TEACHING BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

A summary of the main findings of the Biblos Project, 1996–2004

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bible society making the bible heard

BIBLE SOCIETY IS AN ADVOCATE FOR THE BIBLE IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURES, RESOURCING AND INFLUENCING THOSE WHO SHAPE SOCIETY – **MAKING THE VOICE OF THE BIBLE HEARD.**

What is Biblos?

Biblos is an ongoing research project into teaching biblical narrative.

It is based at the School of Education and Lifelong Learning (SELL) at the University of Exeter and led by Professor Terence Copley (biblos@exeter.ac.uk).

SELL has a Religious Education Research Team consisting of eight members of full-time, part-time and honorary staff. This makes it one of the largest centres for the study of religion in education in the country.

Biblos was founded in 1996 with the aim of investigating how the Bible is, and should be, taught in Religious Education (RE) in England and Wales. It represented a working partnership between the RE team at Exeter and Bible Society. At present it is working in New Zealand to compare findings in another English-speaking country.

What is this report about?

This report attempts to assimilate the key findings and research outcomes of the three UK phases of the Biblos Project by looking at the first two phases from the perspective of the third.

Who is this summary report intended for?

Teachers delivering RE in all key stages
Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education
RE advisers, inspectors and consultants
Governors, especially in foundation schools
Publishers of RE resources and texts
Clergy who teach biblical narrative in schools or churches
Church leaders and junior church leaders
Christian youth and schools workers
Diocesan directors of education and advisers
Denominational education agencies and officers

How can schools and faith communities engage with these findings?

After each section of this report, the key issues for schools and faith communities are highlighted.

How can I find out more?

See Biblos Project publications (section 14) on p.20.

How can I obtain more copies of this report?

Contact: The Biblos Office, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of Exeter, Heavitree Road, Exeter, EX1 2LU.
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1   Introduction

Biblos was started in the first place because of four hypotheses:

- The Bible had largely disappeared from RE
- The Bible was perceived as a text written for, and of relevance only to, committed Christians
- Teachers, especially in primary schools, were reluctant to address biblical material
- Biblical material was being secularised at classroom level.

The first phase of the project (Full report: *Echo of Angels*, 1998)

This tried to tackle the problem of how to teach the Bible in a society described as 'plural' and 'secular' and the role of narrative ('story') in this task. Empirical research among teachers and pupils was conducted in Ealing and Devon schools. Subsequently, classroom materials for Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 were published by the Religious & Moral Education Press. These represent a new approach to teaching biblical narrative.

The second phase of the project (Full report: *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, 2001)

This extended and tested the established Biblos approach into Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 4. We worked with schools mainly in Lancashire and Devon. Approximately 700 children completed a questionnaire. A parallel project was also conducted on *The Figure of Jesus in Religious Education* (2002). This set out to investigate the picture of Jesus being transmitted in RE and why RE did not seem to be presenting the Jesus of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Rastafarianism or the Jesus of 'state of the art' New Testament scholarship.

The third phase of the project (Full report: *On the Side of the Angels*, 2004)

This worked with nine schools in the South West, Midlands and North East of England. To ascertain pupils' knowledge of, and attitudes towards, the Bible as well as what factors they believe influenced these attitudes, we used the most sophisticated questionnaire undertaken in the Biblos Project with 1,066 students. Included in the sample were:

- 518 males (48.6% of pupils).
- 548 females (51.4% of pupils).

- 117 Year 6s (11% of pupils).
- 610 Year 9s (57.2% of pupils).
- 339 Year 12s (31.8% of pupils).

We don't suggest that generalisations can be made about the whole of the pupil population in England on the basis of this sample, still less about Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. But they did come from a wide range of types of school and they run closely in parallel to the national census (2001) findings for religious adherence.

We also conducted 98 semi-structured interviews of about 30 minutes with volunteers from these schools. In addition, by means of a literature review, we investigated the wider social and cultural context that may have shaped pupil attitudes. We tried to assess to what extent children see the Bible as a 'problem' and what the origins of any problems

might be, providing evidence to support particular teaching strategies and emphases in the schools.

2   Secularisation of biblical text

In the first phase of the project, it was noted that during the presentation of biblical text in RE lessons, God in the narratives is often consciously or unconsciously edited out by the teacher (Copley, 1998. p.8). For instance, the Good Samaritan is described in terms of a secular call to help others and the narrative of David and Goliath may be reinterpreted in terms of the triumph of the small person over bullies (*ibid.* p.16). Joseph is told without any of the roughly 50 references to God in the Hebrew Bible narrative.

This might be occurring because teachers often understand Attainment Target 2 (learning from religion) to mean learning 'secular' morals from religion (*ibid.* p.19). This was corroborated by the phase three questionnaires in which pupils were asked to name and describe a Bible passage/story of their choice and then to state what meaning it might have for people today. Their responses were coded under the following categories[1]:

	Cited by
• Secular ethical[2]	36.3%
• Theological	22.9%
• No response	20.2%
• Literal	9.1%
• Irrelevant	5.8%
• Has no meaning	3.0%
• Other	2.7%

Below are some examples of pre-coded responses. They are direct quotations.

Year 9 pupil.
Passage: *Feeding of the 5000*
Meaning for today: *Don't take things for granted and share things.*

Year 12 pupil.
Passage: *David and Goliath*
Description: *The battle of a courageous young boy who defeats the giant goliath with a stone launched from a catapult.*
Meaning for today: *There is hope for the underdog. Even when the odds are stacked against you, you can still come out on top.*

Year 12 pupil.
Passage: *A birth of Jesus*
Description: *Mary gave birth in a stable, 3 kings visited bearing gifts mirth, frankincense and gold.*
Meaning for today: *that the birth of a newborn baby is the best gift of all.*

Therefore, the Biblos Project decided that new approaches to teaching the Bible were required and that these must *reject the use of the Bible merely as a source for use in secular ethical discussion and be fair to the biblical narratives by retaining the theological/God-centred dimension* in which 'God' as the 'Hero' acts as the driving force of the people and events.

Key issues for schools	Key issues for faith communities
• How do we prevent some teachers from secularising biblical narrative?	• Do preachers and teachers in churches ever secularise material, perhaps to make it 'relevant'?
• Are they embarrassed to discuss God, perhaps because they don't believe in God?	• Are they embarrassed to discuss God – or might the people they are working with be embarrassed and so the 'God issues' are played down?
• Or don't they read the narrative before telling it to children?	
• Or are they frightened of the danger of religious indoctrination but unaware of the danger of secular indoctrination?	• How extensively do those who teach narratives prepare before telling them to children?
• Or is the agreed syllabus to blame?	

3 The Bible as a multi-religious text

The phase one report stated that pupils should be made aware that the Bible is a multi-religious text (Copley, 1998. p.19), with importance for Christians, Jews and Muslims (*ibid.* pp.14–15). Multi-religious perspectives on the biblical material should not be ignored. The results of the phase three questionnaire survey demonstrated that pupils were less well aware of the importance of the Hebrew Bible for Jews and of people in the Bible for Muslims, than they were of its importance for Christians. This is not surprising as the phase two report had highlighted that only one of the twenty-four agreed syllabus sections for Key Stage 1 surveyed recognised the commonality of the Bible for Christians, Jews and Muslims (Copley, T. *et al.* 2001. p.12) and only one of the nineteen distinguished between Christian and Jewish approaches to biblical texts at Key Stage 4 (*ibid.* p.24). The quotations below illustrate some perspectives on the Bible from representatives of the world's religions and a pupil without a religious affiliation or identity:

Year 9 pupil. [Christian]
It is something that should be respected and cherished because it has the words from God who created us. It is a way of saying thank you.

Year 9 pupil. [Hindu]
I respect the Bible and its teachings but I do not follow it as I am a Hindu.

Year 9 pupil. [Muslim]
Because it was written by the four gospel writers who were human they could have easily made mistakes in its writing and it could also have been altered over time.

Year 9 pupil. [Sikh]
I don't read or learn the Bible because of my religion but I feel that all holy books are important and are interesting to learn about.

Year 9 pupil. [No religion]
The bible, I think, was designed to defeat the problem of anarchy, as it is a law presented to have eternal consiquences [sic].

Therefore, the Biblos Project decided that new approaches to teaching the Bible were required and that these must demonstrate *the nature of the Bible as Christian and Jewish scripture and as a book dealing with some of the prophets of Islam.*

Key issues for schools	Key issues for faith communities
• How can agreed syllabus revision panels be persuaded to widen their perception of the Bible beyond that of a book of relevance only for Christians?	• What issues arise for Christians out of treating the Bible as a multi-religious text? • How far are Christian communities able to encourage or facilitate their child members in questioning and engaging with biblical narratives? • What might this mean in practice?

4   The Bible and story

In discussing possible new approaches to teaching the Bible, the phase one report noted that one of the most popular labels for the biblical text is 'story' (Copley, 1998. pp.26–33). Story has many positive connotations:

- Story is at the heart of being human.
- We organise our life experiences through the re-telling of stories.
- Everyday stories are shaped by beliefs, values, intentions and decisions.
- They also feed into, and shape, our personal 'life story'.
- Forms of story include biography, history, gossip and soaps.
- The boundary between 'true story' and fiction is actually blurred. Significantly, biblical Hebrew has no word for fiction.
- There is a significant difference between asking 'Is the story true?' and 'What is the truth in the story?' The latter is a better approach to religious literature
- Story is an attempt to find meaning.
- Editorial selection and shaping of a story is undertaken in the search for meaning.
- Stories evoke stories present the world as it appears to the teller.
- Stories are useful in attempting to describe the indescribable because they often use metaphor, simile, parable etc.
- Story, with all its limitations, is a natural medium for religious discourse and for discussing 'God'.

Three types of story associated with the Bible:

(1) Bible stories
Bible stories are selected narratives usually chosen at random from the Bible without coherence and with no regard towards, or perhaps even awareness of, the whole Bible.

(2) The story of the Bible
The story of the Bible is the process by which the Bible as a collection of books came to be. Within this story is the story of how each book came to be, perhaps from oral narrative or experience into defined and eventually unchangeable text.

(3) The Bible's story
The Bible's story pertains to its great theme: e.g. from Adam to Revelation, from Creation and Fall to Redemption and Restoration (Christian Bible). It is a story of

covenant, re-call and promise (Jewish Bible). It is a story of a God who reveals himself and of the lives of his prophets (although for Islam the Qur'an is the 'final testament', the complete and pure revelation).

Key issues for schools	Key issue for faith communities
• To what extent are pupils aware of 'the story of the Bible' and 'the Bible's story'? • Would knowledge of the former prevent simplistic, dismissive attitudes (e.g. 'It's rubbish. Somebody made it up')?	• How far does the faith community you know or belong to work in a 'Bible stories' approach and how much does it teach 'the Bible's story'?

Story – the down side

The word 'story' also has drawbacks.

- Story can mean fiction (even a lie) as opposed to fact.
- It is associated with childhood, something to be 'grown out of'.

Narrative

The word narrative is more appropriate. It is a more neutral word that is not as value-laden as story because it is simply something presented or narrated by another. Narrative retains all the positive connotations of the word 'story'. On this basis, the Biblos Project decided to teach Bible narratives within the context of the Bible's story. The decision was made to select three key narrative themes. Narrative themes should:

- Be sensitive to the biblical narrative but relevant to the world and experience of children today.
- Act as a bridge between secular world views and the religious world views inherent in the biblical treatment of the theme.
- Be linguistically comprehensible.
- Be easily memorable.
- Not secularise the material.
- They should not be exclusive, i.e. they should not exclude legitimate Jewish or Christian or Muslim interpretation.
- Have the potential to be used at any key stage of schooling.
- Enable progression.

Three Biblos themes were selected as keys to unlock the Bible's story:

- Encounter
- Vulnerability
- Destiny

These were chosen because the Bible is full of crucial *encounters* between humans, and between humans and what they call 'God'. In the Christian Bible, God is as *vulnerable* as a baby in manger and a crucified criminal. In the Jewish Bible, messengers of the Living God confront people with God's commands and God as King controls the *destiny* of all things.

It was also decided to create an 'umbrella' statement which could preface all curriculum materials in an effort to relate the narratives to the Bible's story:

The Bible always deals with what people are like and with taking God seriously.

5   Pupil difficulties with the Bible

One key aim of developing new approaches to teaching the Bible was to tackle those things which pupils find problematic. In the phase three questionnaire, pupils were asked what they find difficult about the Bible. The pupil responses were coded under the following categories:

	Cited by
• Language	20.5%
• Meaning	17.4%
• Other	15.1%
• Credibility (in general)	13.6%
• No response	10.1%
• Format (e.g. size, font, lack of pictures etc)	9.6%
• None	6.5%
• Credibility of Miracles[3]	3.2%
• Relevance	2.3%
• Contains contradictions	1.8%

The identification of pupils' difficulties challenges us to consider methods of overcoming them. The first Biblos report stated that it is important to *tell the story of the book* (i.e. how the Bible came to be written and eventually compiled into one unit) (Copley, 1998. p.64). This might lessen pupils' difficulties regarding the format of the Bible. *Readers in our time need clues* about the historical, social, cultural and theological context in which the narratives were written. *These clues should use the latest academic scholarship.* This might lessen pupils' difficulties regarding the language and meaning of the Bible.

In addition, pupils should be taught about *the complexity and diversity of biblical interpretation* even within faith communities. According to the second phase of the Biblos Project, this is not being done. Only four of the nineteen agreed syllabus sections for Key Stage 4 surveyed recognised that the Bible may be approached and interpreted in different ways by Christians (Copley, T. *et al.* 2001. p.24). The first report (Copley, 1998. p.20) stated that texts present different belief and value-systems and how we respond to them is determined by our own beliefs and values.

There is a dialogue between a reader's personal 'horizons' (i.e. knowledge and experience) and the 'horizon' of a text. The former affects the interpretation of the latter and the dialogue leads a reader to gain critical self-awareness (i.e. *learn from* the text). This has enormous implications for the use of the Bible in educational discourse. *The student 'reader-interpreter' should not be passive, but an active participant in dialogue with the text.* This can be done using questions of evaluation and interpretation that encourage reflection and response. Children need to understand how a text can cause them to re-examine their own values and to reflect upon their identity, the nature of their world and the ways in which they relate to it.

The Biblos Project produced curriculum resources to address pupil difficulties. This resulted in the publication of one teacher's handbook and textbooks for Key Stages 2 and 3 (see Biblos Project publications (section 14) on p.20). These were written:

- To present biblical narratives linked to themes which have immediate meaning in the lives of pupils and which relate to the Bible's story: destiny, vulnerability and encounter.
- To be fair to pupils without patronising them, by presenting narratives so that young people can understand them.
- To be fair to the narratives themselves, to allow the narratives to speak without being censored, to be heard as Jewish and Christian writing, as writing about God and humankind and not simply secular moral or ethical or citizenship issues of current concern.
- To draw attention to 'God' as the 'hero' of the biblical literature, all of it, while at the same time recognising that 'God' is not a reality to many pupils.
- To present narrative as writing that challenges all readers to engage in theological response, in other words to learn from them and not merely learn about them.
- To provide curriculum materials planned for progression through Key Stage 1, 2 and 3.

Key issues for schools	Key issues for faith communities
• To what extent do teachers and pupils understand how their prior knowledge, experience and beliefs affect their interpretation of biblical narratives? • How might such an understanding improve their ability to *learn from* the text?	• How far does the faith community which you belong to take understanding the context and culture of biblical narratives seriously? • What specific things could it do to increase this?

6   The curious position of religion in Britain

The third phase of the Biblos Project questioned whether the problems associated with the presentation of the Bible in RE are symptoms of a negative attitude towards the Bible that pervades UK culture. It was decided to undertake a review of current theories about the place of the Bible, Christianity and religion in the UK and to seek to ascertain what pupils' attitudes were towards the Bible and what factors had affected these attitudes.

Our young people are the products of a British culture that has a long history of ambivalence toward religions. It is a culture that many believe has been secularised as a result of modernisation and industrialisation. The leading position of the church, the expectation of churchgoing and automatic subscription to the 'Christian moral code', have all gone. However, Davie (1994) and others note that belief survives well even if people no longer belong to a church. Some 71.6% of the UK population express adherence to Christianity (2001 National Census) whilst only 8% (a disputed figure which could be higher) attend church regularly. But what are the possible causes?

(a) Decline of Christian discourse
Callum Brown's *The Death of Christian Britain* (2001) argues that what is making the difference is the disappearance of Christian discourse. Davie (2000) also talks about an 'amnesic' society in terms of religion. RE plays a major role in preserving religious discourse, rather like the role of the Welsh national curriculum rather than the chapel in preserving the Welsh language. The media cannot be relied upon to improve the

knowledge base of younger people. Their portrayal of religion is often restricted to the salacious (sexual scandal) or the fanatical (acts of terrorism committed in its name). Some atheist 'liberals' within the media strive to hasten the process of secularisation by making strident and articulate use of their media pulpit. Institutional secularism often receives disproportionate coverage. In 2000 the British Humanist Association had 3,600 members. The National Secular Society, its evangelically atheist counterpart, would not reveal a number (Meek, 2000). At that time even church congregations were reaching a weekly one million.

(b) Changing nature of femininity
Brown (2001) argues that the secularisation process in Britain was hastened when women secularised the construction of their identity from the 1960's, after which the churches started to lose them. This secularisation of identity resulted from the simultaneous de-pietisation of femininity and the de-feminisation of piety. In the former, feminism readily perceived patriarchal religion to be objectionable and offered instead freedom and equality. In the latter, when women no longer needed to be escorted to church, men no longer had to "keep up appearances" in the pews.

(c) Decline of community values
Decline in church attendance was paralleled by a decline in various activities – trades union membership, voting in elections, membership of political parties, public libraries, youth organisations, etc. Perhaps this represents a wider swing from the communal towards the individual. Where once one had to opt out (e.g. of infant baptism or marriage) now one has to opt in. In that sense UK culture can be characterised as a 'Me culture' (Copley, 2000), a form of individualistic hedonism, in which satisfying 'my' ambitions, 'my' wishes and 'my' desires, have become prime motivating forces. In such a culture religion is seen as a hobby or leisure activity, in competition with others and, like them, entirely optional.

The British ambivalence towards religion is mirrored in RE in various ways:

- The placing of RE outside the national curriculum in the 1988 Education Reform Act.
- The retention of a parental withdrawal clause for RE, even though RE ceased to be religious instruction some 40 years ago.
- The tendency to see religions as prescriptive, authoritarian, unchanging, pre-occupied with beliefs, whereas 'spirituality' is seen as more personal, less demanding, more DIY, less institutional.
- A tranche of subjects has arisen alongside RE: Personal and Social Education, Citizenship, 'spiritual development' as a cross-curricular theme, etc. These subjects can rival RE, threaten its curriculum time and fail to expose their own secular assumptions for open debate.
- The tendency within some RE to present religions as museums (what people used to believe) or zoos (living creatures, in danger of extinction, which have to be kept at a safe distance).
- In the history of UK education, neither the churches nor RE sought to integrate theology into their educational work nor to teach their members (the churches) or students (RE lessons) to 'theologise', i.e. to think theologically, until relatively recently. The work of Ronald Goldman in RE actively discouraged this (1964 and 1965). Bits of the Bible were used in churches and school, without any reference to the Bible's story (Copley, 1998. p.27). Ninian Smart's work in phenomenology and in Religious Studies also disparaged the role and relevance of theology. It is not that people do not have a concept of

angels, heaven or hell, etc, but they lack a coherent account of these notions (Pratt, 1970). The provision of this 'coherent account' has traditionally been the task of theology, but if theology has been kept from congregations and the classroom, confusion may result. The Biblos Project has promoted the notion of getting children to 'theologise', i.e. think theologically (not become passive students of Christian theology), a phrase adapted from Matthew Lipman's work on 'philosophising' with small children.

The society our children inhabit is – in terms of its attitudes to religions and religious observance – atypical of the planet and to a lesser extent atypical of Europe (Davie, 2000). But to those growing up in it, it is the *norm*. It is a society that has not written off beliefs and values, even some religious ones. A process of secularisation has undoubtedly occurred, as a result of which many people have no contact point whatsoever with institutional religion, but religious beliefs have not died out in Britain. The National Census (2001) suggests that those disavowing religious allegiance constitute only 15.5% of the population. If young people mirror their parents and the National Census is taken at face value, one would not expect to find among young people uniform hostility either towards religions or towards the Bible. But neither will one expect to find conformity or what to the churches might constitute 'orthodoxy' of attitude or belief.

The religious beliefs and values of young people today may in the end comfort neither the churches nor the secularists.

7   Pupil attitudes

In order to find out what young people today think about the Bible two measures of attitude were created. Firstly, year 9 and 12 pupils were asked to consider ten sets of semantically differentiated statements (e.g. 'The Bible is important to me' and 'The Bible is not important to me')[4]. They were asked to tick which statements they agreed with or whether they were not sure. The results below pertain to instances when pupils agreed with a positive statement or agreed with a 'semantically opposite' statement. For ease, the latter pupils have been coded below as those who disagreed with the statements. The remainder of pupils were 'not sure'.

Statement	Agreed (%)	Disagreed (%)
The Bible is important to me	33.7	35.5
The Bible is relevant to today	53.7	18.1
The Bible is interesting	35.9	35.5
The Bible contains truth	47.9	17.1
The Bible can show people how to live	63.1	18.8
I look to the Bible for personal guidance	18.7	58.8
I believe in the Bible	39.6	28.2
The Bible should be respected	74.1	12.9
Science has not proved the Bible wrong	23.4	27.3
The Bible has important things to say to people today	47.8	24.7

Secondly, another set of twenty attitude statements was generated for the purposes of a Likert Scale[5]. The results below pertain pupils who agreed and disagreed with each statement. The remainder of pupils were 'not sure'.

Statement	Agreed (%)	Disagreed (%)
The Bible is important because it tells us about God	65.4	14.7
The Bible is a waste of time	15.7	64.4
Most of the stories/passages in the Bible are true	33.7	23.1
The Bible is no longer important because people no longer believe in God	7.6	74.1
The Bible contains things that in real life would not happen	51.6	19.1
The Bible can help when times are hard	56.0	19.0
The Bible is not important because it is just a book	12.6	69.3
The Bible is important but I don't read it	63.1	22.7
The Bible is the Word of God	52.2	18.5
The Bible is important if you are religious	78.5	11.2
The Bible is not important because it is full of myths	13.2	58.4
The Bible is exciting	17.2	52.0
I would never read the Bible	26.2	45.9
The Bible is not important because it was written so long ago	11.9	66.3
The Bible is important for other people but not for me	43.6	36.8
The Bible is uncool	30.7	41.1
I enjoy reading the Bible	16.0	58.0
I respect the Bible and its teachings but do not live by it	63.1	17.7
The Bible is important because it teaches right from wrong	62.6	12.5
The Bible has not influenced my life	42.8	31.7

As part of the first phase of the Biblos Project, Devon secondary school RE teachers completed a questionnaire. When asked about their use of the Bible in teaching and their reason for this, the teachers wrote of its value in tackling the deep, timeless questions of human experience and in triggering discussion which relates to personal lives (Copley, 1998. pp.57–8). Yet the phase three research suggests that pupils do not see the relevance of the Bible for themselves, although they do recognise its wider socio-cultural importance.

The overall message of our total sample seems to be that pupils believe the Bible to be important (especially to religious people); to be relevant; to be capable of showing people how to live, and to be worthy of respect, yet it is not something they would read, live their life by or look to for personal guidance.

Key issue for schools	Key issue for faith communities
• How can teachers enable pupils to see the relevance of learning about the Bible?	• How can churches address the challenge posed in this summary?

This message reflects a situation in which 75% of households have a Bible while only 8% of the adult population claim to read it regularly (Copley, 1998. p.6) and supports one of the originating hypotheses of the Biblos Project, which was that the Bible is perceived as a text written for, and of relevance only to, committed Christians (*ibid.* p.7).

In the first phase questionnaire for Devon secondary school RE teachers, they claimed that pupils would apply the following words to the Bible: boring; old fashioned; out of date; rubbish; uncool; weird and irrelevant (*ibid.* p.56). However, the third phase has demonstrated that, contrary to the teachers' stereotypes and to the presentation of the voices of young people contained in the discourse about secularisation, pupils are not overwhelmingly negative towards the Bible. *Ambivalence* rather than overt *animosity* seems to characterise most pupils' attitude.

Key issues for schools	Key issue for faith communities
• Does the problem about the Bible lie more with teachers than their pupils? • How can the theological education of teachers, especially in the primary phase, be developed?	• How can the theological education of those involved in teaching biblical narrative be developed?

8   Pupil types?

As part of the phase three questionnaire, we asked pupils questions about their gender, age, religious affiliation/identity, frequency of attendance at a place of worship and type of school that they attend. We also asked them various socio-cultural questions regarding their favourite hobbies/activities, reading material and television programmes and those things which matter to them most. Finally we asked them for their opinions about their families' and friends' attitudes towards the Bible.

By analysing how pupil attitude scores correlated with the answers to the questions above and with their knowledge and understanding of the Bible, it was possible to juxtapose factors associated with the most positive and the least positive attitudes towards the Bible. These are presented in the table below:

Hypothetical pupil type one: factors associated with the most positive attitudes towards the Bible	Hypothetical pupil type two: factors associated with the least positive attitudes towards the Bible
Female	Male
Year 6	Year 9
Christian	Other
Attends a place of worship very often	Never attends a place of worship

Hypothetical pupil type one: factors associated with the most positive attitudes towards the Bible	Hypothetical pupil type two: factors associated with the least positive attitudes towards the Bible
Enjoys reading, voluntary work, youth groups, performing arts and arts/crafts	Enjoys film/TV/cinema
Enjoys reading fiction/novels, religious/philosophical, non-fiction and fantasy/science-fiction books	Enjoys reading PC/games and car/motorbike magazines
Either does not watch or own a television or enjoys children's programmes, Arts/Crafts/DIY/cookery programmes or Soap Operas/Dramas	Enjoys music programmes on TV
Family, education and religion matter to her most	Activities/hobbies matter to him most
Volunteered, and was selected, for interview	Did not volunteer to be interviewed
Attends a Christian Voluntary Aided Primary School	Attends a Community Secondary School
Recognises sources of biblical knowledge other than, or in addition to, RE lessons	Only recognises RE lessons as a source of biblical knowledge
Cites five or more biblical characters	Cites one or two biblical characters
Provides a generally accurate description of a biblical passage	Provides an inaccurate or irrelevant description of a biblical passage
Assigns a theological meaning to a Bible story	Assigns no meaning to a Bible story
Explains why the Bible is important for Christians, Jews and Muslims	Does not explain why the Bible is important for Christians, Jews and Muslims
Believes that the Bible has influenced modern society in terms of morality and the law	Believes that the Bible has had no influence on modern society except in terms of religious people
Finds the Bible difficult in terms of its meaning, language and because it contains contradictions	Finds the Bible difficult because of its format and because it lacks credibility
States that her family believe the Bible to be true and to be important	States that his family believe the Bible to be untrue, unimportant, rubbish and boring
States that her friends believe the Bible to be interesting and to have historical significance	States that his friends believe the Bible to be untrue, rubbish and to contradict itself

This presentation hides the complexity of the relationship between the attitude spectrum and the various factors under review. We should not expect pupils to be easily compartmentalised in to one or other of the above columns. However, it is interesting to explore correlations between gender, age and other factors in each column.

For instance:

(a) In terms of gender, the percentage of females who cited reading, voluntary work, youth groups, performing arts or arts/crafts as hobbies or activities was greater than that of males. These activities/hobbies were all associated with more positive attitudes. Similarly, 73% of females stated they watched soaps/dramas compared with 33% of males and 63% of males stated that activities/hobbies mattered to them most compared with 41% of females. On this basis, more research into gender differences in RE is required.

One avenue of research would be to investigate gender differences in relation to one of the findings of a questionnaire undertaken by Devon secondary school RE teachers in the first phase of the Biblos Project. They stated that pupils who have a positive attitude towards the Bible keep a low profile (Copley, 1998. p.56). It might be possible to test the hypothesis that this is because pupils with a positive attitude are more likely to be female and pupils who dominate classroom discourse are more likely to be male.[6]

(b) Also, in terms of social and cultural factors, 17% of Year 9 pupils stated that they read PC/games magazines, which were associated with the least positive attitudes towards the Bible, compared to 3% of Year 6s. Furthermore, 41% of Year 6 pupils stated that they watched Children's television programmes, which were associated with the most positive attitudes towards the Bible, compared to 6% of Year 9s. On this basis, further research into the attitudes of different age groups is also needed.

In the first report (Copley, 1998. p.44), we asked whether Bible stories are viewed as a discarded part of pupils' primary school experience which they do not want to revisit. The third phase of the project has shown that despite the fact that the Year 6 age group only had 51% of Christians compared with 72% in Year 9 and 75% in Year 12, they still came out as the most positive age group. This raises questions about the relative importance of religious adherence compared with age in determining pupils' attitudes. This is especially important in terms of Year 9 pupils who exhibited the most negative attitudes towards the Bible. Further research is needed in order to understand why this is. Could it be an adolescent reaction against an authoritative text or is their negativity non-specific (e.g. a general antagonism to education)? These questions have important implications at an age when GCSE option choices are made.

Key issue for schools	Key issues for faith communities
• How can further in-depth research on these issues be sponsored?	

9   Biblical literacy

In the phase three questionnaires, pupils were asked where they had read or heard passages from the Bible. They were asked to choose from categories which emerged from a pilot study.

	Cited by
• RE lessons	93.2%
• Collective worship/assemblies	77.9%
• Place of worship	61.8%
• Media (TV/film/radio)	36.1%
• Family	31.2%
• Books/magazines	24.0%
• Friends	15.4%
• Other	4.8%

This demonstrates that *RE remains the most significant source of biblical knowledge*. However, in terms of the Semantic Differential Attitude Score and the Likert Scale Attitude Score, there was no statistically significant difference between the attitudes of those pupils who did, and those who did not, cite RE lessons as the place where they had read or heard passages from the Bible. Therefore, it appears that a variety of other factors affect pupils' *attitudes* towards the Bible (e.g. gender, age, religious affiliation, hobbies, family etc).

Key issues for schools	Key issues for faith communities
• Do teachers realise that they are 'custodians' of the Bible in RE and also in collective worship/assemblies? • Should teaching children to 'theologise' be a higher priority in teacher training for RE?	• Do teachers in faith communities realise that they are 'custodians' of the Bible? • What does this imply for their use of biblical narrative? • Should teaching children to 'theologise' be a higher priority in training youth leaders?

A challenge is presented to RE teachers and textbook writers by the discovery that a more positive attitude towards the Bible is associated with a greater level of biblical literacy. RE is crucial here, because more pupils cited RE as a source of biblical knowledge than any other source and it is the only situation in which every child in the UK is inducted into 'theological' discourse about biblical narratives.

In this sense, while many factors affect pupils' *attitudes* towards the Bible, RE remains the most significant source of biblical literacy. The reciprocity of attitudes and biblical literacy means that the transmission of biblical discourse through RE *could* be the most important factor in transforming all young people's valuation of the Bible both personally, which will be of interest to the churches, and socially and culturally, which will be of interest to all those who recognise the Bible to be a foundational text of western civilisation.

It will also be of interest to RE teachers because prejudicial negative attitudes towards the Bible may preclude high pupil attainment.

This research therefore has multiple implications in regard to:

- The funding of high quality RE research in universities to investigate further the effects of context and culture and the 'types' of pupils who exhibit positive and negative responses to the Bible.
- Planning curricular and pedagogical approaches, which take account of such research, whilst not making undesirable changes to the biblical text.
- The resourcing and staffing of RE including initial teacher training and opportunities for in-service training and continuing professional development.

Key issues for schools	Key issues for faith communities
• How can RE specialist teacher supply be increased without sacrificing high academic qualifications in Theology or Religious Studies?	• How can RE specialist teacher supply be increased without sacrificing high academic qualifications in Theology or Religious Studies?
• How can RE syllabuses provide for proper study of biblical narrative alongside all their obligations to world religions teaching?	• How can the churches help to encourage this as a possible career for some of their young people?

10 Biblos international

The completion of the first three phases of the Biblos Project in the UK marks the beginning of the next crucial component of the project.

It is important to consider the roots of the attitudes of young people in the UK to the Bible, and to learning about the Bible, in order to provide RE teachers with a greater understanding of the causes of misconceptions, problems, attitudes and so forth. Moreover, it is also important to consider our own 'national' assumptions about religion, Christianity and the Bible for these heavily influence RE policy and practice. In this way we can see more clearly whether the 'problems' concerning the Bible, which have been identified by the Biblos Project to date, are really English, British, European or worldwide. There is much to learn from a comparison with other cultures and it is for this reason that we have begun a fourth phase of the Biblos Project in New Zealand. It is hoped that this will be the first of several stages of international collaboration and dissemination throughout the English-speaking world (including Ireland, Australia and the USA).

The fourth phase is being conducted in collaboration with the New Zealand Bible Society. New questionnaires, based on those used in phase three of the UK study, have been constructed specifically for the New Zealand context. These will be utilised in a survey of approximately 400 students from a representative sample of classes in schools across the country. The New Zealand Bible Society has undertaken and financed the administration of the questionnaires, which will be returned to the University of Exeter for analysis. The results of this study will be available in 2005.

Key issues for schools	Key issues for faith communities
• To what extent might we be projecting our 'national attitude' towards the Bible, Christianity, religions and religious education on to the international arena?	
• Are we willing to learn from international partners whose attitudes might differ considerably from our own?	

11 Conclusion

The Biblos Project has challenged some basic assumptions:

(a) The Bible is *not* a text written for, and of relevance only to, committed Christians. It is a multi-religious text with importance for Christians, Jews and Muslims.

(b) Secularisation of biblical narratives, which excludes God as the 'hero', does *not* constitute a non-indoctrinatory approach to the Bible but merely a new form of secular indoctrination.

(c) The theological search for truth in biblical narratives is *not* an exclusive activity reserved for believers in God. All people, regardless of their beliefs and values, can engage with the text, whilst developing a greater awareness of its theological meaning and of their own theological assumptions, whether these be Christian, Jewish, Islamic, agnostic, atheist etc.

(d) Pupil difficulties with the biblical text are *not* insurmountable. Specialist knowledge of the story of the Bible, the Bible's story and of the culture and context in which biblical narratives were written, facilitates the development of pupils' biblical literacy. This, in turn, challenges those negative attitudes, which teachers have all too often assumed are immutable.

(e) Pupil attitudes towards the Bible are generally *not* overtly hostile, but ambivalent. They accept the socio-cultural importance of the Bible, if not always its personal importance. These attitudes are the product of a complex of factors, which remain significantly under-researched, especially bearing in mind that these attitudes probably extend to all aspects of RE.

(f) Our 'national' assumptions regarding religion, Christianity and the Bible affect macro-RE policy and micro-classroom practice, including our attitudes and approaches to teaching the Bible. Despite common misconceptions, our 'national' assumptions are *not* neutral or objective nor are they uniformly hostile. Instead, they are generally ambivalent in a way which is by and large atypical of the rest of the world.

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13 Thanks

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[1] All the results in this report are presented in order of the popularity of the responses rather than in the order in which they appeared on the questionnaire.

[2] A secular ethical meaning was defined as an answer which concentrates on secular moral lessons to be learnt from a particular passage and which excludes any theological meaning, especially reference to God.

[3] This category was differentiated from 'Credibility (in general)' on the basis that some pupils explicitly referred to the credibility of miracles.

[4] 169 pupils (15.9%) provided invalid responses to this question and therefore were coded as missing data.

[5] Some pupils provided an invalid response or no response to these statements, but this was never more than 1.9% of the sample (i.e. 20 pupils).

[6] See (i) Bousted, M. (1989). Who talks?. *English in Education.* 23.41–51; (ii) Howe, C. (1997). *Gender and classroom interaction a research review.* Edinburgh: SCRE; (iii) Swann, J. and Graddol, D. (1988). Gender Inequalities in Classroom Talk. *English in Education.* 22.48–65; and (iv) Stanley, J. Sex and the quiet schoolgirl. In Woods, P. and Hammersley, M. (eds). (1993). *Gender and Ethnicity in Schools. Ethnographic Accounts.* London: Routledge.

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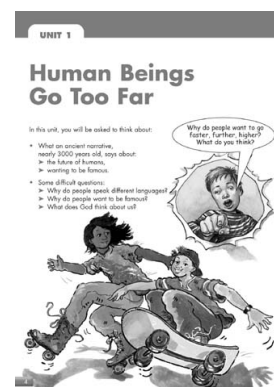
Reports from the Biblos Project

The Bible in Religious Education brings together the main findings of the first three phases of the Biblos Project. Each phase resulted in the publication of a research report.

The first report, *Echo of Angels*, examined the need for research into teaching about the Bible, outlined the project's approaches and detailed its findings in Key Stages 2 and 3.

The second report, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, covered research into teaching the Bible in Key Stages 1 and 4.

The third report, *On the Side of the Angels*, covered research into what young people think about the Bible and what factors have shaped these attitudes.

For copies of these reports, contact: The Biblos Office, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of Exeter, Heavitree Road, Exeter, EX1 2LU. Tel: 01392 264818. E-mail: biblos@ex.ac.uk
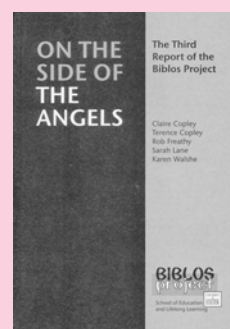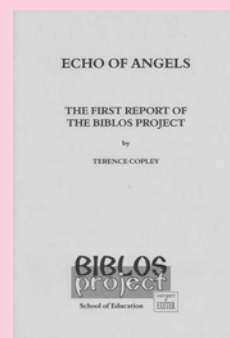
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