

REtoday

Spring 2015
Volume 32
Number 2

ISSN 0226-7738

The magazine for the Religious Education community

In this issue

Alan Bennett:

The wisdom of fairness

Mick Waters on the
future of the curriculum

Professor Dan
Cohn-Sherbok:
on religious dialogue

Rabbi Jonathan
Romain:
Why plurality matters

Professional Reflection:

Bill Gent introduces ...
a rich assembly of
articles, reviews
and commonplace
thoughts to interest and
stimulate reflection

also...

30+
classroom ideas
primary and secondary,
ready to try

What do religions and
worldviews say about
wisdom and where to find it?

THE WISDOM ISSUE





The art of Bible reading: a new approach

Rob Freathy, Esther D Reed and Anna Davis

The status, age and multi-layered nature of the Bible have always made it challenging to teach in an open, exploratory way in the classroom. A collaborative research project between the University of Exeter and the Bible Society has been exploring how art can be a stimulus for teaching biblical stories in RE.

An artist's calling

In 2004 and 2005, a collection of 33 paintings by Devon artist Brian J Turner toured cathedrals across England. The paintings, which depicted biblical stories in colourful and contemporary ways, took the viewer on a journey through the biblical text, from Genesis to Revelation, as well as out into the context of everyday life. Following the tour, as Brian fretted over what to paint next, his wife Melanie suggested flippantly, 'Why don't you paint the entire Bible?!' Perhaps surprisingly, Brian agreed.

The Bible Project (www.bibleproject.co.uk) is now well under way, although Brian estimates it will take around 30 years, and some 3000 paintings, before his mission is complete. He talks of how he has always had a belief in God through the Christian tradition, and describes it as his 'calling' to explore the stories of the Bible through painting. Creating the images, he says, engages his imagination, as he continues to find new ways of exploring the texts and of bringing the stories alive in the twenty-first century.

*Brian J Turner at work
Photograph: Jim Wileman*





A novel approach

As a group of researchers working at his local university, we decided to use Brian J Turner's paintings as the basis for a novel approach to teaching Bible stories, or 'narratives', in RE. This approach, which we called 'The Art of Bible Reading', employs visual art as a stimulus for thinking about how biblical narratives are read and interpreted in differing ways by people both within and outside of the Christian tradition.

Art has been shown to be particularly adept for this purpose, bringing to life the concept of interpretation for students, and revealing how texts might be understood in not one but many different ways. Brian's paintings perform this function especially well, with their quirky style proving engaging and thought-provoking among students. A CD-ROM, which accompanies the recently published textbook on the approach, provides a valuable additional dimension as it contains audio clips of Brian talking about why he paints the Bible stories in the ways that he does, and about how his life and beliefs influence his interpretations.

The Art of Bible Reading textbook contains 12 lessons, aimed at Key Stage 3, that introduce a selection of eight significant Bible narratives, accompanied by Brian's paintings of the same stories. Each lesson is organised around four phases of learning – encountering narrative; interpreting narrative; understanding narrative in community contexts; and reflecting on narratives of self and others – and includes a range of creative and stimulating learning activities.

The Art of Bible Reading approach presents many benefits for teaching RE, including the following four.

Benefit 1:

The role of story within the Bible

First, it emphasises the role of story within the Bible. Narrative theologians in particular understand the Bible first and foremost not as a set of doctrinal or theological principles but as a collection of stories, each of which tells us something about what is believed to be God's revelation throughout history. These stories include the story of creation, the story of

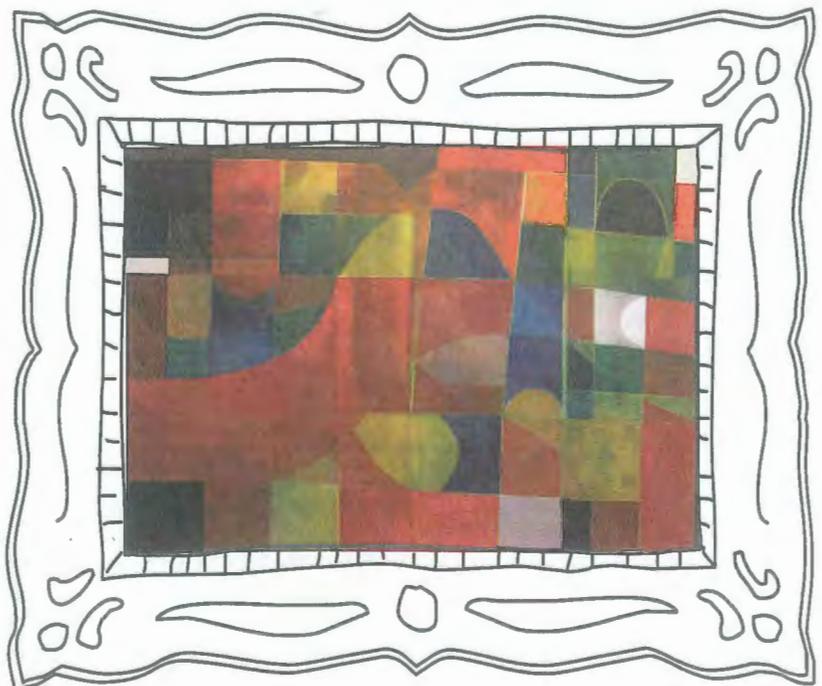
the nativity, and the story of the crucifixion and resurrection. When they are read together, the individual stories collectively tell the 'Bible's story' which, for believers, is the over-arching narrative of God's salvation of humankind.

Of course, the Bible is not just a collection of stories. It also contains many other kinds of text, such as poetry, law codes and proverbs. But these other texts are still part of the grand narrative of the Bible: they contribute to the Christian story of salvation, and their meanings can only be properly grasped when they are read as part of the Bible's story as a whole.

In each lesson in *The Art of Bible Reading*, students are encouraged to participate in the close reading of a text, brought alive by Brian's painting, and to discuss questions relating to how the narrative unfolds. Although this focus on biblical texts has aimed to allow for the importance of story within both the Bible and the Christian faith to be reflected in the RE classroom, it also increases the general biblical literacy of students, enabling them to develop a greater appreciation of the significance of biblical narratives within Jewish and Islamic faith traditions and within Western culture as a whole.

'The Art of Bible Reading' employs visual art as a stimulus for thinking about how biblical narratives are read and interpreted in differing ways

'Genesis' by Brian J Turner © Brian J Turner 2011. All rights reserved.
www.bibleproject.co.uk. Photograph: FX Photography



Benefit 2:**Interpreting texts**

Second, the approach opens up to students the concept of interpretation. Bible stories are read and understood in different ways by different people and at different times, and a narrative approach is able to reflect successfully the multiplicity of different messages and meanings that Christians and others take from the biblical texts.

Brian's paintings of the stories provide students with examples of interpretation that show how one individual – in this case, Brian – personally understands and relates to the texts. Through looking at the paintings, as well as reading and listening to interviews with the artist, students are enabled to reflect on how Brian's own life story – his beliefs, experiences and encounters – influence his engagement with the texts, and how these texts have in turn shaped his life.

Take, for example, Brian's interpretation of the creation narrative (Genesis 1), which takes the form of an abstract painting inspired by the earliest verses in the Genesis account when the earth was formless and desolate. For Brian, the painting depicts the colours and shapes that were the chaos out of which created order emerged. This unusual and challenging painting therefore shows how Brian, as an artist, responds to this story of creation. It also challenges the viewer to consider new ways of looking at the narrative, and gives licence to them to offer original and personal interpretations of their own.

The approach then considers other interpretations that have been offered for the texts in question. The story of Noah and the flood (Genesis 6:9 – 9:17), for example, is interpreted variously as: a literally true account of God's punishment of, and covenant with, humankind; a myth that tells of humankind's disobedience and God's promises; a story explaining how the rainbow has become a universal symbol of hope; and a text that calls for responsible ecological action to prevent the further destruction of the world through climate change. Such varied viewpoints show the Bible to be a 'living text', shaped by ongoing processes of reading and interpretation within Christian communities. They also point to how the



'The first covenant: God and Noah' by Brian J Turner. © Brian J Turner 2011. All rights reserved. www.bibleproject.co.uk. In the private collection of Reud Stephen and Mrs Christine Buckley. Photograph: FX Photography

Bible stories have been understood by, and are significant within, traditions outside of the Christian faith.

Resources that facilitate the handling of biblical interpretation in this way within RE are much needed. Attempts to avoid charges of 'confessionalism' or 'indoctrination' within RE in schools without a religious foundation have led to a tendency for 'neutral' or 'outsider' perspectives on matters of faith to be adopted. By contrast, *The Art of Bible Reading* takes seriously the lived experiences of members of faith communities – what faith is like for people 'inside' the Christian faith – while at the same time being open to interpretations of the biblical texts from other faith and secular traditions. It makes it clear to students that everyone has a 'life-story' and an understanding of the world, and that these influence how they interpret and respond to the Bible.

Benefit 3:**Shaping communities**

Third, the approach encourages students to think about the ways in which Christian communities have been, and continue to be, shaped by their telling of biblical stories and the Bible's story as a whole.

When it comes to teaching about how Christian communities appeal to the Bible when deciding how they should live, many RE resources resort to the practice of 'proof-texting'. This is where isolated phrases are pulled from the Bible and used to provide 'answers' to contemporary moral issues. However, using the Bible in this way – as a 'rulebook' providing ethical principles that guide Christians in making correct moral decisions – misconstrues how most Christians understand their relationship to the Bible. It also fails to do justice to the complexity and ambiguities of the texts, and sometimes applies them in ways that are anachronistic.



By contrast, *The Art of Bible Reading* shows Christian ethics to be less a matter of following lists of rules and more about participating in shared stories of faith. This understanding of ethics is concerned not so much with what we do but with *who we are* – with our characters and how they are shaped. Activities suggested in the textbook therefore emphasise how Christians – as individuals and as communities of faith – read, interpret and live the biblical narratives and, in so doing, become ‘living stories’ that are both informed by, and play a part within, the Christian story of salvation that underpins their shared beliefs.

Benefit 4:

Critical and personal reflection

Finally, *The Art of Bible Reading* invites students to reflect upon how they themselves, whether Christian or not, understand and relate to the biblical narratives.

Students are encouraged to offer their own interpretations of the biblical narratives studied – whether from a faith-based or secular perspective – and to consider how their own life stories influence these readings. They are also prompted to think about the ways in which the text might in turn have an impact upon their own lives.

For example, having studied various interpretations of a Bible narrative, students might be asked whether they agree or disagree with any of the interpretations of the text that have been expressed throughout the lesson, and whether they would like to offer any different interpretations of the story themselves. They are then asked to compare their responses with those of other members of their class: are their answers the same or different? Why do they think this is the case?

The Art of Bible Reading approach also provides the opportunity for students, following Brian J Turner’s example, to express creatively their personal interpretations of the narratives. Homework activities throughout the textbook require students to portray Bible stories in the form of an original painting, collage, newspaper report, diary entry,

photograph or play, and to provide commentaries where appropriate to explain their interpretations to others.

Encouraging active participation in interpreting biblical narratives enables students’ skills of critical engagement to be strengthened. By allowing them to offer their own perspectives on the texts, the approach also provides opportunities for students to develop their abilities to respond to the material in original, thoughtful and imaginative ways.

Most significantly, *The Art of Bible Reading* serves to bring to life within the RE classroom the ongoing process of biblical interpretation, allowing students to contribute to discourses in which the meaning and significance of the Bible to people from all walks of life are pondered anew.

For further information

For a detailed explanation of the narrative approach to RE developed by this project, see Esther D Reed, Rob Freathy, Susannah Cornwall and Anna Davis, ‘Narrative theology in Religious Education,’ *British Journal of Religious Education*, 35 (2013): 297-312.

The Art of Bible Reading is available for purchase from Kevin Mayhew (www.kevinmayhew.com) either as a student textbook (£12.99) or as a teacher textbook with an accompanying CD-ROM containing electronic versions of the books, copies of Brian J Turner’s paintings and interviews with the artist (£34.99).

The Art of Bible Reading is designed to support the aims for RE set out in the *Non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education* (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 2004) and the new *Curriculum Framework for Religious Education* (Religious Education Council 2013). Details of the specific objectives and assessment targets that can be met through the lessons are listed in the teacher edition of the textbook.



The artist with Rob Freathy
Photograph: Jim Wileman



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