Oral Memory And Its Implications
Concerning Chronological Bible Storying

There are many foundational building blocks that are of critical value when learning how to communicate successfully with oral individuals. None of those critical segments related to narrative presentations among orals is of greater consequence than the issue of an oral person’s memory. As more individuals attempt to use Chronological Bible Storying, some of them are asking questions as to the ability of orals to remember the stories and if the orals have the ability to retell them accurately. Other literates who story among orals say they have not been that successful in getting the orals to retell the stories during the story sessions. They too are asking if orals really can remember the stories and retell them accurately.

If oral memories are less than excellent, meaning if they cannot remember the stories and retell them accurately, then all is lost if storytelling is used to give them an oral Bible.

Storytellers need not despair, for there is ample evidence that the typical oral individual, or a fair number of orals within a typical group of orals, have memory skills equal to the task. Thus, the aim of this presentation is to document the fact that sufficient memory skills exists among most orals to support the giving, receiving and maintaining of an oral Bible among them. Questions that will be addressed in this module are as follows.

- How good is the memory of orals?
- Is the memory of a typical oral individual sharper than that of a typical literate individual?
- How “durable” is the memory of oral individuals?
- How accurate is the memory of oral individuals?
- Is a typical oral individual’s memory limited in volume?
- Is a typical oral individual’s memory less than that needed to support the giving, receiving, retaining and reproducing of an Oral Bible?
- Just what are the memory limitations of a typical oral communicator?
- What are the known variables that have been observed within the memory of oral communicators?

In this presentation, evidences concerning oral memory skills will be arranged under the following categories--memory skills among modern literate singers and storytellers; historical storytellers and musicians; memory skills among adherents and leaders within the four major world religions; and memory skills of individuals within secular society.

Memories of Modern Literate Singers and Storytellers. The first evidence presented for consideration comes from everyday life related to entertainment, professional and lay. The average literate likely knows these facts are true without having to quote all sorts of scientific studies supporting them.
Most of the readers of this module have visited a hotel restaurant that had a pianist or singer who took requests, or have attended a wedding party or some other kind of party where a piano player or vocalist accompanied by a piano player took requests and performed them. It is very rare that either the piano player or the vocalist used music scores, or even needed to look up any song that was requested. Most of these performers, and they are common in cities, have a repertoire well beyond five-hundred songs they can play and sing without a score. Most of these performers need only an occasional prompting such as the humming of a requested tune or giving them part of the opening line. They are an illustration of the volume, durability and accuracy of memory, and most of them are literates who are performing this type of memory feat. It is more difficult for literates to remember at the level of an oral since the literate has developed to lean less on one’s memory, which is not a choice for an oral person.

Within the professional field, there are opera singers, men and women, hundreds of them at all levels in operatic competition and performance from local to international, who can perform any of a number of operas on short notice. They and we have come to expect them to remember their lines without fail, and they do.

Within churches, their leaders and members have become accustomed to pianists and vocalists, trained and untrained, who can sing hundreds of Christian songs of all kinds without a score sheet. It is common for pianists and guitarists to play and sing songs requested by church members during social sessions at church. They can perform from memory hundreds of religious songs. In their field of religious music their music memory is very durable, voluminous and accurate.

Again, in the professional field of musicians such as country singers, pop singers, including those who sing with a band, with a guitar, and with other types of accompaniment, have repertoires of a thousand or more songs that they can sing and play from memory. Many of these fill a three hour program with songs, theirs and others.

Moving beyond literates, parents are quite familiar with children who can hear a song once and can repeat it with accuracy. Just let a song they have heard come up on the radio, a CD, or from most any source and those children will join in singing with accuracy.

Storytellers exhibit the same kind of skills that musician’s demonstrate. Starting with parents and children, parents have often observed the ability of children to remember the stories they heard read or told to them only two or three times. Children in many settings have commonly gained mastery of Dr. Seuss’ children’s books such as Green Eggs and Ham, Cat and The Hat, as well as other historic nursery rhymes and stories, long and short. In reading or telling these stories to their children, parents have at times tried to skip parts or change the story in various ways, only to have the child stop the parent. In such situations this non-literate, oral child knows when a part was changed or left out and often can quote correctly the part that was changed or left out. This is an important ability of oral people, young or old. This issue will be referenced again later.
In the professional field, actors and actresses, like opera singers, have mastered through their memories the lines of long poems and stories that they can perform with little notice. Some nine years ago, it was stated in the advertising community in London, England that a company, a school, a business, a family, or any other group could call the actor’s guild and hire, often for a handsome fee, one of at least 250 Shakespearean storytellers who could come and deliver any of Shakespeare’s leading stories.

For decades, high school students, under the direction of their high school drama or English teachers, have successfully taken on one of Shakespeare’ stories or other poets’ or novelists’ works to perform as their senior play. These students master hundreds of lines.

There are Summer Stock Theaters and Little Theaters in moderate sized cities all over the USA who take on one to three hour plays that require significant memory skills. They perform them well, usually with little or no prompting.

During the first full weekend in October of each year one can converge with as many as 10,000 other listeners to Jonesborough, Tennessee to attend the National Storytellers’ Association’s annual production. This three-day event brings from 28-35 regional, national and international storytellers on site who tell many stories from memory over those three days. The Association prefers that no storyteller makes a repeat performance sooner than two years after his or her previous visit. Almost every state in the USA and for sure every country in Europe, Western and Eastern, have storytelling guilds that host the same kinds of storytelling events.

Historical Storytellers and Musicians. One can look back upon the Middle Ages when the troubadours were popular members of every court in Europe. They, like modern day actors and actresses, had a repertoire of hundreds of stories and songs that they could perform, literally at a moment’s notice. The joke that comes down to the present is that a king or queen of a country would call in the troubadour or court jester and say: “A song or story or your life!” These troubadours or jesters were seldom, if ever, in jeopardy of loosing their life for lack of memory of a story or a song. They could, even using the formulas at their memory’s finger tips create a story or a song on most any topic given by a king or queen.

Then, there is the long line of Epic Poets from Homer to modern poetic storytellers who arose in almost every oral society from Homer’s time to the recent past. See Pennsylvania State University Professor William Bernard McCarthy’s Oral Theory and Epic Studies bibliography of known and historically recognized oral epic poems and stories by regions and countries. Among these are modern day epic poets in Central Asia, in Yugoslavia, and in other places in the world. Ong, Yates, Lord, Havelock, Parry and others provide a record of their skills and feats. “Frances A. Yates shows in The Art of Memory the gargantuan mnemonic apparatus originating in the mists of antiquity and built into all Western cultures, from rhetoric to the layout of buildings. Albert B. Lord’s book, The Singer of Tales, building on massive studies of Yugoslavian epic singers by
Lord himself, Milman Parry, and others, explains (pp. 26-29, 98, etc.) how, after listening to it only once, a trained singer can repeat from memory an epic of hundreds of lines even though he had not heard the particular epic at all before. But it is a mistake to think that such a skilled singer memorizes or repeats the way persons using texts do, or even the way many of those studied by Miss Yates might do. His memory, so far as we can find, is never verbatim. In the thousands of recordings which Parry and Lord and their associates have on hand, they find that never is an epic sung by either the same singer or by different singers in exactly the same words, even though the singers themselves may protest vehemently that they do sing the same words. The conversation of incident and narrative structure is nevertheless surprising—the general story varies little from one telling to another. But the words always do.” (p. 23-24) “Hearing a new story, he does not try to memorize it by rote. He digests it in terms of its themes (Lord reports that a singer asked to sing a story he had heard only once often prefers to wait a few days before performing), which are essentially the themes of all the singers in his tradition.”

Note: “Once the texts are in use, this economy of memorization changes, and more particularly for verse. Lord has shown this clearly in The Singer of Tales. In the Art of Memory Miss Yates reports (p. 15) that the memory systems deriving from classical antiquity make something of verbatim memory (memory for words) chiefly for retention of poems and plays, which by that time consist in texts.” (pp. 25-26) The quotes in this paragraph come from Walter Ong’s The Presence of the Word. 1967. Yale University Press.

The epic performers developed a style peculiar to the needs of oral communities. They served such needs as retention of knowledge; entertainment and celebration, among others. Their formulaic style accommodated well those needs. However, the next set of illustrations of excellent memory move beyond examples of epic formulaic skills and styles to the documentation of rote, verbatim type skills and styles.

The Memory Of Individual Adherents and Leaders Within The World’s Major Religions. This category is perhaps the most appropriate one to observe when it comes to Chronological Bible Storying.

Hinduism is the most decidedly oral of all the major world religions. In William A. Graham’s Beyond The Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion, he says: “It is the Hindu tradition, however, that presents the most stunning case of a tradition in which scripture has been so fundamentally and completely conceived of and handled as recited, oral word that to speak of it as ‘scripture’ in the sense of a ‘sacred written text’ must simply be rejected as an error.” (BTWW, p. 66) Hinduism sees its scriptural tradition and authority as residing in the oral forms of their scripture. Graham goes on to say: “The unique Hindu case offers the one unassailable example of a highly developed scriptural tradition in which the importance of the oral word has been so central as to dominate and largely even to exclude the written word altogether over most of its long history.” (Ibid, p. 66) Maurice Bloomfield adds his view of Hinduism by saying: “Vedic Tradition is in some aspects the most remarkable in recorded history. From the entire Vedic period we have not one single piece of antiquarian or archaeological material, not one bit of real property; not a building; nor a monument; not
a coin; jewel; or utensil;--nothing but winged words.” (BTWW, p. 67) Graham also quotes the famous researcher of Indian religious history J. F. Staal as saying: “Nowhere has this significance been more categorical, more dominant, than in India. The ancient Vedic tradition represents the paradigmatic instance of scripture as spoken, recited word. Moreover, in the subsequent Hindu tradition, for all of its massive internal diversity of sects and schools, the oral word has remained the only fully acceptable and authoritative form of sacred texts for over two, possibly over two and one-half, millennia after the implementation of writing.” Graham, after considering all of the sources he consulted concerning Hinduism said: “In the Indian context, it is not the inability to write that has resulted in the supremacy of the oral form of religious texts, but the conscious choice of oral transmission as the only appropriate vehicle for holy utterance.” (BTWW, p. 68) For further references concerning the truth of these statements, see the works of Georg Buhler, Moriz Winternitz, Louis Renou, J.A.B. van Buitenen, and Jan Gonda.

It goes without saying that the memorization of the Hindu scripture is the only way it could be oral, remain oral and be perpetuated century after century. Recitation of the Hindu scripture is the norm for adherent and leader. Graham says: “In similar fashion, one telling Hindi term that indicates that a text has been ‘memorized’ is hanthastha, which means literally ‘situated in the throat’. Knowing a text means also to ‘place in the heart’ (Hindi: hrdaya mem dharana karma), much as in our English idiom; but such ‘by heart’ (or ‘by throat’) knowledge means especially having it ready to the tongue.” (BTWW, p. 69)

For those who ask if people in the past or today have the kind of memory to handle large amounts of scripture, two thousand years of Hindu history that continues today should be sufficient. We will still consult other religious traditions.

Islam is not far behind Hinduism as having a high percentage of oral adherents and leaders. Consulting Graham’s valuable research, two initial quotes should assist us in understanding the Islamic view of oral scriptures. In the Hadith of the Prophet it is said that God said: “Whoever is so absorbed in reciting the Qur’an that he is distracted from praying to Me and asking [things] of Me, him I shall give the best reward [that is granted to] those who are grateful.” (BTWW, p. 79) The second quote from Graham’s research is also from Hadith of the Prophet: “He who does not recite the Qu’ran melodiously is not one of us.” (BTWW, p. 79) He also says: “In Muslim piety, however, the written word of its scripture has always been secondary to a strong tradition of oral transmission and aural presence of scripture that far surpasses that of Judaic or Christian usage. In Islam, the functions of the holy book as an oral text have predominated over its functions as a written or printed one. As an English Arabist put it long ago, ‘from first to last the Koran is essentially a book to be heard, not read.’ For countless millions of Muslims over more than thirteen centuries of Islamic history, ‘scriptures’, al-kitab, has been a book learned, read, and passed on by vocal repetition and memorization….like the Veda, the authoritativeness of the qur’anic text is only realized in its fullness and perfection when it is correctly recited aloud. In other words, the book of holy writ (kitab)
in Islam is ultimately not a written or printed document, but a holy ‘reciting’, or ‘recitation’, which is precisely what the Arabic word *qur’an* means.” (BTWW, p. 80)

Also, it is not uncommon to find significant percentages of Imams in various regions of the Middle East and Central Asia who are illiterate or functionally illiterate. Some can read the Qur’an in their local language, but not being able to read Arabic, have memorized the Qur’an in Arabic.

Also, it is very commonly expected and experienced that children within predominantly Islamic countries or Islamic sections of countries that go to the local Islamic Madrasas schools have mastered in their memories the Qur’an by the time they are twelve years of age.

The oral situation within Islam should speak volumes to those who wonder if oral, or even semi-literate or literate individuals today can memorize, remember and reproduce accurately texts and stories the size of the Qur’an or the Christian Bible. Add this information to what is known about the historic oral nature of Hindu scriptures, the weight of the evidence should be convincing.

Judaism is third in its oral history among the big four religions of the world. The oral and written situation within Judaism is similar to that found in Islam. Before considering scholarly findings concerning oral and written versions of the Torah, basic Biblical background information should be considered.

From the time of creation and the fall until the time of Moses, God did not find it necessary to inspire anyone to record in written form what throughout this period had been God’s words and deeds that had been revealed and perpetuated orally. For a few thousand years from Adam and Eve to Abraham, to Joseph and to Moses, the revealed word of God existed only in oral form. In oral form, it not only survived as generation passed it on to the next generation, it continued to the time of Moses in a full and accurate form.

It is now important to consider the same kind of background information concerning oral and written Judaist scriptures that we have presented concerning Hindu and Islamic scriptures. In Ryan Renfro’s *The Oral Torah and Rabbinic Judaism* as published in Religious Studies 5: February 4, 1998, the following quote appears: ‘‘You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul; and you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.’ (Sacred Texts, p. 62) With these words, God instructed Moses and the Israelites what it means to be a Judaist. The words of God were the Torah, pre-existent with him from the beginning, which are roughly God’s instructions of how the Judaist is to live and behave. In fact Judaism means the way of Torah, thus it comes as little surprise that the practice and study of Torah, both written and oral, are the most important parts of life in rabbinic Judaism. The Torah is the central aspect of Judaism because every element in Judaism ultimately derives form it and the revelation thereof at Mount Sinai. (page 1 of 3)… Unlike many fundamentalist Christian groups, the Jews believe that the Torah or God’s
word is passed on from Moses in two ways: through the collection of writings now known as the Hebrew Bible or the Written Torah and through the Oral Torah.”

Birger Gerhardsson, in researching and writing about the fact and the process of oral transmission found as recorded in his *Memory & Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* that: “The task of the *tannaim* was thus not that of having at their disposal the spirit and contents of a given general tradition, and of being able to teach it. Their task was that of being able, on demand, to reproduce orally, or recite the oral text material needed by a Rabbi or by a college. We may join R. Nabman in calling such a traditionist ‘a basket full of books’ or, to use a more modern metaphor, a living book or living library. The way in which the unsympathetic observer regarded the precise, ‘mechanical’ reproduction of the text material achieved by the *tannaim* is best seen from a popular proverb quoted in the Talmud: ‘The magician mumbles and does not understand what he is saying. In the same way the *tanna* recites and does not understand what he is saying. (b Sot.22a)” (pages 94 and 95)

The use of Gerhardsson’s research is not to argue that the oral tradition Mishnah was Scripture. The quote is to present his evidence that the people during the Old Testament era could master through memorization the entire Torah, including the Pentateuch, the Writings and the Prophets. For the Jews, just as for the Muslims and the Hindus, volume of memorization was, and is, not an issue. Also, accuracy of retelling, if expected and managed by the tutors, was and is, not an issue. This is further seen in Gerhardsson's findings that follow.

“The written Torah, when studied, is carefully committed to memory, learned by heart. Written Torah therefore functions in the memories of those learned in the Scriptures as memorized texts, being quoted from memory and used, for example in debates, from memory, although in decisive contexts—the transmission of the text, the teaching of the Scriptures and the readings in pubic worship—it must be read from a book.” (page 290)…“**Knowing the basic text material in the oral Torah by heart is an elementary accomplishment, presupposed of every teacher and pupil at the more advanced stage.** Those Jewish boys who were privileged to follow the paths of organized study had no alternative to the careful memorizing of the most important basic material of the oral Torah.” (pages 101 and 102) A Rabbinic quote found often in written and oral Torah records according to Gerhardsson was: “He learned it from him ‘forty times’, and it became for him as though it lay in his purse.” (p. 119) This phrase “it lay in his purse” was very commonly used to mean that the material was memorized accurately and could not get out of the purse, meaning the person’s memory…**The pupil is thus in duty bound to maintain his teacher’s exact words**…He must repeat it over and over again, until he has actually passed it on to his pupil or pupils: i.e. until they know the passage in question by heart.” (p. 132-133)

**Christianity** is fourth in oral history among the big four religious of the world. Obviously, what has been said about an oral Torah is true about the Old Testament as viewed by Christians. Likewise, during the New Testament era, from the birth of Christ
sometime about 4 B.C. to a time between 60 and 70 A.D., God did not inspire any of His followers to put His revealed word that came through Christ’s teachings and events into written form. God was pleased for His spoken word to remain oral and not written during the period when the Gospel spread throughout the known world and “turned that world upside down.”

Graham also commented on the Christian Scriptures as he researched the issue of oral and written scriptures among the four major world religions. He said: “Put simply, the word of God was the gospel message of the risen Christ long before it was a book or collection of books.” (BTWW, p. 120) He went on to say: “Thus the Word was available to the rank and file mainly through the evolved forms of the liturgy, biblical storytelling, or biblically inspired art, and much less, if at all, through substantial reading, recitation, and study of the holy words themselves.” (BTWW, p. 120) And, “Oral reading and recitation were the primary means through which the written word was apprehended and reflected upon, as well as communicated, not only among the illiterate but also among the educated members of the community” (BTWW, p. 123) And, according to the Pachomian community “One should learn by heart at least the New Testament and the Psalms.” (Graham’s quote of Pachomian papers on pages 131 and 227)

Gerhardsson, under the testimony of the Post-Apostolic Church are the following quotes: “As we have just pointed out, the skepticism of the authors of the early Church toward the written word is a commonplace, recurring elsewhere in ancient school traditions.” (p. 199) “It is an illuminating fact that quotations from the school tradition and the like are not introduced by such words as ‘gegraptai’.” We may recall the way in which Philo quotes the school tradition.” (See W. Bousset) (p. 199) There is the issue that as the New Testament writers wrote, or had an amanuenses write as they dictated their messages to persons or churches, these N. T. evangelists seemingly had no knowledge that what they were writing was Scripture.

According to this issue, Gerhardsson in his research of all the materials said: “The fact that no evangelist expressly presented his work in this way (meaning using the style and word markers as was used in the Hebrew and Greek Old Testament Scriptures) was certainly a contributory factor to the unequal position which the Gospels occupied from the first in relation to the traditional holy books of the LXX. During the first period of the Church the Gospels did not seem to have been regarded without question as ‘Holy Scriptures’, but rather as ‘Holy Word’ (hieros logos) or oral (messianic) Torah. Finally, we must take a further fact into consideration. The 2nd century seems to have been well advanced before the four Gospels gained anything like a general distribution to all of the more important congregations in the rapidly expanding Christian Church. For a number of decades many were evidently satisfied with one or two of the Gospels, conscious that other congregations had other versions of the gospel. If the indications are to be believed, the gospel material functioned to a great extent orally. We shall soon return to this topic.” (Gerhardsson, p. 200)
memorizing large amounts of Biblical text and accurately reproducing them was and is common among oral learners and communicators. Even so, evidences from the field of educational research will be added to round out the sources to the world of secular, academic circles.

A number of academic fields have been significantly involved in research concerning orality and literacy. The fields are: anthropology, education, literature, and psychology. The United Nations agency of UNESCO has been at the forefront of this research for over a century. A majority of the research concentrated on the progress of individuals who are moving toward literacy. Conversely, only a small amount of research has been conducted on the status and competencies of orals. **Within this body of research only a small percent of it has been conducted on and reported on memory issues.** The reason is that most of the researchers are focused on aiding and advancing literacy. Therefore, they are not interested in aiding orals as orals in their learning and communication situations. This is understandable. But, it is the major reason for the dearth of information concerning orality, especially orals and their memory ability.

To present the findings that do exist in a more condensed way, each of the quotes from the sources will be included through bulleted entries with their source at the end of the quote. The various memory quotes will not be organized into categories.

- “The rounded sentence began its career in the pre-literate days of oral communication, when indoctrination depended on word of mouth and retention of doctrine depended on the memory. (Havelock, Eric. *The Muse Learns To Write*, 1957, p. 126”)

- “The function was then ascribed to the cultural role of versified language in a society of oral communication, in which effective memorization depended on the use of rhythm. Acting as a kind of versified encyclopedia, Homer recorded and preserved the means of maintaining cultural continuity by putting on record the social mores of the culture (ibid., chapters 3 & 4)…”Narrative along with rhythm had been the necessary means of supporting the oral memory and was now no longer needed.” (Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy*. Page 29)

- Narrative formats are critical for memory and recall to occur in any oral society, then and now. “The activist narrative of behaviour in a connected story was what the memory preferred to be able to recall, in order to contain within it a report of the specific items. Whether or not Luria realized its importance, here was a vital clue to the mode of operation of the memory that Robert Wood had noted as unique to oral societies. Its survival is perceptible in Homer.” (Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy*. page 40)

- “If Luria discerned total absence of categorical thinking in the non-literate, did he in his investigation discern a clue to an alternative mode of making meaningful connection between statements? Apparently he did, by choosing as one of his subjects a
literate journalist who had the freakish capacity for oral recall of lists of objects and their names; in short, a professional mnemonist, which is what he became (Luria 1968). What Luria found was that disconnected names in a long list were memorized by being made to represent actors in a narrative context….“ (Ong, Walter. Orality and Literacy. page 39)

• “All those who concern themselves with the methodical study of the traditional source material in the oral Torah learn this material in the form of oral texts, intended to be repeated from memory. This seems simply to have been the current method of learning important texts—whether written or not—in Antiquity.” (page 100 of Gerhardsson, Birger. Memory & Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity.)

• Oral communicators cannot “look something up.” An oral culture has no vehicle as neutral as a list. Remembering a list of items for any length of time for an oral communicator is next to impossible. Then too, during normal discourse, the mind is so random in its memory of lists, that in a list of ten items, the mind can seldom recall more than three or four, and neither the individual nor the speaker can determine which three or four items of the ten will be remembered. (Quotes taken from Ong’s Orality and Literacy, page 31, pages 42 and 43.)

• “A well-known tradition tells of R. Hiyya the elder that if the Torah should be forgotten in Israel he would proceed in the following way: he would buy seeds of flax, plant them, reap the flax, and make ropes, with which he would capture some hinds; from their skins he would then make scrolls on which he would write (from memory) the Torah (Pentateuch). Then he would go to a town where there was no teacher, and there teach six other boys to repeat a mishnah order each. The boys then would be able to teach one another.” (p. 114 of Gerhardsson, Birger. Memory & Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity.)

• “There was however a somewhat different way of learning an oral text collection. It was first learned as a whole; analysis and interpretation was undertaken later.” (p. 117 of Gerhardsson, Birger. Memory & Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity.)

• “Long before any human hand had formed the signs which made up the art of writing, there existed an oral tradition…delivered from memory and transmitted orally.” (p. 123 of Memory & Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity.)

• “A closer look at Hellenistic practice is instructive. In the elementary schools the children were first taught the alphabet, but were later taught to recite from memory, with the correct melodic accentuation, chosen passages out of the classical texts, principally the all-wise Homer.” (p. 124 of Memory & Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity.)
• “in the first, a famous passage from Irenaeus, we are dealing with a regular teaching situation. Irenaeus relates that he carries in his memory many traditions which he received in his childhood from Polycarp. ‘I can even name the place where the blessed Polycarp sat and taught where he went out and in. I remember his way of life, what he looked like, the addresses he delivered to the people, how he told of his intercourse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord, how he remembered their words and what he had heard from them about the Lord, about his miracles, and about his teaching. As one who had received this from eyewitnesses of the word of life Polycarp retold everything in accordance with the Scriptures. I listened to this then, because of the grace of God which was given me, carefully, copying it down, not on paper, but in my heart. And I repeat it constantly in genuine form by the grace of God.’” (p. 204 of Memory & Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity.)

• “Nevertheless, if writing and reading were common enough in the Pachomian daily round, they served primarily as vehicles for the far more crucial task of memorizing and internalizing (‘learning by heart’ in the fullest sense of the phrase) the words of scripture in order literally to live them and, through their constant reading and recitation, in effect to breathe them each moment of the day. The provisions of Pachomius and his successors for both reading aloud and recitation of the scriptures from memory were as explicit as they were fundamental.” (Page 130 of William A. Graham’s Beyond The Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion. Cambridge University Press, 1987.)

• It has been observed in Western-style administrative courts in South Africa that native witnesses, when asked to account for some event, begin their accounts with some other event greatly preceding the critical event in time. For instance, if asked to tell about an accident that occurred at 5:00 P.M., the witness might begin his account by relating all of his experiences from the time he arose in the morning. Such observations led Bartlett (1932) to hypothesize that these natives start at the beginning of any sequence in order to remember one of its later elements. This remembering process was said to be different from that of the ordinary Englishman.” (page 2 of Michael Cole & Sylvia Scribner. Culture & Thought: A Psychological Introduction.)

• “The first indication that the correspondence between the sound of a word and its meaning may influence cognitive processes comes from a recently reported Russian study on verbal memory (Baihdurashvili, 1972).” (page 57 of Michael Cole & Sylvia Scribner. Culture & Thought: A Psychological Introduction.)

• “While there may be some amount of object recognition in simplified presentations, there is no doubt that the kind of pictorial material that is common in modern nations—such as the photographs with which we introduced this section—presents great difficulties to many traditional peoples. An ingenious line of research initiated several years ago by Hudson has helped us to understand some of the factors at work, particularly the role of Western conventions of perspective in pictorial
Oral communicators create larger-than-life heroes. Colorless heroes cannot be remembered. Colorless personalities cannot survive oral mnemonics. Literates do not need heroes to mobilize the memory. (This is a summary of Ong’s presentation in pages 69-71 in *Orality and Literacy*.)

“...in oral-style improvisers and reciters, the revivification of, and memory for, propositional gestures is greatly enhanced and rendered the more precise by clear rhythmic schema that balance in the song or, more often, in the kind of universal, automatic singsong that is so characteristic of spontaneous recitation.” The Guslars are itinerant, illiterate, but obviously not ignorant (reciters), among the southern Slavs...some are said to know 30,000, 70,000 or even more than 100,000 rhythmic schema). In itself, the phenomenon is easily explicable; the (recitations) of the guslars, (similar in this respect to the recitations of Homer, the prophets, the rabbis, to the Epistles of Baruch, Saint Peter and Saint Paul, to the delicate Chinese parallelism, etc..) are juxtapositions of relatively few cliches or traditional formulas. The uttering of these cliches occurs automatically, according to fixed rules. Only their order varies. A good guslar is the one who plays his cliches as we do cards, who arranges them differently according to the use he wants to make of them. Written texts of a guslar’s orations with a six month separation were found to be word for word copies of the previous oration.(pp. 125-126 of Marcel Jousse’s *Le Style Oral Rhythmique et Mnemotechnique Chez les Verbo-Moteurs*) This great oral tradition has now faded into history and the Serbo-Croatian singers of tales are now silent in Eastern Europe, but the stories are

“Seeing” may be “believing,” but seeing is not remembering. “The auditory (and especially verbo-motor, laryngo-buccal) memory in us, we who learn texts almost solely through the eyes, (without loudly articulating them or putting a marked rhythm into them,) is (therefore naturally) weaker.” (Jousse, p. 126)

Nothing could be more mistaken than the restrictive notion that rhythm is created solely in order to express feeling by euphonic means. Such is not the purpose of (a rhythmic schema)...The earliest (rhythmic schema) was a didactic (rhythmic schema; even the earliest (rhythmic schema, which or rhetoric has called) epic, (was, for the reciter who employed it) narrative, didactic,...mnemonic...The earliest rhythmic schema was, then, not an expression of feeling, but above all, a mnemonic expression of thought. (Jousse, p. 127) Note: Jousse was a French researcher, professor and writer who wrote at the turn of the century in French. He wrote in a very technical way peculiar to that era and the translation of his work into English is filled with parenthesis. The quotes are unchanged.

Thus ‘if one studies Arab rhythmic recitation, for example, one is struck by the large role it plays in Arab history and civilization, in the daily life of tribes and individuals...it is a kind of hard currency that makes palpable and tangible, and immediately assimilable by memory, everything the senses perceive and more, as also all
human, including scientific, knowledge—even the most abstract ideas. Thus there have been grammars set in rhythmic schema, ...treatises on medicine, alchemy and logic,...proofs in algebra and geometry, intended to be learned by heart.” (Jousse, pp. 127-128)

- This epic tales recitation tradition is still alive among the Kirgiz nomads of Central Asia. (pp. 3 & 4 of Bruce A. Rosenberg’s *The Art of the American Folk Preacher*)

- “The most difficult initial problem in the history of literacy is appreciating what preceded it.” (M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record* as quoted in Kelber’s book, p. 1.)

- The oral Torah was transmitted alongside written documents. Responsibility for retaining oral materials once again lay in the hands of specialists and their disciples. “An elite” of “skilled professional traditionalists” functioned as teachers and reciters in an elaborate educational program, of which the aforementioned elementary Scripture schools were but one aspect...Memorization was the technique by which oral transmission was carried out. (Kelber’s *The Oral and The Written Gospel*, p. 9)

- But when we turn to the area of memory, the picture is reversed. The severest critics of ‘primitive mentality’ unite in extolling the superlative quality of primitive memory, and find Europeans wanting in comparisons. (Cole & Scribner, p. 123.)

- Another hypothesis about memory in non-literate societies stresses the special practices and techniques that such cultures must develop in order to guarantee the transmission of information from one generation to the next. The ‘wisdom of the elders’ can only survive in the memory of the living; there is no book to look things up in, and thus the information held in mind by individual members of the culture is a valuable asset for the whole community. (Cole & Scribner, p. 125.)

- By taking the perspective of an oral historian, as artist, the narrative may be understood as influenced by the way he thinks, by the way his audience reacts, by his methods of preservation and transmitting information, and by the way that he and his audience interact in terms of the culture that they share. (p. 7 of Miller’s *The African Past Speaks.*)

- The collective aspect of memory assumes particular importance in understanding oral traditions, owing to the intense effect of public performance on the form and content of tradition. Once perceptions of a happening have been coded and stored in the memory, as Vansina points out, that recollection will always exist. In an oral culture, it exists in only a very limited sense since it is realized in conscious form principally as it is performed before others. There is no equivalent to a written diary or book of private remembrances in which the writer carries on a purely personal and internal dialogue about his or her recollections...Thus the recollections assume a collective character...Memory in an oral culture is even more a shared phenomenon than it is in a
literate culture where people create private mnemonic devices--notes, diaries, and the like--to retain accurately their early idiosyncratic impressions of an event. (p. 11 of Miller’s *The African Past Speaks*.)

- The consequences of oral modes of communication on how people manipulate and retain information are becoming increasingly well known, though not always specifically applied to the historicity of oral traditions. (pp. 11-12 in Miller’s *The African Past Speaks*.)

- Memory is like a library. Items are received, labeled according to a system of encoding, and stored. Recall occurs by being given a label and with it tracing the item. Items become lost if they were not labeled, if their label was destroyed later, or if the item was misfiled. The library code is the crucial element in the whole operation. Similarly, the mnemonic code dictates the whole operation of the mind. Three major dimensions of this code are known today. Two of them are congruent with the language code, which underlines the relevance and importance of language and speech in memory processes. The first dimension is the verbal code containing the totality of information and programs that allow the preparation of a verbal expression. The second and truly dominant dimension--the master code--is the semantic memory. Like a library code, it is organized hierarchically by topic and integrated into a single system according to an overall view of the world and the logical relationships perceived in it. This is the same as the ‘cognitive categories’ or ‘mental map’ in anthropological parlance. This code is acquired during infancy and culturally determined. The third dimension is visual. Concrete items easily translated into action/images are much better retained than abstract items because such concrete items undergo a double coding in terms of verbal expression and also visual coding. (Jan Vansina’s Chapter 11 in Miller’s *The African Past Speaks*, p. 263.)

- A few variables affecting the likelihood of remembrance must be kept in mind in all genres of oral history, not just life history. These include the degree of repetitiveness of the experience, concreteness of the data, whether opinions or motivations are involved, whether the memory was learned by rote, and the intensity of the emotions associated with the events remembered. We have already pointed to the negative interference of repetitive experience. This and the effect of the fact that concrete items are much better remembered than abstract items explain the well-known fact that people remember so few numbers, even though one always seems to call for concrete numbers! Numbers are abstract. (p. 264 of Miller’s *The African Past Speaks*.)

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• “The word ‘gospel’ was originally used to designate the oral message of the apostles in which they told of Jesus’ words and works, and then quite naturally the same word was applied to the records which fixed this message in written form for future generations.” (Page 6)…In seeking to answer this question an appeal to the natural powers of the apostle’s memory only is manifestly sufficient. He was twenty-three years old when he heard what Jesus spoke, and he was somewhere between eighty and ninety when he set these words down in writing.” (Page 10)…“We also dare not forget the change of language. Though Jesus may have used some Greek, the bulk of his words were uttered in Aramaic, and the apostles had to translate this into Greek for much of their oral preaching.” (Page 10)…“Here, too, is where the personal factor counts heavily, for a translator has only his own fund of words and ways of expression on which to draw when it comes to a transfer of thought into another language. John was no exception—Greek was not his native tongue.” (Page 11 of R.C.H. Lenski’s *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel*)

• “Memory is a representation by interiorized action of an event or situation (‘remembrance-image’). Such a remembrance is usually expressed in a narrative form, as connected sequence, however inchoate.(Joseph Miller) One only knows what he can remember, what can be recalled and repeated.(Ong) Memory is a recreation based upon impressions from the past…. (Vansina)

• Oral traditions are ‘unwritten’ sources couched in a form suitable for oral transmission, and that their preservation depends upon the powers of memory of successive generations of human beings. Oral traditions consist of all verbal testimonies which are repeatedly reported statements, either spoken or sung, concerning the past.(Vansina in Oral Tradition) Oral tradition is a memory of memories in the most literal way, since the message is learned from what another person recalled and told.(Joseph Miller and Jan Vansina)

• “In antiquity and the Middle Ages reading was necessarily reading aloud…The medieval monks’ reading carrel was indeed a singing booth…The habit of silent reading-room with medieval readers and the buzz of whispering and muttering would be intolerable…What the medieval scribe carried was an auditory memory, and probably in many cases, a memory of one word at a time. Chaytor,s *From Script to Print*; p. 19; and J.W. Clark in *The Care of Books. ” (McLuhan, p. 82 and 92)

• “However, very little has been done to explore the problems involved when illustrations are used in printed matter, especially if one realizes that pictures have to be ‘read’ as well. The problem is further complicated when one realizes that most African people simply do not categorize the world as we of the Western hemisphere…‘We must remember also that much of Africa south of the Sahara is growing out of a non-book heritage. Illustrative material is new to many Africans and quite difficult to understand in
the terms that the Western artist has expressed.” (p. 3 of Duncan Hall’s *How Africans See Pictures.* 1962.)

- Oral communicators must think memorable thoughts if they are to be remembered and thus recalled. (p. 34 of Ong’s *Orality and Literacy*)

**An Interpretative Summary Of The Research Findings Concerning Memory Among Oral Communicators**

**First,** memory is affected by the **form or style of the information** that has been told and heard by the oral communicator.

**Second,** there is the number of times with accuracy that the oral communicator has heard the narrative or story.

**Third,** there is the interest or intent of the oral learner in the story, in the particular type of story, and in the story at the time of telling of the story. The issues here is whether or not he or she was listening to a story with the personal interest or intent of remembering and reproducing that narrative or story. And we have observed that most of the individuals involved in a Chronological Bible Storying Evangelism Track are not at that level of interest or intent. Most do become interested during the discipleship track.

**Fourth,** most oral communicators have to “get hooked on the story or stories” to the point that they are almost one with the story for accurate recall and retelling to occur. Walter Ong cites that one major characteristic of oral communicators, especially oral communicators living in a predominantly oral society, is that they listen so intently that in their mind they join the story.

**Fifth,** After developing an interest in the story and after hearing the story enough times, just the thought of the story brings about the “playing of the story in the mind.” They see the story occur in their mind and tell what they are seeing, which results in high accuracy.

**Sixth,** some primary oral communicators rely upon a trigger of some kind to call to their memory the appropriate story, which then plays in their mind like a video, which allows them to accurately retell the story they are seeing in their mind. Some respond to pictures, or reoccurring phrases in a story, or a reoccurring theme that runs through all of the stories. For some it is the setting, the venue where the stories are told. For others it is the voice of the storyteller.

**Seventh,** maintaining the chronology with effective oral bridging is critical for recall and retelling. Again, bridging between stories is very important, and especially not regressing into exposition as an attempt to achieve bridging.

**Eighth,** identifying a theme or topic with the story is also very important in achieving maximum recall and retelling. This is accomplished during the pre-story introduction, during the telling and during the dialog that follows the story. As each story is identified for inclusion in whatever track--evangelism, discipleship or training—it is important to have a key word or phrase that goes with the story. It must be clearly seen as identifying with the story by the oral communicator. What might be very clear to a literate might not be so clearly associated in the mind of an oral communicator. When one achieves success in identification, when the topic or theme is mentioned or experienced, the person will hear the oral communicator say: “That reminds me of a story.”
Ninth, there is the cultural style of stories as they are told within a specific culture. Numerous researchers such as Klem, Goody, and Finnegans have observed that each culture tells stories in very characteristic ways. (E. Havelock’s TMLW, page 11.) In West Africa it is common for a culture to tell part of the story, sing another part and use the drum to tell another part of the story. (Klem, Finnegans and Havelock in TMLW, pp. 12-13) Certain storytelling phrases are common in other cultures. (OFT by John Miles Foley) Ultimate success is usually dependent upon “telling the story the way they tell stories.”

Tenth, is a reason that usually results from an accumulation, over time, of the other reasons—the cultural and personal valuing of a story or set of stories. For instance, in some cultures the Bible is looked upon as a sacred book and that is enough to place a value on learning to tell all the stories in the Bible. In other cultures the Qur'an is so valued a book that hearing and learning to retell stories from the Christian Bible is literally devalued. Some are even afraid to listen to and learn Bible stories. Among a people, and for individuals in a particular culture, it is important to progress to a point whereby individuals, and hopefully their society, places a value on the stories equal to their heritage stories value, or at or above the level of other religious stories they hear and tell. Until an individual reaches that point in personal value of the Bible stories recall and retelling will seldom reach the level it could if that person or persons placed ultimate value on the stories. The Bible itself promised that God’s Word will not return empty after it is told.

Eleventh, there is the environment or setting in which the story is told and the setting in which the story is retold. Numerous storytellers have said that individuals were very hesitant and poor at retelling a story in the storytelling group, but told the story with accuracy upon arrival at home, when they were asked what was the story they heard. These incidents reveal that the hearers are getting the story to the point of excellent recall and reproduction while not feeling confident in telling it in certain settings. It may be that only much later in a story telling setting that individuals will become confident enough to retell the stories accurately in that environment.

Twelfth, orals can get “hooked” on a story series just as literates can get hooked on a “soaps” story series.

One storyteller, after reviewing these and other reasons, said, “it is a wonder that the hearers remember and retell any of the stories.” It is a wonder; it is a spiritual wonder that God provokes in the hearers of His Word.

Most secular oral researchers such as Havelock, Millman, Parry, Yeats, Lord, Foley, and Ong say that an oral learner’s memory—recall and reproduction—is often very accurate. They say that ordinary reproduction is not always verbatim, but is verbatim when that is their intention and that expectation is placed upon them. Historical research has shown that is generally true of everyday storytellers. At the same time, these same scholars have documented average oral communicators who have over time developed to recall and retell with high accuracy long narrative, epic style presentations. And, it is from the research and writings of these scholars and other experienced storytellers that this author drew the twelve reasons that were just shared.
As one moves beyond primary oral learners and communicators on the learning grid to functional illiterates—those whose competency is farther along the continuum from first grade to the eighth grade, memory skills do weaken slightly due to an increasing dependence on the literate skills the person is gaining. So, what about memory—recognition, recall and reproduction—among functional illiterates who have been introduced to reading and writing? It is important to know that as one is exposed to reading and writing and begins to learn how to read and write, their mind begins changing in identifiable ways.

First, as they begin to learn to read and write, the capacity to remember slowly begins to change. Such individuals begin to have their first thoughts, often unconsciously, that they do not need to pay attention to remembering as much for they will be able to write it down and read it when they need it.

Second, as they learn to read and write they do not feel the same “desperation” that primary oral communicators feel concerning the need to remember at all costs, for there is now beginning to be an alternative for the one who is learning to read and write. Notice, these functional illiterates cannot yet function as a literate and that won’t occur until they reach a tenth or eleventh grade competency level. However, during this time of functional illiteracy, these oral communicators are beginning to depreciate their memory and depend less and less upon it. They still have the capacity to remember and still function by their illiterate, oral skills, while in their mind they are moving away from it.

Third, the functional illiterate between the fourth and eighth grades is beginning to learn how to conceptualize. This conceptualization won’t become a learned and skilled competency until the ninth, tenth or eleventh grade, but they are beginning to develop conceptual skills.

Fourth, perhaps the most critical factor is that literates generally see these first to eighth grade learners as being literate and they are not—they are clearly functional illiterates. When literates see them as literates, depreciate illiteracy in their presence, and place literate expectations on them, they tend to shy away from their valuable oral skills and perform poorer than they otherwise could. When Christians do this to them, and especially when Christians relate to them as literates, when they clearly are still functioning as an illiterate, it further puts these individuals at risk. That is especially true when these functional illiterates do not progress to the eighth and ninth grade and into semi-literate competencies. If whatever reading and writing skills they have can be appreciated while at the same time relating to them as the oral learners and communicators that they are, these individuals can progress much farther in both facets of their life. Within a Chronological Bible Storying environment they should be storied to as oral learners and not as literates and maximum gains will be achieved.

Semi-Literates. Semi-literates are those individuals who have progressed far enough in reading, writing and learning competencies to perform at a ninth, tenth or eleventh grade level. They can then learn similar to the way literates learn for they are very close to being literate. They do not have to be storied to in order to learn concepts, ideas, guidelines, principles and teachings. They still appreciate and can learn well by means of oral formats—narratives and stories—but they do not have to have information in that form in order to learn. Concerning memory skills, they generally demonstrate less and less innate ability to remember and recall with accuracy. They are then exercising
their literate skills and depending upon their reading and writing skills instead of their oral learning and communication skills. Thus, their progress deeper into literacy skills has literally changed their mind. (Jack Goody’s DOTSM) However, some Chronological Bible Storyers, when they have a few semi-literate in their storytelling group, tend to cater to them and move to expositional presentations. When this is done, the functional illiterates and primary oral communicators are then left behind and thus left out. The appeal is to be very clear as to the status of individuals and their competency level with a view to matching the appropriate presentation style with the corresponding learning and communication style.

**Literates.** The general ability of literates to remember and retell the stories with accuracy is much less than that of oral communicators—illiterates and functional illiterates. However, the success of literates who are intentional and committed to memorizing and telling the stories has been often observed. Again, it is not as easy and as natural for a literate to assimilate, recall and reproduce the stories as it is for oral communicators. Discipline is necessary.

Those engaging in Chronological Bible Storying in order to evangelize, disciple and train leaders among oral communicators—mainly illiterates and functional illiterates—should give attention to the stated reasons as the stories are selected, organized chronologically, crafted according to the Scriptures as a told story, told and retold, followed by deliberate dialog. When this has been done, maximum recall and retelling has been consistently observed.

**Bibliographic Materials Specifically Applicable To This Article**
