

RESEARCH PROJECTS

THE BIBLE: MORE BORING THAN WATCHING PAINT DRY?

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A NEW RESEARCH REPORT FROM THE BIBLOS PROJECT OFFERS REVEALING INSIGHTS INTO THE WAY 730 14-16 YEAR OLDS VIEW THE BIBLE. The Key Stage 4 (KS4) students from comprehensive schools were asked about their attitudes to the Bible, in relation to studying it in their Religious Education/Religious Studies lessons. The majority of these students were studying RS for GCSE or GCSE Short Course.

Although this particular survey, based on a detailed questionnaire, is limited to the responses of a particular group of young people in a school context, many of the issues it raises are particularly relevant to churches, and may indicate more widespread attitudes of people in this age group.

Students were asked what sort of RE/RS course they were following; whether they identified with a particular faith tradition; whether they had studied any part of the Bible prior to their KS4 course and if so, where. They were then asked to comment on their preliminary reactions to studying the Bible as part of their KS4 work; what difficulties they experienced in the course of study, and which passages, if any, stood out in their memory afterwards. The closing questions related to whether their attitude towards the Bible had changed as a result of KS4 study; whether students thought they were influenced in any way by the Bible, and to what extent they considered the Bible to be relevant to life today.

Twenty eight per cent of the sample claimed no prior study of the Bible before KS4. Previous experience, however, could either be positive or negative, and initial reactions to the Bible were mixed, ranging from the pupil who said, "I've never actually read the Bible before, so I didn't know what to expect" to "I come from a Christian family and hear about it all the time at home. It puts me off!"

Fifteen per cent of the students expressed an interest in studying the Bible; "I am a Christian and thought it would be good to learn about my religion", said one. But not all those interested claimed a Christian background. A variety of reasons for expressing an interest were offered, including, "the Bible is an important religious source", that "stories from the Bible are very interesting" and that the Bible "can still have a profound effect on people today".

However, 30% of students reacted negatively to the prospect of studying the Bible as part of their KS4 course. Responses ranged from the rather frequent, "I don't find it interesting", "the Bible is boring", to the more passionate, "It's all a load of rubbish – I would rather be watching paint dry." Others explained that they found the Bible

difficult to read, confusing, and identified concerns with their ability even to use the Bible. Some expressed doubts as to the truth or validity of the Bible itself. For some, such doubts revealed rather interesting misconceptions, for example, one student questioned the reliability of the Bible on the basis of its neglect to mention dinosaurs in the Genesis account of Creation!

Not all pupils identifying with Christianity had links with a place of worship (although they were not asked in detail about this), but the results suggest that those with such links are not necessarily more positive towards the Bible: this ought to be a matter of concern to churches. Those most interested in studying the Bible at KS4 were students who identified a combination of home, school and place of worship as places where they had previously encountered the Bible. Whilst the reactions of those who identified only school or place of worship, were predominantly negative.

Asked whether it was helpful to study the Bible as part of their KS4 course, 59% replied affirmatively, for a variety of reasons, ranging from, study "helped my understanding of Christianity or Judaism", to "depends on topic/part of Bible being studied". Perhaps more interesting are the isolated comments that suggest that some pupils had thought more deeply about their response. One pupil felt that the Bible, "gives people a chance to make a choice in their lives", and another suggested that it "enables you to hear someone else's point of view". A large number (33%), however, were only interested in the Bible's quotable value in homework/ coursework/exams in order to achieve better grades. One pupil stated that, "occasionally [the Bible] may be inspiring or uplifting", whilst another hoped that it, "could be helpful somehow in the future".

Many people working with younger people will already recognise that they find the Bible difficult. When asked to identify the difficulties they experienced with biblical material, a large number of the sample group (37%) identified language as the problem, despite the fact that teacher responses indicated that pupils were using predominantly modern language translations, such as the New International Version and the Good News Bible. A typical response was, "it's hard to understand and the words are all funny". It is difficult not to feel some sympathy with the pupil who commented, "All of it's difficult. The writing is just so small".

It is easy to assume that, after nine or ten years of schooling, and in some cases, exposure to the Bible in a place of worship or at home, that many students from the sample group would have had a basic knowledge of the

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► Bible's content. However, only 19% claimed that any passage had left an impression on them. Parables were the most commonly cited, in particular, the Good Samaritan, with only vague references to the teaching of Jesus as the second most popular response. The birth and passion of Jesus were low down the list of passages, despite the fact that these students had lived through 15 Christmases and Easters. In the experience of many of these students, it seems the Bible narrative had made little impact.

Interestingly, in spite of the fact that the majority of students (52%) claimed that they were not influenced by the Bible, a large percentage recognised that the Bible was either relevant (34%) or partially relevant (25%) for life today.

Although the research was conducted in a school context, it highlights areas of concern for churches. The findings suggest that those students identifying with Christianity expressed more negative reactions to studying the Bible than those who identified with other faiths or none. It should be noted, however, that, for the purposes of this survey, a very broad definition of Christianity was used and some may simply have felt that they identified with Christianity because they regarded Britain as a Christian country, or because they had been baptised as infants. There was no indication of active Christian faith, church attendance or any other factors that might have indicated the level of commitment of these students.

When asked to identify difficulties experienced with the Bible, only those students who described themselves as Christians expressed doubts about the Bible's truth, believability or relevance. Perhaps this gives us an indication of what may be the real problem behind negative or apathetic attitudes towards the Bible. It is easy to blame teaching methods, lack of an adequate understanding of the Bible amongst teachers, poor resources or even syllabuses for the negative attitudes towards the Bible expressed by this sample group of teenagers. Although these may all, in some circumstances, have a bearing, it seems that there are more deeply ingrained problems connected with current perceptions of the Bible and its place in contemporary society.

The Biblos project is concerned to ensure that teachers and students are better equipped to handle the Bible and to engage with it in positive and informed ways. At the same time, however, there is a recognition of the possibility that, aside from all the issues immediately connected with teaching and learning, there exists a range of complex social factors which might mean that students in schools are predisposed to have negative attitudes towards the

Bible however it is taught or presented. Churches, along with others interested in the relationship between young people and the Bible, need to find ways of addressing some of the issues emerging from this research. There are indications that the most positive attitudes towards the Bible were expressed when students had previously encountered it in a number of different contexts. This surely means that the responsibility for establishing a positive profile for the Bible is shared and involves faith communities as well as schools.

It must not be forgotten, however, that the survey did reveal positive attitudes even if they were largely overshadowed by negative ones. These were not restricted to committed religious pupils, but included those who were able to see that the Bible "... still has the answer to many of today's questions".

The task for teachers and others is to open up the Bible to young people, whatever their faith background, and encourage them to see it as something worthy of their attention. One young person caught sight of this potential, saying "... no matter how much I read [the Bible] I always learn something new".

Rather than watching paint dry, fruitful study of the Bible could help young people to catch a glimpse of a new landscape which engages their creativity and imagination. ■

THE BIBLOS PROJECT

The Biblos Project is a partnership between Bible Society and Exeter University School of Education. It aims to research how the Bible can be taught successfully in schools. Research so far has covered, in phase one, Key Stages 2 and 3, and in phase two, Key Stages 1 and 4. Phase 3, which is now in progress, aims to discover what forms the attitudes of children and young people towards the Bible. The project has published two research reports, *Echo of Angels* and *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *Splashes of Godlight*, a book of Biblical narratives retold by Christians and Jews. A series of classroom resource books for Key Stages 2 and 3 is due to be published next Spring. The Biblos Project, School of Education, University of Exeter, Heavitree Road, Exeter EX1 2LU