

Preface

Several years ago, I wrote a book called *Anyone Can Tell a Story*. It was written, as the title suggests, for anyone who wanted to tell *any* kind of story.

Since I wrote that book, seven or eight years ago, I have learned a lot more about the art of storytelling. During that time, as well as retelling many old favourites, I have also rewritten and retold a lot more stories, most of them from the Bible. So it makes sense, I think, to pass on what I have learned, and also to do it in the context of biblical storytelling, since that is the area in which I have gained the most experience.

As a result, some of the content of *this* book has been carried over from the previous one (no point in re-inventing the wheel!). But a lot of it is new, and reflects my experience and discoveries in those intervening years.

Anyone Can Tell a Bible Story is broken up into five chapters. The first gives a history of my “storytelling life”. You will see that I had no formal training in the art; I just picked it up as I went along, learning by trial and error. Since that is the case, I think you may find it helpful to trace that progress and, I hope, learn something from my journey, as well.

The next chapter is all about my philosophy of storytelling. Don’t be afraid. I use the term “philosophy” loosely. However, I think that if you’re going to do something well, it helps to know why you’re doing what you do – the theory needs to come before the “nuts and bolts”. And because I believe that storytelling works largely because it is relational in nature, I outline the four relationships that are at the heart of biblical storytelling.

In the following chapter, I look at how stories “work”, and show how I take a Bible story apart and then put it back together as a retelling. I will also explain how this process will help you discover the elements of a story that will make it “shine” for you – and help you retell it yourself with passion and enthusiasm.

In the fourth chapter, I set out the (mostly) traditional tips and

techniques that storytellers use to engage their audiences and make them a part of the story. It's essentially the process of "de-audience-ification"!

Finally, I have included a chapter on reading the Bible in public, largely because I think there is a crying need for it (I have certainly shed the odd tear during that part of the service). Much of what makes good biblical storytelling work can also be applied to the public reading of the Bible.

At the end of each of the first four chapters (and at the end of some sections within them), you will find a set of stories which I have selected to illustrate the key points of that chapter. These include brand new stories and some old ones – mostly from books that are now out of print. Before each story, I explain how it fits into the chapter and suggest some "telling tips" that you can use to bring that story to life.

I have tried to make this book as user-friendly as possible, and I hope that it works for you. Even more, I hope that it helps you to become a better storyteller. As I say at the start of every workshop I lead, I don't have all the answers and no two storytellers are alike. All I can do is to share what has worked for me. If it is of some help to you, as well, then this book will have achieved its purpose.

Introduction

When we were kids, my brothers and I used to take turns spending the weekend with our Grandma Brosi. As is often the case with grandparents, she would let us do all the things that our mum and dad wouldn't. This included consuming large quantities of sweets, fizzy drinks and sugared cereals, and, best of all, staying up well past our bedtime on a Saturday night. Usually, that was seven-thirty or eight o'clock. Grandma, however, would always let us stay up and watch *Chiller Theater*, which didn't even start until the late-night news had finished at eleven!

Chiller Theater was a Pittsburgh institution. It was hosted by the local TV weatherman, dressed up like Dracula, and featured both some of the best and some of the cheesiest black-and-white horror films. We'd sit there in the dark, chewing on sweets, gulping down Cokes and scaring ourselves silly before crawling reluctantly into bed.

The following morning, Grandma Brosi would teach our Sunday school class – and, somehow, all that creepy stuff from the night before would find its way into the Bible stories that she told! Battles were brilliant! Evil kings were really nasty! And I can't even begin to describe the way in which she depicted the demise of wicked Queen Jezebel! Or recounted how Queen Athalia ascended to the throne of Judah by murdering all but one of her grandchildren, step by gory step! What I can say, though, is that those stories stuck. I can remember, to this day, how she told us about the tenth Egyptian plague – the death of the firstborn – and then looked around the room at those of us who were the oldest in our families, and solemnly said, "That would be you, Sammy. And you, Chucky. And," (pointing her bony finger in my direction) "you, Bobby, too!"

Biblical storytelling can do one of two things. It can excite and inspire and create a thirst for more. Or it can bore and embarrass and leave a group with a sad sense of “so what?” And that’s an important difference if you believe, as I do, that those stories contain something essential about who we are and who God is. It’s that collision, I think – my story and God’s story – that leads to faith, and also has been instrumental in my development as a storyteller, in general, and more particularly, as someone who is committed to telling Bible stories with as much passion and wit and creativity as I can muster. So I’ll start off by telling you my story. A storyteller’s story. But before that, I thought you might like to read some examples of the kinds of stories my Grandma liked to tell.

Athalia – The Wicked Granny’s Tale

As this book started with my Grandma Brosi and her unique approach to biblical storytelling, I thought it might be nice to offer some examples of the kind of stories that my grandma told me.

This is an obscure story, to be sure, from 2 Chronicles 22–23. In fact, when I mention it in churches, I often get blank stares. But it’s one that my grandma told a lot, which is strange in a way, since it’s all about a grandmother who murders her grandchildren so she can become Queen of Judah! Frankly, I’m just happy that I never had anything Grandma wanted. The story was originally in *More Bible Baddies*, a collection which is now out of print.

Telling tips: *Just enter into the spirit of the thing – that’s what Grandma would have done – a mad smile on her face as Athalia’s wickedness is revealed, and an even madder one at her comeuppance.*

Sweet and gentle. Wise and kind. Kitchens rich with the smell of fresh-baked treats. That’s what grannies are like!

But Athalia was not your typical granny.

She was cruel and ambitious, deceitful and sly. And she had never baked a biscuit in her life! Evil plots were her speciality, and she cooked

one up the moment she heard that her son, the king, was dead.

She gathered her guards around her. She whispered the recipe in their ears. And even though they were used to violence and to war, they could not hide the horror in their eyes.

“Yes, I know they’re my grandsons,” Athalia sneered. “But I want you to kill them, so that I, and I alone, will inherit the throne!”

Athalia was not your typical granny. And she hadn’t been much of a mother either. So perhaps that is why her daughter, Jehosheba, was not surprised when she peeped into the hallway and saw soldiers marching, swords drawn, towards the nursery door.

Jehosheba had a choice. She could rush to the nursery and throw herself in front of her little nephews – and be killed along with them, more likely than not. Or she could creep back into the room from which she’d come, and try to save the king’s youngest son – the baby she’d been playing with when she’d heard the soldiers pass.

The cries from the nursery answered her question. She was already too late, and she cursed the palace guards for their speed and efficiency. Speed was what she needed, as well, for she could hear the guards’ voices coming her way.

“Did we get them all?”

“We’d better get them all?”

“The queen will have our heads if we’ve missed one.”

And so they burst into each room, one by one, down the long palace hall, and Jehosheba had time – barely enough time – to wrap her hand round the baby’s mouth and duck into a cupboard.

“Don’t cry,” she prayed, as the soldiers grunted and shuffled around the room. “Please don’t cry.”

“No one here,” someone said at last. But Jehosheba stayed in that cupboard, as still as a statue, long after they had left the room. Then she wrapped up the baby in an old blanket and bundled him off to her home in the temple precincts.

Athalia stared sternly at her soldiers.

“So you killed them? Every last one?” she asked.

“Every last one,” they grunted back. And Athalia’s stare turned into an evil grin.

“Then tell me about it,” she ordered. “And don’t leave out one tiny detail.”

When the guards had finished their story, Athalia sent them out of the room, and then she tossed back her head and cackled.

“At last. At last! AT LAST! Queen of Judah. Mother of the nation. That has a nice ring to it. And my parents... my parents would be so proud!”

Across the temple precincts, Jehosheba’s husband, Jehoiada, however, had a very different reaction.

“Well, what did you expect?” he fumed, when Jehosheba told him about the murder of their nephews. “With a father like Ahab and a mother like Jezebel... well, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree!”

“But I’m HER daughter!” Jehosheba protested. “You don’t mean to say...”

“No. NO!” Jehoiada assured his wife, as he wrapped his arms around her. “I didn’t mean that at all. You are a wonderful mother – a good woman who knows the One True God. And because of your love and courage little Joash, here, is still alive.”

“The true ruler of Judah,” Jehosheba added. “If only the people knew. You’re the high priest. Perhaps you could tell them...”

“Even if they knew, they would do nothing,” Jehoiada sighed. “Athalia is much too powerful, and they are still entranced by the false gods she worships. No, we must wait – wait until they have seen through her evil ways. And then, and only then, dare we show this little fellow to them. Meanwhile, we shall hide him here, in the high priest’s quarters, in the temple of the One True God. For this is the last place your wicked mother will want to visit.”

One year passed. And while little Joash learned to crawl and then to walk, his evil grandmother was busy murdering anyone who dared to take a step against her.

Two years passed. And as Joash spoke his first words and toddled around the temple, Athalia sang the praises of the false god Baal and offered him the blood of human sacrifice.

Three years, four years, five years passed. And as Joash grew into a

little boy, the people of Judah grew tired of Athalia's evil ways.

Six years passed, then seven. And when Joash was finally old enough to understand who he was, Jehoiada decided that the time had come to tell the nation, as well.

"We must be very careful," he explained to his wife. "The palace guards are finally on our side, but your mother still has some support among the people. We mustn't show our hand too soon."

"So how will you do it?" Jehosheba asked.

"On the sabbath, it is the usual custom for two thirds of the palace guard to stay at the temple while the others return to the palace to protect the queen. Tomorrow, however, the bodyguards will leave as expected, but they will not go to the palace. Instead they will return to the temple by another route and help to protect young Joash, should anything happen."

"Ah!" Jehosheba smiled. "So Joash will be surrounded by the entire palace guard – while my mother will be left with no soldiers to do her bidding!"

"Exactly!" Jehoiada grinned back.

When the sabbath came, the people gathered in the temple, as usual, to worship the One True God. But there was nothing usual about what happened at the end of the service. Jehoiada, the high priest, led a little boy out in front of the crowd. Then he placed a crown on that little boy's head. And while the palace guard gathered round the child, the high priest shouted:

"Behold, people of Judah! Behold your true king! Behold Joash, son of Ahaziah!"

All was silent for a moment and then someone cheered. Someone else joined in and soon the cheering filled the temple and echoed from there to the palace, where Athalia was waiting, wondering what had happened to her guards.

She was old and frail now, but as wicked and as stubborn as ever!

"What's going on? What's all the noise about?" she muttered as she hobbled out of the palace and across to the temple.

"Out of my way! Get out of my way!" she ordered. And the crowd parted before her. And that's when something caught her eye – a glint, a

gleaming from the little king's crown.

"What's the meaning of this?" she glared. "This looks like treason to me!"

"Not treason, Athalia," said the high priest. "But the true king of Judah restored to his rightful throne – Joash, your grandson!"

"My grandson?" Athalia shuddered. "But I thought... I mean... my soldiers... they told me..."

"That they had murdered them all?" asked Jehoiada. "Is that what you meant to say? Well, in their haste to fulfil your wicked ambition, they missed one – the one who stands before you now. The true king of Judah!"

"Treason!" shouted the old woman again, but her words were stifled by the palace guard that quickly surrounded her.

"Where are we going? What are you doing?" she demanded to know as they led her away. "I'm an old woman – a grandmother – don't push me!"

"Don't worry, granny," one of the guards whispered in her ear. "This won't take long. Remember what you had us do to your grandsons all those years ago? Well we're going to do the same thing to you now!"

Athalia shrieked, but only the guards heard her final cry, for the crowds were still cheering – cheering for Athalia's grandson and for the end of her wicked reign.

Ahab and Jezebel – The Rotten Ruler's Tale

Here's another Scary Matriarch Special. And it will come as no surprise that it's related to the previous story. That's right, Jezebel was Athalia's mum! Apples. Falling. Trees.

As you will see, I have tried to explore the humour in this tale (or perhaps, in memory of Grandma, simply invented it). But it does strike me that Ahab's determination to match the evil of his wife is consistent with what the Bible has to say about her leading him astray. This originally came from *More Bible Baddies*, as well.

Telling tips: *This story needs to be told with your tongue firmly planted in your cheek, and a hint of that mad smile again wouldn't do any harm, either.*

King Ahab wanted to be wicked. He wanted it in the worst kind of way! But he lacked the courage. And he lacked the imagination. And worst of all, he lacked the will – the “killer instinct” that true wickedness demands.

His queen, Jezebel, however, lacked nothing. She was, without question, the most wicked woman he had ever met. And this just made things worse. For, given her expertise at evil, her artistic flair for foul play, he could never hope to impress her with any wickedness of his own.

She sensed this, of course (even the most wicked have their compassionate side), and tried her best to cheer him up.

“Who’s the wicked one, then?” she would ask playfully over breakfast.

And Ahab would blush and lower his eyes and answer coyly, “You don’t mean me, do you, darling?”

“Of course I do!” she would coo. “Who betrayed his own people? Who put my god, Baal, in place of Yahweh the god of Israel? Who murdered Yahweh’s prophets? And who chased his true believers into hiding? It was you, my dear – that’s who. Wicked King Ahab!”

“Well, I couldn’t have done it alone,” he would mutter in a humble, “aw-shucks” sort of way. “I had a wonderfully wicked wife to help me.”

“Nonsense!” Jezebel would blush in return. “You’re quite wonderfully wicked all on your own!”

Then the conversation would turn to the weather (dry, *always* dry), or to the state of the economy (failing crops, starving cattle), and ultimately to that pesky prophet, Elijah, who had somehow managed to stop the rains from falling.

“If I ever get hold of him,” Ahab would rant, “I’ll murder him – right there on the spot!”

“I’ll do more than that!” Jezebel would counter. “I’ll torture him – slowly – and stand there and laugh as he dies!”

“I’ll rip off his fingers!” Ahab would return.

“I’ll tear out his hair!” Jezebel would shriek.

And on and on it would go, until the two of them would collapse in fits of evil laughter, and then set off to do their day’s worth of evil deeds. It was, on the whole, a sick sort of relationship. But it seemed to work.

One morning, however, King Ahab failed to appear at the breakfast table. And when Jezebel found him – on his bed, in his room – he had a woefully *unwicked* expression on his face.

“What’s the matter, dear?” Jezebel chirped. “Run out of prophets to kill?”

“No,” Ahab sighed. “Something much worse than that. It’s the vineyard, next door.”

“Naboth’s vineyard?” queried Jezebel. “What could possibly be the problem with Naboth’s vineyard?”

“It’s in the way!” Ahab moaned. “That’s the problem! My little garden is much too small. I want to put in some cabbages next year. And some sprouts. And two more rows of those little potatoes you like so well. But his stupid vineyard is right smack up against the property line. I’ve offered to buy it. I’d give him more than what it’s worth. But the selfish so-and-so refuses to sell! So what can I do?”

Jezebel tried hard to hide her disappointment. There were plenty of things that Ahab could do. He was king, after all! And a wicked king (or a wicked wannabe), as well. The answer was obvious. But would telling him, straight up, snuff out the spark of true villainy she had worked so hard to ignite? Would it fracture his already brittle evil self-esteem? In the end, she decided that a simple demonstration would be the clearest (and, surely, the most compassionate) response of all.

“Leave it to me,” she said quietly. Then she turned the conversation to the weather.

And, later that day, while Ahab was out digging in the garden, Jezebel sneaked into his office and picked up his pen. She wrote letters to all the elders and noblemen in Naboth’s home town. She forged Ahab’s signature (she’d had plenty of practice – so it was perfect!). And she stamped each letter with Ahab’s special seal!

My dear friend and servant, (each letter began)

I have a favour to ask of you. Would you proclaim a day of fasting – a special, holy day – in your town? Would you be so kind as to invite my neighbour, Naboth, to this event (he has a lovely vineyard, don't you think)? Would you give him the most prominent seat at the event – some place where everyone can see him? And then would you hire two villains (I have names and references if it would be helpful) and ask them to stand up in the middle of the ceremony and accuse Naboth of some heinous crime? Blasphemy against his god, perhaps. And disloyalty to the king. And then, and I hope this is not asking too much, would you drag Naboth from that place and stone him to death?

Thanks very much for your consideration. I do hope that this will not be too much of an inconvenience. As always, my concern is for your continued health and well-being, which will be assured by your prompt response to this request.

Regards.

Ahab, King of Israel

Jezebel cackled and clapped her hands and hopped up and down in her seat. There was a joy to pure evil that never failed to delight her. Naboth would die (she had never liked him as a neighbour anyway!) Ahab would get his vineyard, and the local noblemen would be convinced, once and for all, of her husband's utter and total depravity. She couldn't wait to see the look on his face.

Her wait lasted only a few days. Ahab appeared at breakfast, one morning – a changed man.

"I'll have two eggs for breakfast, this morning," he grinned. "And – why not, by Baal! – a few rashers of bacon, as well!"

"So what's got into you?" asked Jezebel innocently.

"Haven't you heard, my dear?" Ahab beamed. "Naboth is dead. His widow wants to sell. And now, at last, his vineyard is mine!"

“How wonderful!” said the queen. “So tell me – how did poor Naboth die?”

“It was most unusual,” Ahab mumbled through a mouthful of egg. “Blasphemy. Treason. Not very neighbourly, if you ask me. But then the rumour is that the charges were trumped-up. As if...” And here the king’s chewing became more deliberate. “As if someone truly wicked had it in for him.” And here he stared at his queen.

Jezebel could contain herself no longer. She blushed and she nodded, like a schoolgirl caught with a love note.

“Yes, my darling, I was the one who arranged it. I thought, at first, that it might be better to leave it to you – wicked man that you are. But you were so miserable! And, in the end, I just wanted to see you happy again.”

Ahab held up his hand. “Enough,” he said, solemnly. There were tears in his eyes, and little yellowy bits of egg on his trembling lips. “I have been blessed with the most exquisitely evil wife in the whole world. What more, I ask, could a malevolent monarch want?”

And then he gave Jezebel a big, sloppy, egg kiss. It was, on the whole, a disgusting thing. But it seemed to work for them.

Ahab’s celebration, however, was short-lived. For as he strolled through his new vineyard later that day, he was surprised by an unexpected guest.

“Elijah!” Ahab cried. “What are you doing here?”

The king’s voice was shaking. Shaking with anger, as he remembered the threats he had shared with his wife. And shaking with fear, as well – for this was the man who had stopped the rain.

“I have a message for you from my God,” Elijah solemnly replied. “The God who sent a drought upon this land. The God who defeated the prophets of Baal. The God who was once your God too.

“‘You have sold yourself to evil,’ says the Lord. ‘And so, on the very spot where the dogs lapped up the blood of Naboth, they shall lap up your blood too.’”

Ahab’s shaking was all fear now. “Naboth... no... you don’t understand,” he tried to explain. “Jezebel... it was all her doing.”

“And as for your wife, Jezebel,” the prophecy continued, “the dogs

will do even more. They will chew her to pieces and leave so little behind that even her dearest friends will not be able to recognize her!”

Ahab wanted to be wicked. He really did. He wanted to turn his evil threats into reality. He wanted to rip off Elijah’s fingers and tear out Elijah’s hair and torture Elijah and murder him. But it’s hard to be wicked – really hard – when what you actually feel like doing is wetting your pants!

Ahab was scared – more scared than he had ever been in his whole sorry life. So he ran from the vineyard and hid in his room and wept and wailed and hoped that Jezebel wouldn’t notice.

The noise was hard to miss, however, and Jezebel was humiliated by her husband’s behaviour – a feeling that turned to disgust when he told her his battle plans over breakfast, one morning.

“It looks like we have to fight the Syrians,” he explained, as he lifted a dripping spoonful of porridge to his mouth. “And the prophets have told me that I will die in the battle.”

“Not Elijah, again!” Jezebel moaned. “If I hear the story about the dogs one more time...”

“No, no! Not just Elijah,” Ahab interrupted. “But Micaiah, as well – a prophet from Judah!” And Ahab dropped the spoon back into the bowl. “But here’s the thing,” he went on. “I think I have outsmarted them. And it’s a plan so devious that I am sure you will approve. When I go into battle, tomorrow, I will not be dressed as Ahab, king of Israel. I will wear a disguise! The Syrians will try to kill some other poor fool and I shall escape unharmed!”

Jezebel was appalled. And so upset that she thought she would lose her breakfast, right then and there. After all her work, all her training, all her coaxing and encouraging and example setting, had it come down to this? Her husband was not evil. Her husband was not wicked. He was a nasty little man, at best. And a coward, to boot!

“All right, my dear,” she said, very quietly. “Whatever you think is best.” But inwardly she hoped that she would never have to look at that face again.

Her wish came true, of course. Ahab disguised himself, just as he said he would. But a stray arrow struck him, anyway. He bled to death

in his chariot, and when his servants washed the chariot down, they did so at the same spot where Naboth had died. So just as Elijah had predicted, the dogs lapped up Ahab's blood.

A civil war broke out in Israel. The king's heirs and commanders fought for control of the country, and in the end it was a man named Jehu who was victorious. He rode to Jezebel's house one morning, even before she had had breakfast.

She knew he was coming. It was inevitable. So she put on her best clothes and make-up. "He's a ruthless man," she thought. "Perhaps I can win him over and make him more ruthless still."

But Jehu was quite ruthless enough already. When he saw her in the window, he called out to her servants and demanded that any who were loyal to him should seize her and throw her out of the window to the ground.

There were plenty of volunteers, and while Jehu went into the house and had something to eat, the dogs breakfasted on the body of the dead queen.

"Someone had better bury that woman," he said to one of his servants. But when the servant went out in the street, there was nothing left to do. Elijah's prophecy had come true again – there was nothing left of Jezebel but her skull and her feet and the palms of her hands!