

Teaching the Bible in RE

Using the Bible in RE

Besides the obvious fact that the Bible is written into the Agreed Syllabus as the Christian Holy Book, there are many other good reasons for working with the Bible:

- It is a collection of stories of how men and women made sense of being human
- It talks about God
- It helps children to develop a vocabulary with which to think and talk about religious ideas
- It helps a child to see that his/her questions have been asked by others
- It may help a child to make sense of his/her own experiences of life
- It helps the understanding of both English history and English literature.

It should be remembered that the books of the Old Testament are also the Jewish Scriptures, and pupils need to be aware of this.

What is the Bible all about? (A Lightning Tour!)

1. **Beginnings** – Stories wrestle with questions about life; creation, suffering, sin etc (*Genesis 1-12*)
2. **The story of the Jewish people** – In response to God's call, Abraham and his family, who were nomads, journeyed to Canaan, where the family increased with son Isaac and his sons Jacob and Esau. (*Genesis 13-38*) Famine eventually drove Jacob and his 12 sons, including Joseph, to Egypt, where they became slaves. (*Genesis 39-50*) They escaped under Moses and travelled across the desert where they developed laws for the community under God. They settled in Palestine establishing themselves as a nation. (*Joshua, Judges*) a monarchy was established with Saul and later David and Solomon. (*1 & 2 Samuel; 1 & 2 Kings*)

Attempts at foreign alliances brought cultural and religious pluralism (*Amos, Hosea, Micah, Jeremiah*) and the Jews were eventually exiled as prisoners of war. (*Jeremiah, Isaiah*) Some returned, under the edict of a benevolent Persian overlord, but many remained in foreign lands. Empire succeeded empire; Persia, then Greece and finally Rome, but the Jews were never absorbed by their conquerors. They resented their subject status as occupied territory and constantly, below the surface, the seeds of nationalism flourished.

3. **The Story of Jesus** – One Jew, Jesus, was heralded by many as the deliverer of his people (Messiah / Christ) and the Son of God. He challenged an exclusive faith, which marginalized the poor and sick by proclaiming God's love for all; Jew and non-Jew. The Romans executed him. (*Matthew, Mark, Luke and John*) His followers continued his mission challenging people to live in God's way (*Acts, Letters*)

The Faith of the Bible

Throughout their story, the Jews believed that it was God who had called and chosen them; their history was a response to God's activity. The Jews, through experience, formed convictions about God and themselves that influenced every part of their living.

The division of the Bible into the Old and New Testaments reflects the Christian understanding that the former is the story of God's agreement with his people (the Jews) through the Law and the latter is the story of God's agreement with all mankind through Jesus Christ.

But it is neither helpful nor correct to make a distinction between the belief about God in the Old and New Testaments. The God of the prophets and the God of Jesus is a God of mercy, justice and love who is intimately involved in the affairs of his creation and with whom a loving relationship is both possible and the proper destiny of mankind.

In the New Testament, Jesus, in his unique life and death, both *shows* and *is* the way to this destiny.

The Bible is not a book – it's a library!

The Bible is actually a collection of books (39 Old Testament, 27 New Testament) and its books include many different types of writing (e.g. history, myth, law, letters etc). There are some important things to remember when working with the Bible:

- The Bible is written by believers who use metaphor, myth and history to *explore* God's truth. It would be misleading to assume that every word was *intended* to be *literally* true, although Christian believers may differ significantly over which sections they accept as factual and which they see as truths described through myth .
- It was written over a long period from about 1500BC to the end of 1st century AD (i.e. over about 1600 years!) by a collection of people, many anonymous, yet all believing that they conveyed insights about God and humanity. One must expect it to bear the vocabulary, style and ideas of the culture of the day.....and remember that these are very different from our own (e.g. it presupposes a flat earth; it is patriarchal)
- It is an adult book written by believing individuals/communities for believers to learn and worship, **but** it speaks of experiences common to children.

- It is a source of faith to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, but it is understood in different ways. E.g. Muslims believe that the Qur'an, which contains Biblical stories, was dictated by God, whereas many Christians understand the Bible to be God inspired through the words of fallible humans. The Bible is called Holy by Christians and is used in private and public worship as the Word of God. But Christians believe that Jesus is God's Word (John 1) as he is the full revelation of God and His will.
- When reading the Bible it is always helpful for a teacher to know (and share as appropriate);
 - ✓ The context in which the story is written
 - ✓ The sort of literature it is
 - ✓ The writer's purpose in telling the story
 - ✓ Something of the theological significance behind the story

Different Literature in the Bible – a brief survey

Myth

A story that intends to convey truth. This truth is the important element of the story. E.g. the creation stories in Genesis seek to convey truths about the nature of man and the origin of sin and evil.

Legend

A legend is a story that has its basis in historical fact, but which has become exaggerated over the years. E.g. David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17)

Law

The laws of the Old Testament are in the first five books of the Bible (Torah). They are concerned with the agreement between God and his people, Israel, with requirements on both sides. E.g. Ten Commandments (Exodus 20)

History

Tricky! The whole of the Bible is set in an historical context and archaeological evidence and other sources do corroborate some Biblical narratives. But the Biblical writers interpret events in the light of their faith – it is history with a bias; but then, is there any other kind of history? E.g. Acts of the Apostles

Story

These are set within a historical context, but are written for a specific purpose. To discern this, it is necessary to find out the circumstances in which they were written e.g. Daniel was written at a time of persecution to encourage continuing faith; Jonah and Ruth were written to counter the exclusive nature of the Jewish faith after the Jews' Exile to Babylon.

Prophecy

This is particular to the Old Testament and is not appropriate to Literacy Hour.

The prophets were God's spokesmen; reminding people of God's will and speaking out against what was wrong in society. E.g. Amos

Poetry

Written in the Hebrew poetic form, the Psalms is the hymnbook of the Jews and is used by Christians and Jews in worship. There are also three psalms in the New Testament at the beginning of Luke's Gospel; Mary's Song (Magnificat), Zechariah's song (Benedictus) and Simeon's Song (Nunc Dimittis)

Gospel

Not objective biographies, but written by believers who wish to spread the good news of Jesus.

Letter (Epistle)

Most were written by St Paul to encourage and teach the churches he had founded.

Heavy on theology! One which could be used successfully with primary pupils is Paul's letter to Philemon, which is a plea to Philemon to take back his runaway slave

Parable

A story with a message that uses striking and familiar images often used by Jesus.

On choosing a Bible story to work with.....

Before choosing a Bible story, some general questions need to be answered:

- ✓ Will the pupils be able to grasp the theological meaning of the story? If not, the story will be in danger of being trivialised and this would certainly be poor RE. E.g. the story of Noah is about judgment and a new covenant, not water and animals and the second Creation story is about suffering and sin, not the order of creation.

- ✓ Does the story give a false or primitive idea of God? Is it frightening or so simplistic that the children will discard (and sometimes all the rest of the Bible with it) at a later stage? Is it presenting ‘ a God of the Old Testament’ in sharp contrast to the ‘God of the New?’
- ✓ Will it engage the pupils? Will it fit the developmental needs and present experience of the pupils?
- ✓ What are my learning objectives? *Why* have I chosen this story?
- ✓ How does it fit into the scheme of work?

How will I tell the story? Do I need to omit any parts/ alter the vocabulary? Read it? Summarise it? Get the pupils to act it out? Show a video? Which version of the Bible will I use?

Some Bible Websites

<http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible/> This site allows you to search the Bible in nine different languages and a wide variety of Bible versions. You can either key in a chapter reference (It can't cope with chapter and verse!) or try a word search

<http://www.khouse.org/blueletter/> The blue letter Bible allows you to look up a Bible verse and link to over 85,000 pages of concordances, dictionaries and commentaries! Also gives the Hebrew and Greek.

<http://www.bibleinfo.com> This is an information site that offers 340 different Bible topics to “help you find answers to life’s questions and struggles”. Most helpful if you want immediate access to several different references on a particular theme, as this will put them all on one page for you, but without commentary.

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/collection/> The National Gallery’s collection of art contains a significant number of Biblical paintings if you are looking for traditional illustrations of stories.