

## Issues in studying the Bible in secondary school Religion classes<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

The use of the Bible in Religion classes—variously referred to as Bible, Scripture, or Studies of Religion classes—in the Christian secondary education context<sup>2</sup> appears to be something that should naturally take place. However, two issues may stand in the way of biblical study actually happening. First, it is all too easy to talk *about* the Bible without really studying it in any great depth. This article attempts to provide educators with some practical suggestions regarding effective scriptural study. Second, is the problem of not knowing where to start and perhaps where to finish. What is one to do with the biblical stories that seem inappropriate for early high school students? What if the Bible teacher gets out of her / his depth and cannot deal with the questions and issues raised by questing teenagers? How is one to deal with the considerable diversity within the Bible on many issues as well as with the vast disparity between contemporary culture and biblical culture/s? Again, I will attempt to provide some assistance in these areas.

“How does one deal with the considerable diversity within the Bible on many issues?”

Initially, though, I need to tell you something about myself and ‘where I’m coming from’. While, not having taught at secondary school level, for many years I have engaged with students who just completed high school. In addition, I’ve spent six years training school leavers in theology, biblical studies, and practical ministry in Papua New Guinea. Still, my best qualification is that I am married to a highly effective and very passionate Bible teacher. Not a day goes by without there being at least some discussion between us on the subject of ‘Bible teaching’.

### Background factors

#### What the Bible is like

What does one need to know about the Bible if it is to be understood? Can we, for instance, use the same methods of understanding its meaning as we might use for any other piece of literature? As

I remember my own high school study of English literature, we were provided with appreciable historical background material in order to understand Charles Dickens’, *A tale of two cities*. What sort of information, then, is necessary in order to understand the Bible?

It seems to me, at very least, that the type or genre of literature determines to a great extent the way we interpret it. *Poetry* would need to be read in a different fashion to a *letter*, and the same is true for a *parable*, a *proverb*, or a *prophecy*. The complex thing about the Bible, however, is that it contains a wide variety of types of human literature as well as making some wide-ranging authority claims. For instance, 2 Timothy 3:16 asserts: “All Scripture is God-breathed” (NIV). This biblical writer is specifically referring to the Hebrew Scriptures, which of course often refer to God’s direct input into the Scripture-making process.<sup>3</sup> So, while the Scriptures were written in common, ancient, human languages, they claim to be more than human literature; in fact, this is God speaking in human voices.

It might appear that the easier aspect of the Bible for us to come to terms with is its humanity. And, definitely, it has all of the traits of human literature: sublime as well as poor literary style, simple and complex figures of speech, words whose meaning is difficult to decipher at this distance, and unfamiliar genres. But for the contemporary reader, possibly the most disconcerting aspect of the ‘humanity’ of Scripture is its cultural underpinnings. Personally, I did not fully recognise this until I ministered in a cross-cultural situation where I found myself transported back into what was more like an Old Testament setting than a western context.<sup>4</sup> It is not as if some sections of the Bible are cultural and other parts are trans-cultural and our task as interpreters is to separate the human from the divine. Paradoxically, all of Scripture is fully cultural and fully divine.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps, this is best illustrated when God most personally speaks to human beings during the Exodus. He articulates the Ten Commandments in a patriarchal place, time, and mode. Notice for instance, the reference to “manservant” and

“maidservant” in the Sabbath law. Slaves were to be granted freedom, not from slavery, but in order to keep the Sabbath.<sup>6</sup> Then, the command which prohibits coveting is written from the perspective of the man who is not to covet the property of his neighbour. Such property includes the neighbour’s wife, male-slave, female-slave, ox, donkey, or anything else belonging to him.<sup>7</sup> For some of us, (but not all) God’s Word comes clothed in a strange culture. This sharpens for us—and even more for secondary school students who are often from a different cultural generation than their teachers—the issue of the clarity or ambiguity of Scripture.<sup>8</sup>

How are we to deal with the ambiguity and variety within Scripture? An example may help us understand the issue. The New South Wales Studies of Religion Level 6 Syllabus indicates students who choose to study the Christian religion for their “Religious traditions depth studies” component may focus on sexual ethics as one of the areas of “ethical teaching in Christianity”.<sup>9</sup> Presumably, Bible teachers would want their Year 11 and 12 students to carefully examine the biblical data that range from God’s blessing of marriage and sexuality (Gen 1:27-28), to the law forbidding adultery (Exod 20:14), to statutes ‘regulating’ adultery and rape (Deut 22:13-30), to Jesus’ “You have heard that it was said, . . . But I tell you . . .” statements on adultery and divorce (Matt 5:27-32). Even a cursory examination of these passages indicates diversity and ambiguity in the biblical materials that begs for some explanation in regard to what the Bible is actually like.

## What the readers are like

So far, we have looked at what the Bible is like and how that might impact on how we interpret it. But, what are the interpreters or readers like, and do they make any difference to the meaning derived from Scripture? Previous biblical scholarship was quite optimistic that it was possible for the Bible student to approach Scripture objectively by asking what the intent of the biblical writer was in a particular passage and then assuming that we would now know the meaning (or, at least the range of meanings) possible in the contemporary setting. Current scholarship is now much more willing to admit that the readers bring their own ‘text’ to their biblical study. Let me illustrate this by two examples. The first—somewhat distant to our own context—is the fact some Christians have supported slavery while at the same time other Christians promoted the abolition of slavery. Of course, both sides used ‘clear’ biblical passages. The second, more recently, Christians on both sides of the apartheid divide in South Africa used the Bible to support their own positions. While this variation may relate in part to the already

mentioned diversity within the Bible itself, it must also stem from differences within the readers.<sup>10</sup>

What are secondary school students like? Obviously, adolescence is a period of major change and development, hence it is difficult to characterise them accurately. Solvang maintains that students finishing high school tend to be “dualistic thinkers,” “focused on self” with “difficulty thinking outside their own experiences and circumstances,” persons with “little skill and experience in critical thinking”, “emotive rather than reflective”, and able to communicate better privately and narratively than publicly and persuasively.<sup>11</sup> Certainly, this is descriptive of upper high school age youth.

Additionally, contemporary young adults might be described as *post-modern* (or *Gen-Y*). While post-modernity is a controversial concept, it seems clear people do not think (or read) as they used to do. They are more attuned to technology and “truth is stranger than it used to be”.<sup>12</sup> It is not that truth is completely relativistic, but it is certainly pragmatic. What works is deemed to be truth. Thus when generational differences are added to the ‘melting pot’ of multiculturalism, new definitions of family, post-feminism, and others, young biblical ‘readers’<sup>13</sup> come to the Bible with a new set of expectations. These demand that learning experiences will be real (credible), raw (spontaneous and interactive), relevant and relational.<sup>14</sup>

## The process of interpretation

It is the process of biblical interpretation that brings the text of Scripture and the reader together. Therefore, it is vital that we have some understanding of the kind of book (and books) we are dealing with in the Bible. The past emphasis in biblical studies has been on what the words meant in their historical and literary context, but it seems to me, an even more vital issue is what they mean applied in contemporary settings—in students’ lives. It is easy to miss the point of Scripture: “...that the man [and woman] of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”<sup>15</sup>, unless its words and teachings are applied in the present.

If, so far, our understanding of Scripture has been made complex by the character of Scripture and the nature of the readers, there is help available for the Bible teacher and student. Even though it is rarely discussed in books on biblical hermeneutics, the teaching role of the Holy Spirit is highlighted in the New Testament.<sup>16</sup> Jesus clearly taught that the Holy Spirit would “teach you all things” (John 14:26) and “guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). Does this mean that the Bible teacher can relax while the Spirit does all of the work of preparation and application? By no means! After all, Jesus instructed his disciples

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to “go and make disciples” with the assurance that he would be with them “to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:19).<sup>17</sup>

## Using the Bible in Religion classes

### Desired outcomes

We have looked at what the Bible is like, what our youthful readers might be like, and how the text and the readers might interface. It is also vital to ask Bible teachers what goals they will have, in engaging students with Scripture.

The primary aim must be to provide students with opportunities to know God through Jesus Christ. In fact, while we affirm that the Bible is both human and divine, it does not actually draw attention to itself. Rather, its focus is on Jesus Christ. Jesus, himself, refers to certain people who “diligently study the Scriptures” but miss the point completely in thinking that the Bible provides “eternal life.” Instead, Jesus maintains: “These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39-40). The point of the Bible is not to provide interesting stories of long-gone people—although it does do that—it is to give us access to the same God who interacted with Joseph, Moses and Esther, and Daniel, Mary, Martha and Paul.<sup>18</sup> We also miss the point when we fail to confront Jesus Christ as the central character of Scripture.

The second aim in using the Bible in religious education is to provide ‘starting points’—opportunities, for *spiritual formation and personal development*. In particular, the stories of Scripture may act as resource material on which the young person might draw as he / she develops values such as integrity, service, self-control, and faithfulness. The hope is that students might begin to form personal habits of reflective reading of Scripture, aided by modern translations; with subsequent impacts throughout the lifespan.<sup>19</sup>

A third goal is to create a Christian community in the class setting. For many high school students, the Studies of Religion class may be the only ‘church’ community they experience. The Scriptures were originally intended to be read and studied in community; something that has been lost in many congregations. The original Hebrew and Christian communities were primarily listening communities rather than reading communities. For instance, most of the New Testament epistles are written to particular church communities. This probably applies to the gospels also. Creation of a classroom community will also involve the fostering of good citizenship and the valuing of diversity. The fact that the Bible does not always ask for just one answer stands as a strong basis for the value of differences of opinion.<sup>20</sup>

Providing opportunities for the formation of Christian faith, personal development, and community building are all important goals of Bible reading and study in the secondary school setting. However, how might one get to those desired outcomes?

### Methods

It seems to me that one will need a contextual entry point into Scripture. For some students who have grown up in a religious home, the Bible may be a familiar book. But, for others, it is completely unfamiliar, old-fashioned, and even irrelevant. So, we must seek means of meeting on common ground. Acts 17 provides a biblical example. Paul is in Athens and uses the words of well-known Greek poets in order to engage his audience with key Christian content.<sup>21</sup> Various entry points may be used, depending on the experience and gifts of the Bible teacher and the contemporary situation. Ofra Backenroth’s study describes and evaluates the use of art (including sculpture, diorama, painting, a play, or a video) in Bible teaching with Grade 6 Jewish students.<sup>22</sup> My wife, Carmel, regularly uses media such as contemporary, secular music and film as entry points into the biblical text. Still others have used biblical archaeology as a means to make “the Bible come to life.”<sup>23</sup> Using various contextual entry points does not mean that one uses a certain approach and then moves on to the biblical text alone. Rather, the strategy is entry, re-entry, entry, and re-entry. This allows a ‘sideways’ approach rather than a ‘direct’ approach which may sometimes seem like an ‘attack’.<sup>24</sup>

If a consistently contextual method of biblical study is used, one must provide opportunities for students to study larger rather than just the smaller portions of Scripture. This will not only enable them to gain a feel for what the Bible is like, but it will also give them experience in wrestling with and applying the text in their own situations. Key biblical passages might be committed to memory by the teacher’s use of ‘quote of the week’ on the whiteboard and (sometimes) by reading aloud.<sup>25</sup> Thus, students should have access to class copies of the Bible in modern translations.

Other more informational and imaginative means include the use of humour, music, and drama to assist in embedding the Bible into the students’ minds.<sup>26</sup> Nancy Ammerman, remarking on the necessity of memorising portions of Scripture, maintains:

... when we commit something to memory, it sinks deep and often resurfaces in surprising ways to meet new situations.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, how is the teacher to deal with the

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'strangeness' and diversity of Scripture? The easy answer: with some difficulty! However, I have found it helpful to think in terms of God taking account of the circumstances of His people and speaking to them in ways that they understood. So, because circumstances continue to change over time, God does not express His consistent, loving, and eternal salvation message through identical communication to all people at all times. William Webb calls this a "redemptive-movement hermeneutic" that allows the Bible student to observe the progress (and sometimes regression) in Scripture, for example, of the ways that slaves and women are treated. Such an approach allows contemporary people to make applications of Scripture that might go beyond the words, but are in keeping with the 'spirit' of the Bible.<sup>28</sup>

Keep in mind, it is probably the diversity of the Bible that makes biblical study and application so dynamic and ultimately so community-enhancing.<sup>29</sup> While this diversity might mean the teacher is sometimes 'stuck for answers' for her / his questioning students, there is nothing like the excitement of personal and group discovery, discussion, and even debate, to fire the imagination of postmoderns, even if it means admitting that some of our answers are, at best, limited and partial—for the time being.

## Conclusions

In the end, effective secondary Bible teaching is not accomplished by making it more complex. We do need to know what Scripture is like, what our goals are in teaching it, how to effectively interpret the text, and how to apply it in the lives of our students. However, it does not need to be complicated. Carol Bechtel concludes:

In teaching, true brilliance is revealed not in elaborate lesson plans, complex lectures, or sophisticated technology. Rather, brilliance shows itself in the ability to simplify the complex without oversimplifying it.<sup>30</sup>

Nothing of lasting significance in regard to Scripture, however, will be conveyed by people who are not immersed in it themselves! And, that is a good place for Bible teachers and students to begin. **TEACH<sup>®</sup>**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This article was written during a 2008 research leave, funded by Avondale College and the Avondale Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> While the focus of this article is on the secondary school setting, the principles may be applied effectively at primary school level also.

<sup>3</sup> See for example: Isa 66:1; Jer 11:1; Eze 38:1; and Mic 1:1

<sup>4</sup> I describe this experience in: How Melanesia shaped my

hermeneutics and theology: Some personal reflections, in Oliver, B. et al. (Eds.). (1997). *Avondale and the South Pacific: 100 years of mission*. Avondale Academic Press: Cooranbong, NSW, pp.93-105.

<sup>5</sup> Loveday, A. (2006). God's frozen word: Canonicity and the dilemmas of biblical studies today. *The Expository Times*, 117, p.241.

<sup>6</sup> Compare Deut 5:14-15.

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 20:17-18. Notice also the patriarchal hierarchy in this list.

<sup>8</sup> In the past, this has been referred to as the "perspicuity" of Scripture. A helpful introduction to this subject, from a Baptist viewpoint, can be found in Maddox, T. D. (2003). Scripture, perspicuity, and post-modernity. *Review and Expositor*, 100, 555-85.

<sup>9</sup> Board of Studies, NSW (2005). *Studies of religion, stage 6 syllabus*, p.41; available on [www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au](http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au).

<sup>10</sup> See for instance Village, A. & Francis L. J. (2005). The relationship of psychological type preferences to biblical interpretation. *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 18, 74-89; also Johnson, C. (1983). *The psychology of biblical interpretation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>11</sup> See Sovang, E. K. (2004). Thinking developmentally: The Bible, the first-year college student, and diversity. *Teaching Theology and Religion*, 7, p.234.

<sup>12</sup> This expression is from Middleton, J. R. & Walsh, B. J. (1995). *Truth is stranger than it used to be: Biblical faith in a post-modern age*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP. Especially helpful is chapter eight (The hope of our times), where the authors refer to the living of Christianity as "faithful improvisation" (pp.183-185).

<sup>13</sup> There may actually be a greater emphasis on viewing and accessing rather than reading!

<sup>14</sup> See the research-based article by Mark McCrindle: Understanding Generation Y, available on [www.learningtolearn.sa.edu.au](http://www.learningtolearn.sa.edu.au)

<sup>15</sup> 2 Tim 3:17.

<sup>16</sup> Note that the popular and very helpful work by Fee, G. D. & Stuart, D. (2003). *How to read the Bible for all its worth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, has no comprehensive discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit in the process of biblical interpretation.

<sup>17</sup> Compare John 16:7-11. A balanced approach to biblical interpretation which takes account of the text, the reader, and the Spirit can be found in Pincock, C. with Callen, B. L. (2006). *The Scripture principle: Reclaiming the full authority of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, pp.223-245.

<sup>18</sup> Notice, for instance, the recurring theme ("The Lord was with Joseph") in Gen. 39, verse 2; also 3, 5, 21, and 23. Note Fee and Stuart's discussion (ibid.) of the narrator's role of the Joseph narrative, pp.93-94.

<sup>19</sup> Note the discussion of the necessity of teaching for personal development in Adler, M. G. (2002). Why the Bible is good for children (and even for adults). *Family Ministry*, 2(16), 33-44.

<sup>20</sup> See the Pauline discussion of eating food that had been sacrificed to idols in 1 Cor 8:1-13. In spite of the initial Church prohibition placed on eating food offered to idols (Acts 15:20, 29), Paul appears to take a more flexible three-pronged stance in the Corinthian setting.

<sup>21</sup> Acts 17:23-31. The same principle of contextualisation and accommodation can also be found in 1 Cor 9:19-23.

<sup>22</sup> Backenroth, O. A. (2004). Art and *Rashi*: A portrait of a Bible teacher. *Religious Education*, 99, 151-66. He cites evidence, when "there is a shared cognitive and symbolic element between two disciplines, skills transfer is more likely to happen" (p. 153).

<sup>23</sup> Schiffman, L. (2003). Making the Bible come to life: Biblical archaeology and the teaching of Tanakh in Jewish schools. *Tradition*, 37, 38-49.

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<sup>24</sup> This method is well-described by Reich, K. H. (2003). Teaching Genesis: A present-day approach inspired by the prophet Nathan. *Zygon*, 38, 633-41. Reich describes his approach as the kind of 'detour' that Nathan took in his interactions with King David (see p.633).

<sup>25</sup> Several strategies (for what is termed a "sacred reading", i.e. reading the scriptures together and aloud) are recommended and provided in Veling, T. A. (2007). Listening to 'the voices of the pages' and 'combining the letters': Spiritual practices of reading and writing. *Religious Education*, 102, 206-222.

<sup>26</sup> See the suggestions presented by Bechtel, C. M. (2002). Teaching the 'strange new world' of the Bible. *Interpretation*, 56, 368-377.

<sup>27</sup> Ammerman, N. T. (2007). Memory verses: Teaching children the Bible. *Christian Century*, April 3, p.10.

<sup>28</sup> Webb, W. J. (2001). *Slaves, women and homosexuals: Exploring the hermeneutics of cultural analysis*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP. Particularly, see chapter two: A redemptive-movement hermeneutic, pp.30-66.

<sup>29</sup> A useful examination of religious education teaching models and approaches—both *enfaithing* and *interfaith*, can be found in Lovat, T. (2002). *What is this thing called RE: A decade on?* Katoomba, NSW: Social Science Press.

<sup>30</sup> Bechtel, C.M., *ibid.* p.377.