

Critical and creative ways to teach Religion and Philosophy .....

# Dialogue

## Australasia

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# The Art of Bible Reading: A Narrative Approach

Rob Freathy, Esther D. Reed, Anna Davis

Teaching the Bible in a fresh, open and exploratory way can be a daunting task. So the University of Exeter (UK) and Bible Society (England and Wales) have developed an approach to enable students to engage creatively and personally with Bible stories in Religious Education lessons.

## Painting the Bible

British artist Brian J. Turner is a man on a mission: for the past 10 years he has been undertaking a vast project that will see him paint every story in the Bible.

Brian's story began back in 2004-5, when 33 of his Bible paintings toured cathedrals across England. The exhibition took viewers on a journey from Genesis to Revelation, as well as out into the context of everyday life, and received much critical acclaim. After the tour, unsure about what he should paint next, Brian consulted his wife, Melanie. Tongue-in-cheek, she replied: 'Well, you could always paint the whole Bible!' Brian accepted her challenge, and the Bible Project was born (see [www.bibleproject.co.uk](http://www.bibleproject.co.uk)).

Working from his studio in Exeter, Devon, in south-west England, Brian is now in the process of painting over 3000 colourful and contemporary images. He estimates that the project will take him around 30 years to complete. When asked what spurs him on, Brian points to his belief in God through the Christian tradition, and his sense of a 'calling' to explore the Bible through art. There is also, he says, the on-going creative challenge of finding new ways to imagine and explore the texts, and to bring alive the stories in today's world.

## The Bible in Religious Education

Brian's paintings are now being used as the basis for a new approach to teaching Bible stories, or 'narratives,' in Religious Education (RE). The approach, developed by academics at Brian's local university, uses the paintings as a stimulus for encouraging students to

think about how Bible narratives are read and interpreted in different ways by people both within and outside of the Christian tradition. This article aims to give a flavour of how the approach can work in the classroom, to discuss some of the ideas behind it, and to highlight the benefits it offers to RE teachers and students.<sup>1</sup>



## The First Covenant: God and Noah

'When the rainbow appears in the clouds ... that is the sign of the promise which I am making...'<sup>2</sup> The story of Noah and the flood is among the most famous in the Hebrew Bible (or Christian Old Testament). Using Brian's painting of the narrative – entitled 'The First Covenant: God and Noah' – as the basis for an RE lesson can enable teachers and students to explore the narrative in new ways.

At the start of the lesson, Brian's painting accompanies students' initial reading of the text. Targeted questions are used to highlight key aspects of the narrative: Why does God send the flood? What does God instruct Noah to do? What promise does God make? What is the sign of God's agreement with Noah and his sons? Further questions prompt students to look closely at the painting: Who do you

think the figures in the painting are? What gift is being exchanged?

Students then listen to, or read, extracts from interviews with the artist talking about his painting. They are encouraged to think about and discuss the particular way in which Brian has chosen to show the Noah narrative, and why this might be the case. Questions include: Does hearing from the artist about how he has interpreted the Bible story make you view the painting differently? Is the painting a good interpretation of the story? What are the reasons for your answers?

Next, students are presented with examples of how the Noah narrative has been interpreted in different ways by other people from within the Christian tradition, as well as by people who are not Christians. For example: 'I believe the narrative is literally true and tells us about a giant flood that really happened;' 'I think the narrative is a myth that tells us about the relationship between God and humanity;' and 'I don't believe in God, but I do understand why rainbows have become a symbol of hope, representing a better future that is to come.' Students are encouraged to discuss these examples in small groups, thinking about possible reasons for why the different views are held, and then to explain their answers to the class.

Finally, students are asked to consider their own understanding of the Noah narrative, asking: Do you agree or disagree with any of the interpretations of the narrative discussed previously? Do you have any views or questions about the narrative that have not yet been mentioned? Students are also encouraged to share their responses with the person next to them, asking: Do you share the same views about the narrative? Why or why not?

As a homework activity, students are given the opportunity to creatively engage with the Noah narrative. Imagining the story from the perspective of Noah, students are asked to

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complete a series of diary entries that detail the key events of the text, as well as Noah's own personal responses to, and feelings about what has happened.

An optional extension activity encourages students to think about the significance of the Noah narrative in relation to contemporary environmental ethics: How can Christians talk about God's promise never again to destroy the world when the planet is facing potential ecological catastrophe? In what ways might the biblical narrative be interpreted as calling for responsible environmental action on the part of human beings? Students are invited to consider responses to these questions, presented as extracts from a dialogue between six fictional students, and to add their own contributions to the conversation.

### **Exploring narratives**

This example lesson shows how the narrative approach can be applied within the RE classroom. Central to the approach is open-ended discussion and debate about the biblical text itself, with students invited to participate in a creative and empathetic manner. The Bible is presented first and foremost not as a set of rules or theological principles, but rather as a collection of stories of narratives, each of which tells us something about what Christians believe to be the revelation of God throughout history. Together, these stories are seen as forming the overarching 'Bible story' which, for Christians, is the narrative of God's on-going salvation of humankind.

Focusing on Bible narratives in this way allows the importance of story within the Bible, and the Christian faith more generally, to be reflected in the RE classroom. It also increases students' general biblical literacy, enabling them to develop an appreciation of the Bible's significance both within faith traditions and as part of Western culture more generally.

### **Opening up interpretation**

The narrative approach also introduces students to the concept of biblical interpretation. In Brian's paintings, students are presented with examples of how one individual – in this case Brian himself – understands and relates to the biblical texts personally. Through looking at the paintings and hearing the artist talk about his works, students are enabled to reflect on how Brian's own life-story – that is, his beliefs, experiences and encounters – influence the way he interprets the Bible stories, and also how these stories influence his life.

Visual art is suited to bringing alive different interpretations of texts, and Brian's paintings do this especially well, with their quirky style proving engaging and thought-provoking among students. Classroom activities featuring conversations between fictional groups of students or art critics also provide a model for how the paintings can be approached, and serve to facilitate discussion and critique of both the texts and Brian's interpretations of them.

In this way, the narrative approach enables RE to challenge the view that biblical texts contain only one, fixed, objective meaning, and instead allows students to begin to think about how biblical texts are understood in different ways by different people and at different times.

### **Community contexts**

The narrative approach also invites students to examine the role that Bible narratives play within communities. By examining multiple interpretations of the biblical texts put forward by Christians and others, students are encouraged to think about how these readings are shaped by the communities out of which they have grown, and to consider how these communities are shaped in turn by their readings of the texts.

This focus moves away from current tendencies within RE to treat the Bible as a 'rulebook' for ethical principles, from which isolated phrases are pulled to provide 'answers' to contemporary moral issues. Known as 'proof-texting,' this practice is problematic because it misconstrues how most Christians understand their relationship to the Bible. It also ignores the complexity and ambiguities of the texts, and at times applies them in ways that are anachronistic.

The narrative approach, by contrast, allows

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RE to portray Christian ethics as more about participating in shared stories of faith than following lists of rules. It shows how Christian communities read, interpret and respond to Bible narratives and, in so doing, become 'living stories' that are both informed by, and play a part within, the Christian story of salvation that forms the basis for their shared beliefs.

Understanding the Bible within community contexts in this way also enables RE to successfully handle 'faith-based' or 'insider' interpretations of texts. Until now, attempts to avoid accusations of 'confessionalism' or 'indoctrination' have led many teachers to favour 'neutral' or 'outsider' perspectives on matters of faith. The narrative approach, however, takes seriously the various lived experiences of faith community members – what faith is like for people 'inside' Christianity – while at the same time being open to interpretations of the biblical texts from other faith and secular traditions. It makes clear that everyone has their own 'life-story' and worldviews, and that these influence how they read and respond to the Bible narratives .

### **Critical and personal reflection**

Finally, the narrative approach enables students to reflect upon how they themselves understand and relate to the Bible narratives, as well as how their views compare to those of others. Brian J. Turner's paintings give license to students to express their own personal interpretations of the narratives whether

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faith-based or otherwise, to consider how their own life-stories influence these readings, and to think about the ways in which the narratives might influence their own lives and worldviews. Expressing their interpretations as paintings, collages, newspaper reports, diary entries, photographs and plays, and providing commentaries where appropriate to explain their interpretations to others, students are invited to follow Brian's example of engaging creatively and imaginatively with the biblical texts.

Active engagement with texts in this way brings to life the process of biblical interpretation within the RE classroom. It strengthens students' skills of critical engagement, and enables them to both examine, and contribute to on-going discourses that explore the meaning and significance of the Bible for today's world.

**Curriculum materials**

A set of curriculum materials, based upon the narrative approach and entitled *The Art of Bible Reading* (Kevin Mayhew 2014), has been published.<sup>3</sup> The textbook, aimed at lower secondary school students (11-14 year-olds), contains 12 lessons 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 and assessment activities.

**Help us to help you**

We are keen to find out how teachers implement our narrative approach within the RE classroom, and the effects that it has on students' learning. Therefore, if you use our curriculum materials or any of the ideas presented here in your lessons, please let us know by emailing Rob Freathy at the address above.

Thank you!

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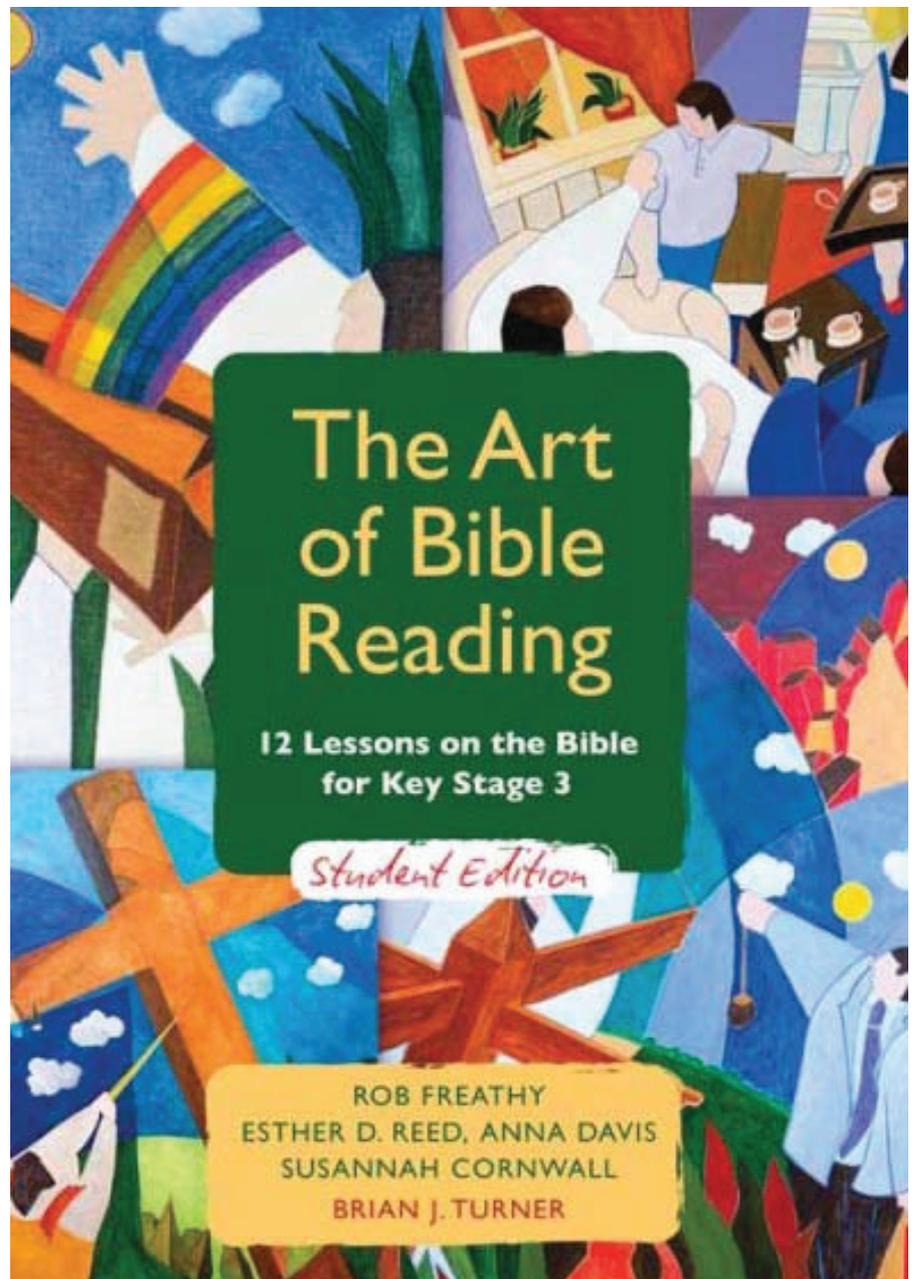
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A commissioned video presentation on *The Art of Bible Reading* will be shown at the 2015 DAN Conference, *Recreate! Teaching RE through the Arts* with the presenters joining a Q+A session via Skype and Twitter.

**Endnotes**

- 1 Further details of our narrative approach to Religious Education can be found in Esther D. Reed, Rob Freathy, Susannah Cornwall and Anna Davis (2013) 'Narrative Theology in Religious Education', *British Journal of Religious Education*, Vol. 35, No. 3, pp. 297-312. If you have trouble locating this article, please email r.j.k.freathy@exeter.ac.uk.
- 2 Genesis 9:16-17 (Good News Bible)
- 3 *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 painting and interviews with the artist) (£34.99).





**Cover Image:**

*The First Covenant: God and Noah.*

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[www.bibleproject.co.uk](http://www.bibleproject.co.uk)

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