

## **Group Study: The Craft of Story (Making Sense)** **January 19, 2025**

Most people come to a Bible study to study, well, the Bible. However, when engaging in Bible study, knowing yourself and your relationship with the Bible is important. Each of us approaches the Bible in a slightly different way; we have different experiences and perceptions. None of us read the Bible alone, even if we're sitting by ourselves in an empty room. We read with the voices of our parents in our ears, or voices of pastors, children, friends, and grandparents. Depending on your tradition, Augustine reads over your shoulder, perhaps with Martin Luther or Martin Luther King, Jr., Rachel Held Evans, Henri Nouwen, Beth Moore, Tom Wright, or Esau McCaulley.

Take a moment to reflect on your biblical autobiography.

When did you first encounter the Bible? Who first taught you about the Bible, and who influenced how you read it?

What is your social location (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, geography, religion)? How might this affect how you experience the Bible?

How have you heard the Bible used in public discourse, for example to address social issues? Do these circumstances affect the way you view the Bible?

When you read the Bible, do you feel included? excluded? Has this changed over time?

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## Good Faith Bible Studies Podcast Transcript

### **Good Faith Bible Study**

**Kathy and Nathan Maxwell**

**January 19, 2025**

**"The Craft of Story"**

**Literary Plot**

**<https://goodfaithmedia.org/bible-studies/>**

Transcript:

This week's lesson doesn't focus on one biblical text, but instead on how the smaller passages and stories of Scripture make up one large story, a metanarrative. In the lesson, I suggest that this big story of the Bible is complex and ancient, but that it is also living and active, and that in many ways, it is our story. I'd like to raise a related aspect of the biblical story in this short podcast. If we let them speak for themselves, stories have the power to be subversive in some unusually persuasive ways. If we think about it, stories, in general, have power. There's an underlying narrative that significantly impacts our lives. For some people, that narrative is: If you work really hard, you can be anything you want to be. But for others, the narrative that runs in the background is: No matter how hard you work, there is no hope for you.

The power of these narratives, these stories, is really subtle. They're so ingrained in our culture that we don't even realize how much they influence us. And I should say that just like anything else that is powerful, the power of story can be used for good or for evil. We don't have to look very hard to see that narratives can be very effective tools of oppression. Those in power are very good at crafting a narrative that protects themselves, often at the expense of others.

On the flip side, though, stories can have incredible, subversive power. They can surprise us by reordering power structures, and they have this incredible staying and persuasive power. Something in us as humans gravitates towards story. We love to tell stories and to hear them, and we naturally begin to see ourselves in the stories we tell. They stay in our brain and in our hearts. We tell stories to our families. So stories of subversion can take root and give us hope that – even though it's not easy, and even

though it often involves great risk – even the least among us has the power to affect the community's narrative.

I think that to change society – and I recognize this is probably too simplistic and too idealistic – but I think that to change society, it's not always that we need to work harder or that we need to debate more persuasively, but instead, we need to tell and hear different stories. We have to begin to listen to and live according to a different storyline.

Now, as Christians, we can look to this metanarrative of Scripture and find stories that are subversive, stories that grow out of conflict and revolution, but to us today, many times these stories seem very tame because we've heard them over and over again. Paul Ricoeur is a French philosopher who talks about approaching a text with what he calls a “second naivete” – that is, reading a text or a story again for the very first time. Sometimes we need to read the Bible in this way.

Now, before we go further, I suppose I should point out two things. First, the power of biblical stories has been used to promote injustice and oppression. So these stories are not immune to being misused. And second, I think that many times the Bible tells us the story of God's good intentions of creation being whole, living in community, but other times the Bible stories are simply reports of what it looks like to live in a broken world. So it's important to know that not every biblical story shows us the way it should be. Sometimes we're hearing a story about the way things are. And by the way, both of these perspectives are important.

But many biblical stories are subversive. Some of Jesus's followers in the New Testament were accused of this same thing. We hear that biblical stories have the power to turn the world upside down. But I thought we would take a look at a short story from Exodus chapter one to illustrate this subversive power story.

This is the story of the Egyptian midwives. Listen to how the seemingly absolute power of Pharaoh is subverted. Exodus chapter one, starting in verse 15:

“The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah, and the other Puah, ‘When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, see them on the birth stool. If it is a boy, kill him, but if it is a girl, she shall live.’ But the midwives feared God. They did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.

So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, ‘Why have you done this? You've allowed the boys to live.’ The midwives said to Pharaoh, ‘Oh, well, because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women. They are vigorous. They give birth before the midwife even comes to them.’ And so God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very strong.”

Now I won't go into the place of slaves and women in ancient Egypt. You could imagine the power, or rather the lack of power, that these women would have had, but the plans of Pharaoh are overturned by a couple women gathered around a birthing stool. These slave women risk colluding together. They're committed to justice, and the power of Pharaoh is subverted. We even hear the name of these two midwives. To hear the name of characters in the biblical story often means that they have some particular significance. And so we remember these two. Their names are Shiphrah and Puah, and we tell the story of their courage and the power that they had to change the narrative of one from death to life for the oppressed people.

And here's what I think is the most subversive thing about the biblical story. Throughout history, we see dominant empires overthrown by the oppressed over and over again, and we all love to cheer for the underdog. But what happens after the empire is overthrown is vitally important. More often than not, the oppressed become the oppressors. When a new group comes into power, they slowly begin to act like the very oppressors they raged against. When we grasp power, our tendency is to protect it, to hoard it.

But what I hope that you see in the metanarrative is that God's story isn't like that. Instead, true power is always sacrifice. It's humility, compassion and justice. Justice, especially for those who are on the margins for whatever reason. Jesus's Sermon on the Mount in Matthew five through seven – we'll look at the Beatitudes in just a few weeks – completely redefines what it means to be powerful. The gospels teach us that true power means making and wielding not swords but peace and justice.

So how do we experience the biblical metanarrative with a second naivete? How do we read the Bible again for the first time? Well, I think the first thing we have to do is ask questions. Open-ended questions like “Why?” or “I wonder ...” or “How?” or “What if ...” can really open up possibilities with any story, including biblical stories.

Now, sometimes it's a bit uncomfortable to think that the biblical story might have multiple meanings. But I think that this is actually one of the amazing things about how story works. A story is flexible. Different parts of the same story can be highlighted depending on the context: Who is telling the story, who is listening to the story, and where is God's Spirit leading? The second thing we can do is poke at interpretations or assumptions in the story that we've always assumed to be true.

For instance, Lynn Cohick suggested a different understanding of the Samaritan woman in John chapter four – the Samaritan woman at the well. Several years ago, Dr. Cohick published this, and it has been so helpful to me. You know the story from John chapter four: Jesus and his disciples are in Samaria. They stop at a well. The disciples go off to get something to eat, and while they're gone, a woman comes to the well to draw water. She and Jesus have this conversation, and in the midst of the conversation, it's revealed that the woman has had five husbands, and the person she is living with now is not her husband. Now, I had always assumed that the woman had five husbands because she was sexually promiscuous. Dr. Cohick suggests, though, that the people of the village wouldn't have been so quick to listen to a woman like that when she comes to tell them that she has found the Messiah. Instead, Dr. Cohick explores the reality that a person's lifespan was not nearly as long. In the first-century world, there were many other dangers and things that would cause an early death, and that a woman was almost always required to remarry in order to find provision and protection in the first-century Mediterranean society. So isn't it possible, and perhaps even likely, given the way the rest of the story unfolds, that this woman has had five husbands because she was widowed five times?

That changes completely how we see this woman. Now we don't judge her. We feel deeply for a woman who has suffered the loss of five husbands. Now I can't say for sure why this woman has had five husbands, but this is a good example of questioning conclusions or assumptions that we hold, probably because of our own cultural and social positions and how we've always heard the Bible taught.

So as you study the Bible through these lessons and on your own, I hope that you are asking a lot of questions and that you will try reading the Bible again for the first time. What assumptions have we made because of our own cultural and social identities? One of the best ways to expose these assumptions is to study the Bible together, and as often as we can with people who are different than we are. We find that the metanarrative is

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not a neat and tidy package. It is complex, and it contains multiple voices, multiple perspectives. When we study the Bible with others who have multiple voices – perspectives that are different than our own – and when we listen carefully to each other, this subversive and persuasive story will shape us, maybe to be more like the Hebrew midwives, and certainly to be more like Jesus himself.