Chapter 4

Faith Formation and Bible Stories

A Biblical Framework for Nurturing Faith Formation through the Study of Biblical Narratives

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AS SCRIPTURE TEACHERS, WE may unintentionally reduce biblical narratives to a values-education program, making them engaging entertainment, self-help stories, cautionary tales or a collection of 'good' stories. An essential aspect of faith formation involves nurturing the personal love of, knowledge about, and interactive engagement with biblical narratives (Bible stories) on both an intellectual and a relational level, so the following *Four H's Biblical Framework* (four- phase process) was designed to assist Scripture Teachers as they nurture a student's faith formation through an engaging and interactive 21st century transformational approach to studying biblical narratives.

Bible Stories and Narrative Schema

Everyone relates to stories. Stories have universal appeal. They connect people, present them with new ideas, motivate them, and challenge their thinking (Fisher 2014). Beck (2008) states that, "Perhaps it is these characteristics of the story that led an all-knowing God to introduce the divine Person to us by using this literary tool" (3). Chronicled in a library of sixty-six books (Old and New Testament), the sacred story is told through a variety of literary genres with the main literary genres, according to Crain (2010), being poetry, prose (narrative), and drama. However, Barton (2010), Beck (2008), Fee & Stuart (1993), Harrison (2015), and Ryken

(1984) all point out the dominance of the narrative genre evidenced in twenty-two of the sixty-six Bible books.

Crain (2010) suggests that by using literary genre conventions to study the Bible, the reader can dig deeper into the story; discover the themes, setting, characters; and points of view while illuminating the biblical writer's message. In the narrative classification or genre, writers use the terms *story* and *narrative* interchangeably because, as Fee & Stuart (1993) indicate, "narratives are stories" (78). Bratcher (2013) reasons that the two terms are synonymous since they have identical literary forms, i.e., structure, style, narrative elements and language features (Lee 2001); both forms have a linear story line; and both have identical key elements of plot structure, characters, setting, theme, and conflict (Trischitta 2008; Walch 2015). Interestingly, the narrative's plot structure can likewise be defined using synonymous terminology (Barwick 1999; Trischitta 2008).

A biblical narrative, Fee & Stuart (1993) state, is their term of preference when referring to Bible stories because:

1. they believe that the contemporary understanding of stories "has come to mean something that is fictional";
2. the term, "narrative" is a technical term that is more objective and less prejudicial; and
3. stories usually mean a single or individual story that stands alone with its "single set of characters and single plot." (79)

For these outlined reasons the term "biblical narrative" is the author's term of choice for this chapter.

The Biblical Metanarrative

Christians believe the Bible contains the true story of the world; therefore we embrace the biblical story as our metanarrative or grand story (Stonehouse & May 2008). The Bible, according to Gibson (2016), is a grand narrative "rich with interesting characters in an unfolding saga of infinite love, horrific loss and glorious restoration at last. It tells of a God who loves each of us more than His own existence; one who would rather die forever than live without us" (12). Walch (2015) sees the metanarrative as a unifying story that helps us understand the details of the individual stories. White (1952) further suggests that, "the central theme of the Bible, the theme about which every other in the whole book clusters, is the redemption plan, the restoration in the human soul of the image of God" (125).

Without the entire story as the overarching backdrop, individual narratives and episodes may lead to incorrect assumptions or misinterpretations. It is important to remember, says Ryken (1984), that, "the episodes relate to each other in the unfolding progress of the story" (49). Described as an epic, overarching, explanatory story (that provides objective reasoning and justification for Christian beliefs, morality, and identity), the Christian metanarrative employs a typical narrative form or schema (Table 1) that incorporates many of the various forms of narrative (poetry, allegory, parables, biography, etc.) to showcase and explain this grand story (Fisher 2014).

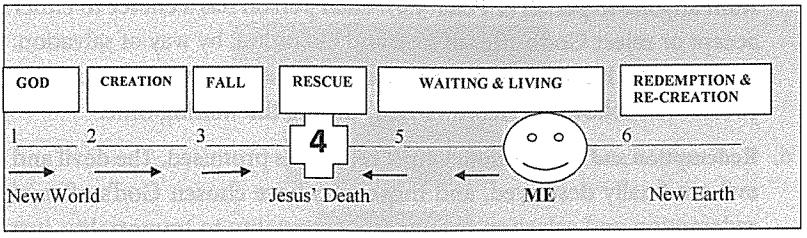
Table 1. The biblical metanarrative schema (Fisher, 2010)

Biblical Metanarrative	Narrative Episodes	Biblical Roots
The Orientation	1. Triune Godhead	Old Testament stories point to the Cross and the promise of salvation.
Setting, Characters	2. Creation	
Complication	3. The Fall	
The Resolution	4. The Rescue	New Testament stories look back to the Cross and claim salvation has come.
	5. Waiting and Living	
Conclusion	6. Redemption and Re-creation	

The Christian metanarrative, as found in the Bible, is a progressive, linear narrative (Figure 1), not cyclic as in Hinduism, and tells the story of the great cosmic conflict set in typical narrative structure (Fisher 2010). This supernatural cosmic power struggle has been described by the contemporary theologian Boyd (2016), as a "Warfare Worldview," while Eldredge's (2004) book, *Epic: The story God is telling*, outlines God's role and our human role in this universal conflict. The interaction between the two opposing forces in the cosmic conflict is highlighted in the following comment by Rasi (1995):

> It centres on two conflicting views of God's character and principles: one that considers God as loving, gracious and just; the other that considers God as arbitrary, unjust, and unfair. Our world has become a battle-ground for these opposing forces of good and evil, and the battle is played out principally through human lives. (E8)

Figure 1. The Linear Biblical Metanarrative Condensed into a Timeline (Fisher, 2010, p. 120)



Following is an explanation of the numbered chapters (1–6) on Fisher's (2010) condensed linear biblical metanarrative timeline in Figure 1.

1. **God:** The Trinity (God, Christ and Holy Spirit) exists in a perfect world (Genesis 1:1, John 1:1). Lucifer, a created being, leads a rebellion against God (Isaiah 14:12–14, Revelation 12:7). Lucifer is cast out of God's kingdom and becomes the devil (Satan) (Revelation 12:8–9).
2. **Creation:** God creates His earthly kingdom in six days. On the seventh-day God creates the Sabbath, a God-relational space, says Gibson (2016), where God receives "reciprocated love from His creation" (p. 40). God creates man and woman in His image with a free will (Genesis 1 & 2).
3. **The Fall:** Satan introduces the spirit of rebellion (Genesis 3) on Earth through Adam and Eve's rebellious choice (Roy 1999). Satan now claims to be the ruler of the earthly kingdom. Roy (1999) writes, "He questions God's character, the fairness of His law, His right to rule and Jesus' right to save sinners from eternal death" (E4). Satan is in daily conflict with God concerning who will control people's lives and to whose kingdom they will show allegiance (Ephesians 6:12).
4. **Rescue:** This confirms Christ's right to be the ruler of the earthly kingdom and guarantees the eventual destruction of evil and Satan (Romans 5:19). Roy (1999) says that:

> Through Christ's life of perfect obedience to God's will, His suffering, death and resurrection, God provided the only means of paying for, and escaping from, sin. The resurrection of Jesus Christ proclaims God's victory over sin. (E4)

5. **Waiting and Living:** God is now waiting before He reclaims His earthly kingdom because He wants everyone to (a) see the results and

consequences of giving allegiance to Satan; and (b) have the opportunity (John 3:16) to know God as King and Lord because He does not want anyone to perish (2 Peter 3:9). Each person has a choice to either accept or reject God's offer of love and liberation, by way of salvation, and eternity. He sends the Holy Spirit and the angels to comfort and protect His followers (Hebrews 1:14) during the waiting time.

6. **Redemption and Re-Creation:** Christ returns as promised. The devil and evil are finally destroyed, and those who have chosen God's offer of redemption and salvation change from mortality to immortality, just as it was before the *Fall*. God's character has been vindicated before the entire universe. A perfect re-created world has returned (Revelation 21:1–7).

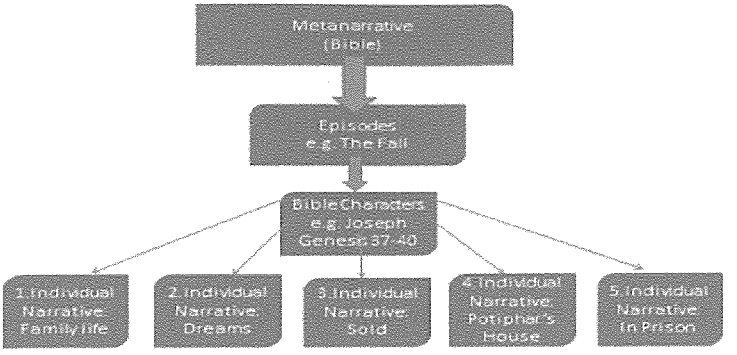
To be effective nurturers in the faith formation of their students, Scripture Teachers need to be able to identify their part in this grand story before they can assist any child to identify his/her personal role in this ongoing daily spiritual drama.

Biblical Narratives: Their Role and Function in the Bible

The biblical narrative's role, state Fee and Stuart (2014), is to "*demonstrate* God's involvement in this world and *illustrate* his principles and calling" (110). Fee and Stuart further point out that the Old Testament narratives are used to illustrate doctrines that are "taught propositionally elsewhere" in the Bible (111) and demonstrate conflicts and tensions that need to be resolved. For Corcoran (2007), biblical narratives "depict the universals in human existence" (41) and tell us about life as a part of salvation history. Ryken (1984) adds that the biblical narratives also reveal that people still behave the way they did in Bible times "and with the same dire results" (73). White (1952) further argues that: "As an educator no part of the Bible is of greater value than are its biographies. These biographies differ from all others in that they are absolutely true to life" (146). It is important to note that these biographies are not just true to life, they are *true*.

When the Bible is regarded as having hierarchical narrative order, then individual stories can be placed in their contextual framework (as illustrated in Figure 2). Beck (2008) points out that biblical narratives are designed to be interdependent because: "A Bible story never stands alone, but is always placed within the literary context where it interacts within a larger family of stories" (14).

Figure 2. The Relationship between the Metanarrative, Episodes, Bible Characters and Individual Narratives



A Framework for Interpreting and Applying Biblical Narratives

The *Four H's Biblical Framework (Four H's)* is a four-phase process *(History, Head, Heart, and Hand)* that can support the interpretation of, reflection upon, and engagement with biblical narratives in the 21st century. It aims to connect the students with God through thoughtful interactions with the Christian biblical grand epic and its individual narrative episodes on a personal and relational level. This framework highlights the fact that we are not spectators in God's Big Drama of the Ages but players, or actors, with a specific charter.

When studying biblical narratives, the *Four H's (History, Head, Heart, and Hand)* are designed to place equal emphasis on each of the four phases, ensuring a balance is given to both biblical knowledge and life-application. Knowledge of narrative genre is beneficial when implementing the *Four H's* because:

1. understanding narrative plot structure can assist Scripture Teachers when portraying and interpreting a biblical narrative because: setting, characters, and action, and the interaction between these three elements, are the building blocks of stories (Ryken 1984);
2. Harrison (2015) points out that, "Recognising (sic) the genre of each passage helps us to know how it was intended to be understood" (1660); and

3. individual biblical narratives can be placed and understood within the context of the Christian metanarrative.

When teaching a Scripture Lesson, teachers generally divide the experience into three main sections: **Introduction; Narration and Discussion;** and **Conclusion.** The *Four H's* can be applied in all three sections of Scripture Lessons. For example:

(a) During the Lesson **Introduction**, *History, Head or Heart* phases can be utilized to HOOK students, or gain their attention;

(b) Next, the **Narration** of the biblical narrative and its **Discussion** can incorporate the *Head and History* phases to provide the setting, essential background information and a knowledge base for studying and interpreting the biblical narrative;

(c) Once the biblical knowledge base has been established and developed, then spiritual engagement and a commitment response from the *Heart* phase becomes appropriate;

(d) A **Discussion** of how the Cosmic Conflict is evident in this biblical narrative, along with our personal role in the Cosmic Conflict, is appropriate during the *Head* and *Heart* stage of the lesson; and

(e) Finally, during the **Conclusion** section of the Scripture Lesson the *Hand* and *Heart* phases can initiate discussions about applying the lesson to the student's life and discovering ways to engage in personal outreach (Fisher, 2016).

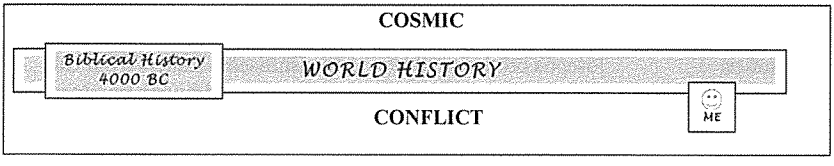
The *Four H's Biblical Framework* Defined and Explained

> ***1. History:*** *listening and discovering. An overview of where the biblical narrative fits into the biblical metanarrative. It includes Bible reading, biblical history, world history, cultural information, maps, and timelines (Fisher 2010).*

All biblical narratives are about actual people and places set in Jewish, Middle Eastern cultures and times. The *History* phase sets the scene for the biblical narrative as it considers the historical setting and context of the biblical narrative while also identifying its biblical reference and location. Including background information provides an opportunity for students to meet Bible characters as real people in a real world (who slept, ate, cried, laughed, and had the same temptations and problems as they do).

By placing the biblical narrative in the larger context of the cosmic conflict metanarrative, it shows an epic saga already in progress that involves historical, biblical, and contemporary individuals. By providing a sense of the narrative's context, Walch (2015) argues that Scripture Teachers can assist students to understand their part and place in this grand narrative. Bratcher (2013) further adds that "while the story itself may be studied on its own for its own message, the surrounding stories, the flow of thought of the larger work, as well as its historical and cultural setting, affect how the individual story is to be heard (1). Scripture Teachers need to be aware of inadvertently teaching biblical narratives as history lessons, with little or no relevance to the 21st century, so the interplay of world history, biblical history, and the cosmic conflict needs to be addressed. Figure 3 is an example of how to demonstrate the interrelationship of these historical timeframes.

Figure 3. The Relationship between Biblical History, World History, and Contemporary History (Fisher, 2010, p. 168)



Commercially prepared time charts can be helpful to illustrate how Biblical history is a cultural subset of the larger context of world history. One example of a comprehensive biblical and world history time chart is: *The Timechart History of the World: 6000 Years of World History Unfolded* (Gibbons, 2004). It provides students and Scripture Teachers with an opportunity to see how biblical characters and historical figures fit into the larger picture of a cosmic conflict (Fisher 2010).

> 2. **Head:** *learning and knowing (Fisher 2010). Knowledge of God evident in biblical narratives; familiarity with narrative genre; relationships between episodes and individual narrative plot structure (orientation, complication, resolution, and conclusion); and the metanarrative.*

The *Head* phase builds on the contextual knowledge gained in the *History* phase. Students need the opportunity to observe God's extravagant, forgiving love, to see His power to change people's lives, to witness a Bible character's active faith, and to comprehend the consequences and results of personal choices (Fisher 2014). Narrative genre structure has

the potential to assist teachers and students in reaching this goal. During the *Head* phase, therefore, students need personal access to an appropriate version of the Bible so that they can individually read the biblical narrative being studied and become familiar with God's written word through regular interaction and engagement.

Table 2 demonstrates how, using the story of Joseph (and his multicolored coat), a narrative plot structure can highlight the main points of the narrative.

Table 2. An example of a biblical narrative plot structure

Narrative Plot Structure Outline	**EXAMPLE:** An Old Testament Biblical Narrative Joseph: his multicolored coat and family interactions
Orientation	Joseph lives in a dysfunctional family in the Middle Eastern desert
Complication	Joseph's father is perceived to favor Joseph above his brothers by giving Joseph a multicolored coat
Resolution	Joseph's brothers sell him to the Ishmaelite traders from Gilead who are on their way to Egypt, thus ridding themselves of the troublemaker
Conclusion	Joseph lives as a slave in Egypt. Many years later God's loving foreknowledge is demonstrated when Joseph saves his family

The narrative plot structure, states Bratcher (2013), reminds the Scripture Teacher that the plot of the individual biblical narrative is specifically "related to the point (message) of the story" (1) and the students are assisted to help remember the major points of the narrative while also gaining an understanding and knowledge of "how the conflict is resolved (or not)" (1). Bratcher further states that "biblical narratives do not tell us everything about an event; they are selective and focused on those elements that contribute to the plot, and cannot be made to address every question we might want to ask of the story (1).

Once the biblical narrative has been placed in its historical and cultural context, then the "freezer dried" narrative is brought to life using multisensory and modality-based experiences (visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile) and resources as demonstrated by the examples in Table 3.

Table 3. Biblical narrative multisensory and modality-based ideas

• Touching thorns	• Listening to music
• Smelling perfume	• Feeling lamb's wool
• Making unleavened bread	• Holding sand
• Imagining that you are a bystander in the Bible story and then describing the scene	• Using puppets • 'Stepping-out' the size of Noah's ark

Multisensory questions, according to Ryan (2001), can engage the students in the narrative through creative imagination (See examples in Table 4). Engaging the imagination when reading a biblical narrative, Ryken (1984) states, "is the first requirement for reading biblical narrative" (34) because it involves personal interaction.

Table 4. Examples of multisensory questions

Sounds: What sounds can you hear around you in this narrative?

Sights: In this narrative what can you see happening around you?

Smells: What are the dominant odors you are experiencing as you witness this narrative?

Touch: What textures can you feel and touch during this biblical narrative?

Taste: What possible tastes might you encounter in this biblical narrative?

A biblical narrative can be perceived as a good moral story unless it is brought to life by the Scripture Teacher and the power of the Holy Spirit (Fisher 2016). Stonehouse (1998) observed: "If the stories have become real to us, the children will sense our excitement and join us, through their imaginations, in the story" (161). Bringing the biblical narrative to life is the goal of the *Head* phase.

> 3. ***Heart:*** *loving and responding (Fisher 2010). Opportunity for spiritual (emotional) engagement; heartfelt commitment and a reflective response to the biblical narrative.*

The *Heart* phase is where engagement with and response to the narrative at an emotional and reflective level is encouraged. For the *Heart* phase to be an effective internalization phase it is essential that previous interaction

and engagement with the *History* and *Head* phases has occurred. Without these introductory phases (*History* and *Head*) it is possible that a *Heart* response may lack the intellectual information that supports transformational faith formation, conviction, and personal commitment. Rice's (2014) words summarize the goal of the *Heart* phase: to create a heartfelt longing and to provide the opportunity for an "intellectual decision to act on God's Word" (1).

During the *Heart* phase students are encouraged to enter the grand narrative and create their own faithful versions (Wright 1991). With spiritual wisdom and insight being vicariously experienced through biblical narrative, this opportunity can provide unique, age-appropriate transformational learning and faith formation opportunities for all students. Barwick (1999) states that a narrative portrays a theme or message that the listener responds to in "a reflective, imaginative or emotional manner" (4). While DeVries (2015) argues that, "well-crafted stories feed our imaginations to step beyond the factual limits of our own particular lives" (1). Beckwith (2004) reminds Scripture Teachers that students need to be given the opportunity to interact with the Bible as a way of seeing God's overarching story and purpose in the world. So identifying with and discussing a biblical character's actions, as demonstrated in a biblical narrative, is one way that students can engage in reflection and response to further their faith formation.

Reflective questions, (see Table 5), also have the potential to provide students with an opportunity to internalize, reflect upon, interpret and emotionally engage with the biblical narrative. A simple 'Yes/No' question can become a reflective question when 'Why? or Why not?' is included (see Question 3 in Table 5 below). Scripture Teachers can design rhetorical questions for personal and private reflection while a variety of group reflective questions can be planned for small group interactions (Fisher 2016).

Table 5. Examples of *Heart* Reflective Questions and Discussion Starters (Fisher, 2016)

1. McNabb & Mabry (1990) suggest the following questions: "How would your life be different if you really took this Bible passage seriously?" and "What is God saying to me through this biblical narrative?" (27).
2. Explain which character in the biblical narrative would remind you of Jesus. Why?
3. Are you like or unlike any of the characters in the biblical narrative? Why/Why not?

4. What is the Good News for you in this biblical narrative? Why?
5. How can learning about Bible characters help you to be more like Jesus?
6. What attributes of God's character are demonstrated in this biblical narrative? Why and how?
7. What have you learned about God's 'extravagant' love from this biblical narrative?
8. How has this narrative impacted your life? Why?
9. If you had been part of or witnessed this biblical narrative, how do you think you would have reacted? Why?
10. What have you learned about the 21st century cosmic conflict from studying this biblical narrative? Why?

Developing discernment and problem-solving skills are imperative in the 21st century because Christian students are constantly bombarded by the values and attitudes portrayed via the media. So applying God's word to the *Heart* and becoming reflective thinkers, rather than echoing the thoughts of others, can be encouraged through engaging, interactive, non-judgmental question and discussion opportunities provided in the *Heart* phase.

> *4. **Hand:** living and giving (Fisher 2010). This phase explores how students can apply and implement the metanarrative in their lives and ways of sharing it with others in their community.*

The fourth phase of the *Four H's* involves an acknowledgment that Christian students, committed to a relationship with God (*Heart*) can share God's love to a needy world (*Hand*). Once a person steps into God's story and begins to create his or her story, then, according to Shortt (2014), he or she has a responsibility to invite others to step into the story with him or her so they can experience it together. This external action validates a genuine *Heart* internal response because as Rice (2014) comments: "Without an authentic external action our internal response may prove ineffective" (1).

To assist teachers in applying the *Hand* phase of the *Four H's* a selection of suggested questions and application ideas are listed in Table 6.

Table 6. Examples of *Hand* Questions (Fisher, 2016)

1. How can you share with others the biblical narrative's message about God's love?

(As a class group, develop a list of ways to share the special message from the current Bible story about God's love that is non-confrontational)

2. Why is it important to learn about Bible people and their stories?

   (Compare a well-known current local "Hero" and his or her lifestyle choices with those of a Bible character)

3. What is the difference between "being" and "acting as" a Christian?

   (Ask the students to form small groups and discuss the role that 21st century social media plays in influencing personal Christianity. With student collaboration, create a set of media viewing guidelines for Christians)

4. What is your role in the cosmic conflict?

   (Create a collage of all the events in the newspaper for one day that illustrate the cosmic conflict. Identity how the cosmic conflict is evident in the classroom)

Four H's Implementation

It should be noted that the four phases of the *Four H's* framework are not necessarily used in chronological order, often overlap, and may occur several times during the lesson. *History* and *Head* knowledge are powerless without a *Heart* response and a *Heart* response provides the impetus for *Hands* to demonstrate a personal and committed relationship to Jesus Christ (Fisher 2016).

While each phase of the *Four H Biblical Framework* is necessary, if this transformational, interactive, and engaging biblical study approach is to be realized then a positive and affirming interaction between the Scripture Teacher and students is paramount. According to McNabb and Mabry (1990), "Our job as Bible storytellers is more than getting our students to understand what the Bible says about a particular issue; we must help them understand what God is saying to them personally" (21). This is the specific and all-encompassing goal of the *Four H's Biblical Framework*.

Conclusion

Over 60 years ago, White (1952) wrote that: "The teaching of the Bible should have our freshest thought, our best methods, and our most earnest effort" (186). This statement, written in the 20th century, is still relevant in

the 21st century. However, we cannot rely on the previous generation's methodology to reach today's contemporary student. In this generation, young people and children live in a constantly-changing society; have unique life-style issues, and experience the world differently. So Scripture Teachers need to constantly seek for the "best methods" and ideas to meet these contemporary challenges while also ensuring that Bible teaching "has our freshest thought." Students will see that Scripture Lessons are relevant, appropriate and meaningful for all age groups and learning abilities when it engages the teacher's "most earnest effort." The *Four H's* can support teachers as they strive to reach this goal. God has asked teachers to sow the seed. He has promised that He will look after the harvest (Fisher 2016).

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