trip, which will also feature a tour of the good work MURR is doing in and around Haiti. One of MURR's projects is to educate and spiritually empower 10,000 Haitian youth to create their own opportunities for growth and advancement. Last year we visited a school, a half-way house for sex workers, and a self-sustaining farm, along with street people in Port-au-Prince.

For our part, the NBSI team, which consisted of Juliana Rowe, Beth Galbreath, and Tim Coombs, introduced biblical storytelling to a host of pastors and lay leaders at an upbeat educational conference spread over three days.

To be honest, the Haitian church leaders did not know exactly what biblical storytelling was, but by the end of our time with them, 24 church leaders came

forward to be commissioned to continue the good work we started with them. They are most eager for our return so

that we can water and feed the seeds of biblical storytelling we germinated on that trip.

As you may be aware, Hurricane Matthew devastated the Sud and Grand 'Anse provinces of Haiti (the southern fork). It will be years before this part of the country will be fully recovered. The NBSI Haiti mission will take place in the Ouest and Sud-Ouest (West and Southwest) provinces in and around Port-au-Prince, which did not take the



brunt of Matthew.

To be a part of this mission team, contact Juliana (boodydede@aol.com) or team leader Tim Coombs immediately (tcoombs@earthlink.net).

## Haiti Mission Memory

by team member Beth Galbreath

Sometimes God puts the right person in exactly the right place at the right time.

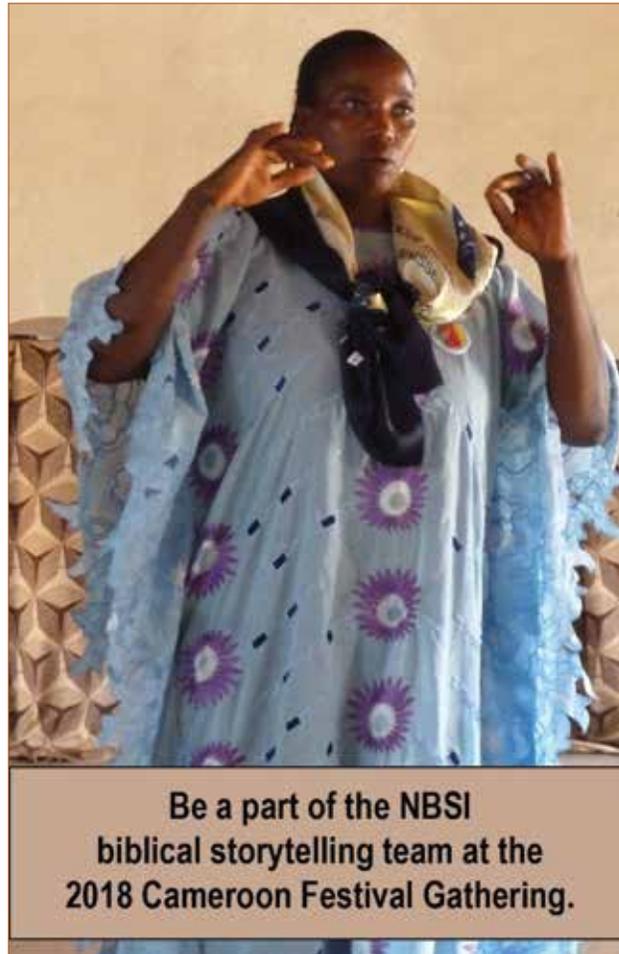
It was evening, in a bare-bones church structure in one of the new communities planted in Haiti by persons displaced by the 2010 earthquake. We'd been teaching biblical storytelling through interpreters to Kreyol speakers, around 200 folks at any one time, filling the church.

It was my turn to introduce "biblical storytelling with children," and I'd invited the children to tell the story of "Jesus Blessing the Children" using a "liquid pictures" technique from the other side of the world.

NBS Australia's Carole Danby pioneered the "liquid pictures" technique: dividing a story into short phrases and assigning one phrase with its gesture to each child to repeat three times, so that as the children tell their phrases in sequence, the whole group learns and tells the story by heart. And the children were eagerly taking their places in the story in front of all the adults!

Finally only one sentence was left—"Jesus took them in his arms, laid his hands on them and blessed them." We were down to the last two children, a girl about 11 years old, holding her baby sister on her lap. I urged her to join the rest, but the other children said, "She can't. She can't speak." I looked and saw that she was

wearing a hearing aid. "Of course you can," I said. "You come up and hold your sister like Jesus did; I'll say the words." So she did. And then we told the story, loudly and enthusiastically! The children returned to their seats to excited applause. I followed the girl, sat down with her, and removed my own hearing aids to show her. I'll never forget the complete shock on her



face as she stared open-mouthed at the instruments in my hand — and then she smiled.

*The story had come alive and this rejected child was welcomed and blessed with a vision of herself as someone who could now overcome her disability when others said "you can't."*

## INDIA MISSION 2018

Organizers: Linnea Good, NBSI President Ron Coughlin, and Juliana Rowe

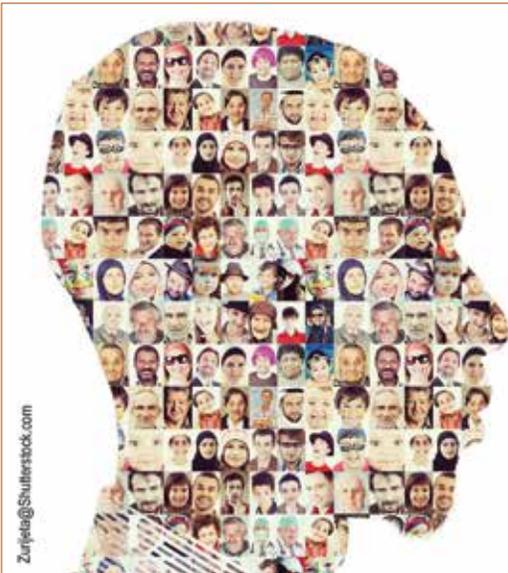
In January of 2018, a group of NBSI team members will travel to south India to offer leadership at this conference and at two other cities in the region—one in the likely area of Bangalore, state of Karnataka, and the other on the coastal city in the western state of Kerala. Juliana Rowe and Ron Coughlin will head up the project. The missions will be targeted to clergy, lay leaders, parents and Christian Educators in the region. Plans are in the formative stage, but team leader Ron Coughlin is very encouraged by the number of people who have signed on to the project. "We are so pleased that people felt so called by the Spirit to join the team to India that the team is already full and in place!" While the cost of the trip is still being negotiated, a good estimate is around \$2,250. The Christian Medical College Hospital of Vellore, in Tamil Nadu, south India will host the group. You can see photos from Linnea and David Good's previous trip to India: [www.goodworksforindia.com/new.html](http://www.goodworksforindia.com/new.html)

## CAMEROON 2018

Organizer : NBSI-Cameroon Coordinator George Vimensi Minang

George is calling for an NBSI team to return to Cameroon in 2018 to provide workshop leadership and planning for a 2018 Cameroon Festival Gathering. To join this mission team, contact Juliana Rowe (boodydede@aol.com) or Beth Galbreath (beth@bethgalbreath.com).

Great things are happening in NBSI Missions abroad. Come aboard! Your time, donations, prayers, and leadership are valued and appreciated.



# Using Accents in Your Storytelling

A Two-Part Performance Series by Pam Faro

## Part Two: “Hollywood Does the Bible And So Do We”

You know those movies of biblical stories, or movies set in biblical times like *Ben-Hur* or *Spartacus*? What’s with the British accents?

Of course: Hollywood movies set in biblical times will be in English.

If the characters were all speaking the original languages of Hebrew, Egyptian, Aramaic, Greek, Latin, etc., it just wouldn’t generally work for the presumed audiences. I suppose the argument could be made for filming in original languages and then providing subtitles – the 2004 Mel Gibson movie *The Passion of the Christ* did just that: it was in Aramaic, Hebrew and Latin. But that was a notable exception to the general practice.

Even for those of us who don’t mind movies with subtitles (you can’t pay my husband to go to one), it makes perfect sense

for Hollywood movies produced for American audiences to use English for all or most of the dialogue. No matter what spot on the globe or what time period, we generally expect and accept that the movies we see will be in the predominant language of the presumed audience: in Hollywood’s case, English.

As biblical storytellers, we certainly tell biblical stories in our own language(s) —precious few of us have the ability and motivation (and audience) to tell in the original Hebrew or Aramaic or Greek. As movie watchers, we expect to go into the theater, or load a DVD, or to stream our movie choice, and to have English as the language we hear.

But what’s with the British accents?

I’ve had this conversation with plenty of people, and chuckled over it with fellow biblical storytellers: It seems

ies,” you get links to discussions and blogs that offer a variety of creative theories: From “it’s based on the King James Bible” to “the actors are using their own accents and many come from Britain;” from “it makes it seem exotic” to “it makes it seem authentic,” to “it’s easier to understand than a Hebrew accent”...?! My favorite is: “I’m guessing they use the British accent because it’s quite old compared to the American/Aussie accents that have only been around a few hundred years”!

In preparation for exploring this question, I will confess to you that I did not perform exhaustive cinematic research by obtaining and (re) watching biblical epics from throughout the decades, but I did think it prudent to do at least some dabbling in online movie clips

in addition to some of the DVDs gathering dust on my shelves.

Imagine my surprise when I discovered that my memory/impression of “the Romans, the Pharisees, and any other characters in positions of authority or upper class always have British accents; and the Jews, the col-

**Precious few of us  
have the ability  
and motivation  
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or Aramaic or Greek**

that so many movies set in biblical times and places have everyone speaking in a British accent. Or, the Romans and Pharisees have a British accent while the “regular folks” are speaking in American accents. What’s that about?

If you google “Accents in biblical mov-

onized, the slaves and workers always have either American accents or Cockney (lower class) British accents"... proved not to be the case.

In *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) it gets a bit turned around as pretty much everyone speaks with a British accent, especially Jesus—which makes sense as it was a British production. But the Roman characters of Pontius Pilate and a centurion, don't...quite... They are played by fine American actors Rod Steiger and Ernest Borgnine... neither of whom, however, was quite able to pull off a British accent.

In the recent (2016) remake of *Ben-Hur*, it seems that everyone, Jew and Roman alike (except for Morgan Freeman's character), speaks with a British accent. (As far as I'm concerned, Morgan Freeman's magnificent voice means he can speak in whatever-the-heck accent he wants...)

In *The Ten Commandments* (1956) it turns out there isn't a lot of British accent happening at all. Actor Cedric Hardwicke does use his native British accent as the Pharaoh Sethi; but Charlton Heston as Moses couldn't be any more American-sounding, while Yul Brynner as Rameses couldn't be any more, well, Yul Brynner-sounding. Nefretiri (Anne Baxter) speaks in clear Mid-Atlantic English, which is the not-quite-British/not-quite-American hybrid accent that was taught in upper class boarding schools across New England in the 1920s-1950s and which was standard for American theater and movies for years.

So what does this have to do with our biblical storytelling?

When it comes to American-made movies set in biblical times, we can notice and perhaps chuckle over the use of British accents. (Even when discovering, as I did, that it's not as universal as I thought it was.) But when we are engaging in our storytelling—a story-

teller, telling and living and breathing the story in and with our body, to and with a live, real-time audience—it can be a crucial choice or issue to be fully conscious of.

There are many questions to seriously consider around using accents in our storytelling. It can be a useful choice, if you have the ability, to employ an accent to communicate something about a character, and/or about power relationships in your story. Or, it may be an inadvisable choice if it may be experienced as a negative stereotype or caricature. The choice is impacted by several issues such as your ability and your audience.



I'm grateful to movie-makers who use their art form to bring stories to life on the big screen—I certainly can draw from many of those movie images to enrich and expand my capacity for imagining the sights and sounds, etc. of the biblical times and settings to employ in my own storytelling.

But I definitely would think twice or more about the question of giving a "ruler" or "upper class" or "authority" figure in one of my stories a British accent (even though I can do a couple)...or a Cockney or some kind of "lower-class" accent to another character. When we are storytelling, we're engaging in something very different from what a movie actor is doing. His or her task is to inhabit and BE a particular person, in the context and cast and under the direction of the film's director —and to employ whatever

accent AS that person is intrinsic to that art form.

As storytellers, we are...well...storytellers! We tell the whole story to our listeners, with all the characters and narration and setting and all. While we each have our abilities and inclinations as to how much we "act out" the story, or "give character voices" (where accents usually come in) to the people in the story, we are and remain storytellers throughout: ourselves, no fourth wall...we tell the story.

We each DO need to use our own authentic selves in our biblical storytelling. There is an argument to be made for each of us retaining our own voices and accents throughout the telling of the story—that's one end of the spectrum of possibilities. There may be some of us for whom using various accents, because of the ability and practice of doing that in daily life, is a natural choice to make.

My favorite movie dialogue (for several reasons), is from the non-biblical *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991), between the Moor Azeem (Morgan Freeman, speaking in whatever accent he wants, as far as I'm concerned) and an English child, seeing a dark-complexioned Moor for the first time:

**Child: Did God paint you?**

**Azeem: Did God paint me?!**

**(laughs) For certain!**

**Child: Why?**

**Azeem: Because Allah loves wondrous variety!**

You, and I, and every storyteller we know...are all over the map in terms of our personalities, our abilities, and our inclinations. Let us make thoughtful choices regarding accents and everything else, while embracing our wondrous variety!

When you support NBS you are supporting our mission. No money is spent on bricks and mortar!

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## NBS International

### *What It Is and Why It Matters*

by Beth Galbreath

International Liaison on the NBSI Board of Directors

The Network of Biblical Storytellers International has always had big, Kingdom-of-God sized dreams! Its mission is simple, focused and huge: to encourage everyone to learn and tell biblical stories. NBSI believes that the Holy Spirit speaks as we share the stories with one another, and that neither the Spirit nor the stories belong to any single nation, or denomination, or theological viewpoint, or storytelling organization!

NBSI's international work, achieved with a modest budget, includes:

► International mission trips through connections with local partners. Such institutes usually result in local NBSI-associated organizations to carry on the work. The institutes are led by NBSI members who volunteer their time and give their money to participate. Current efforts involve India, Cameroon, and Haiti.

► Sharing electronic copies of *The Biblical Storyteller* and "Scholarly Musings" with NBSI members and participants in NBSI institutes, through a monthly international enews. The enews also includes reports from various countries about biblical storytelling institutes, performances and workshops. We often receive feedback that starts "Thank you for the enews/TBS. It has inspired me again... and I'm sharing it with..."

► Scholarships. International participants attending Festival Gathering are also invited to attend the Scholars' Seminar beforehand and the board meeting afterward, and NBSI has a limited amount of money to help folks coming from around the world.

► Nbsmobile.org, a series of teaching videos designed with young urban

folks in mind for whom English is a second language.

► Efforts of individuals and guilds outside the boundaries (and budget) of NBSI but very much in its spirit! Many NBSI folks have traveled with their own church mission trips and taught biblical storytelling. One guild helped launch a biblical storytelling radio show in Cameroon.

International connections give a broader perspective on the work of God on planet Earth in the 21st Century. Humans are, after all, only human, and one perceives through one's own eyes and ears. When one visits and shares the art with others, one sees first-hand that God's work is bigger than any church, bigger than any culture: NBSI missions have partnered with, and learned from, clergy from Catholic to Baptist, from mainline to evangelical to Pentecostal traditions.

And, our international members remind us that the purpose of biblical storytelling is helping people connect with God.

Our international mission participants also testify to the transforming power of biblical storytelling for others: When a woman in Cameroon reports she was inspired by Juliana Rowe's teaching of the Shema to do away with all other objects of devotion. When an older woman in a group of oral learners beams with pride at her telling of scripture. When a young pastor catches a new vision for preaching and teaching. When seminary teachers discover new insights in the stories.

NBSI brings the word alive for people across the globe and our international missions increase cultural and religious understanding.

# pilgrimage

Interfaith experiences in a Florida community by Rev. Drew Willard

*“And the time had come for Jesus to be taken up into Heaven; So he set his face to go to Jerusalem.”*  
Mark 9:51

The tradition of pilgrimages can be found in each of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). In Islam, Muslims give the honorific title of “haji” to any Muslim who has satisfactorily made the pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia at least once in their lifetime.

The experience of becoming a haji had a profound effect on the American black Muslim, Malcolm X, who later said about his experience: “There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blondes to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and the non-white. America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. You may be shocked by these words coming from me. But on this pilgrimage, what I have seen, and experienced, has forced me to rearrange much of my thought patterns previously held.”

Our UCC congregation in Oxford, Florida made a pilgrimage of sorts with the congregation of our local Jewish temple in 2010. We were inspired to walk from the Temple Shalom to our UCC sanctuary as an act of spiritual outreach and solidarity.

In the years since, we have expressed solidarity in other services and programs with the leadership and members of our local Muslim and Jewish congregations. We have an interfaith community Thanksgiving service. On the third Sunday in Advent, we celebrate “Love Sunday” as we light the Advent wreath and remember those of other faith traditions. A quarterly interfaith prayer service has also been created for our community by the Interfaith Prayer Partners in Oxford.

*Pilgrimages as journeys of faith have been significant in the Judeo, Christian, and Islamic traditions:*



Abraham & Sarah leaving the land of Ur (present day Iraq), to find the promised land of Canaan; Moses leading the Hebrews across the Red Sea and through the wilderness back to the Holy Land; Jesus sending out his disciples as he made his way to face his destiny of crucifixion and resurrection in Jerusalem; Christians in the millennia that have followed, venturing out to go on the Pilgrimage Outremer, or the “pilgrimage beyond the sea;” Mo-

hammad instituting the hajj by making the journey to Mecca himself as an example to be followed.

As Americans, we have a worthy legacy from the Protestant Europeans who were called “the Pilgrims”—coming to the New World to find religious freedom. Suffering privations that left half of them dead, three months after their arrival, the English pilgrims were helped by an Indian interpreter named Samoset to form an alliance with the native Wampanoags that would last 50 years. They succeeded because of the personal relationship of trust and friendship that was established between their principle leaders.

The same has been true about the success of our interfaith projects together in Oxford. They succeed because the imam, the rabbi and I know and trust each other, and it is our hope that new friendships will be formed and forged to build on what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the “beloved community.” Finding companions on the path leading to mutuality and respect and a willingness to be open to discovery are what it takes to reach that goal of beloved community.

I encourage your congregation to make a pilgrimage of faith this year by reaching out to members of different faith communities. In the United Church of Christ, we say, “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” I love this expression, as it characterizes a very important part of our shared journey of faith. Isn’t it true for any of us that the hardest journey is the journey from the head to the heart?

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