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Using Exegetical Techniques to Improve Biblical Literacy Among GCSE Students: A Critical Investigation and Analysis

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Abstract

This paper explores a potential strategy for developing and improving the biblical literacy of GCSE students. Biblical literacy refers to students' ability to interpret biblical texts intelligently and independently, rather than being reliant on the explanations and interpretations of others. The strategy explored in this paper applies the basic scholarly tools of exegesis (critical interpretation of a biblical text) to biblical passages within the GCSE classroom. Findings suggest that contextualizing biblical quotations and interrogating a range of possible meanings may help to develop a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of these passages. The extent to which current examination question styles demand, encourage and reward genuine biblical literacy is also questioned. Finally, this paper offers several recommendations for how this classroom strategy could be improved and adapted, as well as affirming more broadly the need for a deeper engagement with sacred texts in Religious Education.

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Introduction

Religious Education (RE) syllabi in England are legally required to "reflect the fact that religious traditions in this country are in the main Christian" (Education Reform Act, 1988, Section 8), but concerns have been raised in recent decades over the quality of teaching of the Bible, Christianity's foundational text. The Biblos project, founded in 1996 by Terence Copley, identified a number of problems related to the Bible's use (or lack thereof) in English RE (T. Copley, Freathy, & Walshe, 2004). Recently, Bowie and Coles (2018) have called attention to hermeneutical weaknesses in General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exam course, i.e. weaknesses in the depth and quality of biblical interpretation. They argue that these courses encourage an approach which isolates biblical quotations from their context and uses them primarily as 'proof texts' (Bowie & Coles, 2018).

My observations as a student teacher of RE in a secondary school in the East of England without a designated religious character mostly reflected these general findings. This school's culture takes pride in examination success; during one of my first conversations with a part-time RE teacher at the school, he remarked:

> *"One of the great things about having a three-year GCSE course is that we can take the time to really refine and focus on exam technique, which is why our results are so much higher than some of the other schools around here."* (RE teacher)

Set within this exam-focused culture, I sometimes observed a superficial level of engagement with biblical texts in some GCSE classes. Lessons featuring biblical quotations focused on how these quotations could be included in exam answers rather than exploring their context, possible meanings and significance.

This led me to consider whether and how it is possible for RE teachers to promote and encourage a deeper engagement with biblical passages at GCSE level. Rather than simply memorising isolated quotations and fixed interpretations of their meaning, I want students to develop the higher-order

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skills of textual interpretation and analysis. Insofar as students are unable to do this, they are reliant on other people to interpret and explain biblical texts for them, and thus remain biblically illiterate. I decided to investigate how teachers can help students to develop exegetical skills and techniques, i.e. skills and techniques of critical biblical interpretation, so that they can interpret texts for themselves and thus improve their biblical literacy.

This article will begin by summarising some of the most significant research that has been carried out on students' attitudes towards and understanding of the Bible in RE. It will then suggest a possible model for how to approach biblical passages with GCSE-level RE students, before detailing how I put this model into practice at my placement school. Finally, I will analyse the effects of this model, evaluate its usefulness as a method for approaching biblical passages with GCSE students and offer some recommendations for future practice and research.

Literature Review

The Biblos project, pioneered by Terence Copley in 1996, began with four hypotheses: "the Bible had largely disappeared from RE; the Bible was perceived as a text written for, and of relevance only to, committed Christians; teachers […] were reluctant to address biblical material; biblical material was being secularised at classroom level" (T. Copley et al., 2004, p.4). A team of researchers, led by Copley, conducted three phases of extensive empirical research with pupils and teachers from various parts of England, which supported their initial hypotheses. Yet despite these difficulties, the Biblos project found that "the most common attitude among young people towards the Bible was ambivalence", not hostility, and that "RE remains the most significant source of biblical literacy" for young people, most of whom no longer read the Bible regularly themselves (C. Copley, Copley, Freathy, Lane, & Walshe, 2004, p.49). The Biblos project thus highlighted both the need and the potential for RE classrooms to foster more robust engagement with biblical material.

A 2013 issue of the *British Journal of Religious Education* (BJRE) featured two articles on the Bible in RE which further contributed to research in this area. Reed, Freathy, Cornwall and Davis (2013) found that biblical passages were being secularised with a particularly ethical focus, so that "the biblical texts come to be treated simply as a sourcebook for ethical principles" (p.301). This encourages 'proof-texting', where passages are stripped of their historical, literary, spiritual or theological importance and simply used to justify contrasting ethical positions. In the same issue,

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Julia Ipgrave (2013) published research suggesting “a discontinuity in the handling of the Bible between primary and secondary religious education (RE) classes” (p.264). Ipgrave argues that, while biblical texts are encountered in primary RE as narratives on their own terms, in secondary RE, the Bible is restricted by ‘behind the text’ concerns, such as issues of historicity, a reputation for strict rigidity and a perception of the texts as outdated. She warns that the dominance of these concerns prevents secondary students from engaging with the Bible directly or being challenged by it.

In 2014, David Horrell and Anna Davis similarly argued that the perceived irrelevance of the Bible for non-Christians has led to it becoming increasingly ignored in secondary RE. However, they also highlight a lack of guidance for how RE teachers (often non-specialists) should approach biblical passages: “textbooks offer relatively little guidance as to the ways in which one might engage in study of these texts, beyond simply ‘looking them up’” (Horrell & Davis, 2014, p.76). Helpfully, Horrell and Davis propose a possible way to improve this situation through a method which focuses on history of interpretation and influence to help students to understand diversity of interpretation and to engage exegetically with the texts themselves.

In 2018, David Aldridge published an article arguing that religious educators are involved in two sorts of hermeneutics: the hermeneutics of religion and the hermeneutics of education. A hermeneutic approach to education recognises that understanding emerges through a dialogue between teacher and student around a shared concern or subject matter. This dialogic relationship is mutable and therefore has to be constantly reframed to ensure that the object of study selected by the teacher allows for meaningful dialogue. Then, once the object of study has been selected, the religious educator becomes involved in more explicit hermeneutical difficulties: “a hermeneutic approach to religion reminds us that RE teachers […] do not ever present the Bible, or the Qur’an, but *a* way or some of the ways in which the Bible and the Qur’an have been interpreted and received” (Aldridge, 2018, p.254). At every stage of teaching with sacred texts, then, RE teachers “involve themselves, explicitly or not, in hermeneutical complexities” (ibid.).

Despite the ubiquity of hermeneutical issues in RE, Robert Bowie and Richard Coles found that these issues are rarely addressed in contemporary RE exam courses. In their article ‘We Reap What We Sew,’ Bowie and Coles (2018) argue that in GCSE RE, “there is a problem related to the use of fragmentary texts” (p.277). They note that examiners’ reports for one GCSE course highlighted problems with students taking biblical quotations out of context and failing to explain their relevance

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to the question. Yet, they point out, "the associated exam board approved textbook modelled proof texting, with little explanation given for the inclusion of quotes, often cited without a reference" (ibid., p.280). This approach not only limits the interpretation of individual passages; it also encourages a specific view of religion as being primarily focused on propositions, rather than on action, experience or relationship. If the hermeneutical complexities of selecting passages and interpreting their meanings are not modelled or made explicit to students, one should not be surprised if students fail to demonstrate hermeneutical awareness themselves.

Writing in the same issue of BJRE as Aldridge, Bowie and Coles, Susan Docherty (2018) proposed a possible solution by "[setting] out the case for a more intense dialogue between RE and the field of biblical studies" (p.298). Of course, Horrell and Davis had already appealed to developments in biblical studies, particularly a focus on history of interpretation, as a means of promoting thoughtful and critical engagement with biblical texts. Writing four years after Horrell and Davis, Docherty (2018) identifies two additional developments in biblical studies that RE teachers might profitably learn from and apply in their practice: "(1) a transformation in the understanding of the first century Jewish context within which Christianity was formed and (2) the emergence of new forms of biblical interpretation which draw on the perspectives of previously marginalised groups" (p.298). Docherty argues that applying these new understandings and interpretative methods may help RE teachers to overcome the hermeneutical weaknesses observed by other researchers.

In 2019, Rae Hancock published an article reflecting on an alternative method for promoting biblical engagement: the use of comic books. Hancock records her observations and reflections from a lesson in which the Parable of the Good Samaritan was read from the comic book *Manga Messiah*. One student remarked that *Manga Messiah* is "not the original version so it might have been changed and people might interpret it a different way, that they might think there's a different moral of the story" (Hancock, 2019, p.373). The student's answer implies that the 'mono-textual' Bible (without illustrations) has not been "changed" as the comic book has. Yet even mono-textual Bibles are not "the original version" – they are a text in translation which has therefore been interpreted and "changed" in some way. The real distinction between mono-textual and comic book versions of the Bible, then, is simply that students are *more aware* of change and interpretation when they encounter the Bible in comic book form.

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Recent months saw the publication of an initial findings report from a project called 'Texts and Teachers' led by Robert Bowie, Farid Panjwani and Katie Clemmey and sponsored by Culham St Gabriel's Trust. Ten teachers were given some Continuing Professional Development (CPD) on hermeneutics and its application; they then taught a series of lessons using ideas from the CPD sessions, before being interviewed at the end of the process to reflect on their findings. Most of the teachers remarked that using hermeneutical tools gave students a sense of agency in interpreting the text, and that students (contrary to teachers' expectations) enjoyed studying longer extracts. They also found that hermeneutical approaches led to a deeper quality of conversation during lessons. Many teachers felt that hermeneutical approaches would lead to better answers in GCSE exams, especially when explaining differences within religions. However, it was also generally felt that current GCSE exam structures do not adequately encourage or reward deep hermeneutical engagement with texts (Bowie, Panjwani, & Clemmey, 2020, pp.4-9).

This survey of previous research, while wide-ranging, reveals some recurring themes. First, superficial treatment of biblical texts and 'proof-texting' is most apparent in examined courses, especially at GCSE and particularly in connection with ethical issues. Second, deciding which texts to present and how to present them is both hermeneutically significant in itself and also affects the way that pupils think about and respond to the texts. Third, a deeper engagement with biblical scholarship may help to improve students' biblical literacy. Finally, the relationship between biblical literacy and GCSE exam courses is nuanced and complex, but both teachers and researchers agree that it could be better.

Based on this literature review, I decided to focus my research on two GCSE classes, one in Year 10 and one in Year 9, and I identified three main research questions:

1) How, and under what circumstances, did students draw upon context to help them understand or interpret the meaning of a text?
2) How, and under what circumstances, did students demonstrate an understanding of diverse possible interpretations of a text?
3) In what ways did the structure and requirements of GCSE examinations affect students' ability to demonstrate biblical literacy?

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Research Design

In order to investigate these questions in the specific context of my two GCSE classes, I constructed a plan for data collection. I am a professional practitioner seeking to study subjective phenomena such as understanding and interpretation within a specific context. I am not testing a universal hypothesis, and I am not seeking objectivity. Consequently, it makes sense to approach this research from within an interpretivist research paradigm, or what Keith Taber (2007) calls "Educational Research Paradigm ERP2" rather than the positivistic "ERP1" paradigm (pp.31-61). Resting on an assumption that there are social phenomena which require interpretation, the interpretivist paradigm naturally draws more on qualitative than quantitative data (ibid., pp.40-43). My own research questions demand descriptive rather than numerical answers. I therefore decided to collect qualitative data that can be interpreted to provide answers to my three research questions.

In implementing and critically reflecting on a strategy for improving biblical literacy based on wider research and theory, I am following the methodology of action research (Taber, 2007, pp.83-87). Action research creates a loop between theory and practice: prior research and theory suggests a practical strategy; implementing this strategy produces further theoretical insight (ibid., pp.83-84). Bias can be a weakness of action research and of the interpretivist paradigm more generally (ibid., pp.97-98); I have guarded against this by triangulating my observations with other teachers' observations, students' work and students' assessments (see below).

Classroom strategy

Based on my literature review, I formulated a strategy for framing students' engagement with biblical texts in the classroom, which consisted of the following five points.

Selection and presentation

Aldridge (2018) points out that RE teachers "do not ever present the Bible, or the Qur'an, but a way or some of the ways in which the Bible and the Qur'an have been interpreted and received" (p.254). My strategy's first stage was selecting a passage and translation designed to stimulate dialogue *about* and *with* the text. Ipgrave (2013) argues convincingly that the Bible should challenge students, but it must also be accessible (Docherty, 2018). Many researchers have emphasised the concept of 'narrative' as a way of framing the Bible in RE (e.g. T. Copley et al., 2004; Ipgrave, 2013; Reed et

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al., 2013). Yet this must not mean neglecting the Bible's rich variety of genres: its epistles, for instance, are highly relevant to many GCSE topics. Finally, students should be aware that the presented text is not 'the original.' Hancock (2019) found that, especially in mono-textual form, students assume that the presented text is the 'original' and authoritative version. Where relevant, my strategy therefore included exposing students to other biblical translations and versions.

Contextualisation

Bowie and Coles (2018) suggest that "students required to draw on sources should have some contextual knowledge of them" (p.285), since "a text without context is little more than a pretext" (Green, 2011, p.13). Their research emphasises the importance of contextualising biblical passages: within the surrounding text, within the biblical canon, within history and within theology. Accordingly, the second stage of my strategy was to make students aware of passages' context. This includes using longer extracts rather than single-verse quotations. It includes providing historical information that may be relevant to the passage's interpretation. It may include encouraging students to make links between the passage and wider Christian theology. Finally, where practical and relevant, contextualisation can include helping students to make comparisons between different biblical texts on a similar theme.

Explanation and interrogation

This stage of my strategy invites students to explain what they think the text is saying. It might be helpful for them to paraphrase or summarise the text in their own words. This may help the teacher to identify and correct misconceptions and gauge the level of challenge. Student explanation could also provide a starting point for discussion and debate around meaning.

This stage also involved bringing diverse interpretations into dialogue with each other. Horrell and Davis (2014) suggested that exposing students to differing interpretations of biblical texts would help to facilitate a critical engagement with them; more specifically, they propose that students should study different ways believers have answered these questions historically. Yet given the emphasis placed by Docherty (2018) on contextual hermeneutics, I felt that diverse interpretations should ideally be elicited from students themselves, to avoid reinforcing a view of the Bible as "a text written for, and of relevance only to, committed Christians" (T. Copley et al., 2004, p.4).

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Application

The fourth stage of my strategy was applying the biblical text to contemporary life. This step of the process is inevitable when studying Christian practices and religious ethics. Regardless of whether application is properly part of exegesis, it is both required by the exam content and an intrinsically valuable thinking skill that follows naturally from understanding. Yet I deliberately placed this part of the strategy towards the end. As pointed out by Reed et al. (2013), the Bible is already too often presented "simply as a sourcebook for ethical principles that guides Christians in making correct moral decisions" (p.301). Horrell and Davis (2014) note that simply presenting the ethical meaning of passages, without discussing their interpretation, "[does] little to foster critical and open engagement" (p.76). Pollefeyt and Bieringer (2005) similarly warn against making the Bible "a ventriloquist of a priori fixed views" instead of allowing students to discover their own interpretations (p.128). Application, while important, must therefore come only after the text's meaning has been discussed and interrogated. Ideally, students should explore how different interpretations might lead to different applications.

Examination

The hermeneutical weaknesses of GCSE courses have recently been highlighted in research literature, most notably by Bowie and Coles (2018) and then by Bowie et al. (2020). Nonetheless, it remains the case that the success and progress in RE of KS4 and KS5 students (and their teachers) is measured and assessed through examinations. Progress in biblical literacy, however intrinsically valuable it might be, is unlikely to be publicly acknowledged or celebrated unless it leads to 'better' exam answers. There is some evidence to suggest that biblical literacy may indeed improve exam answers; at least, this was the general feeling of the teachers interviewed by Bowie et al. (2020). This final step of the process therefore involved modelling how exegetical insights can be included in exam answers, inviting students to practise including them in exam-style answers, and then marking and giving feedback on their answers.

Method of data collection

I gathered five sources of data to assist me in answering my research questions.

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The first source of data was my own observations and reflections. After each lesson, I recorded my own impressions of the lesson with respect to students' demonstration of biblical literacy, including what appeared to assist them and any obstacles. I included specific examples from the lesson that illustrated these observations, including students' contributions. Occasionally, I updated my observations and reflections with details that I recalled later.

The second source of data was the observations of other classroom teachers. During each lesson that I taught, I was observed by the regular class teacher. Teachers were asked to record observations relating to students' understanding of and interaction with biblical texts. After each lesson, the classroom teacher gave me a copy of their observations, as well as a brief verbal explanation of them. Occasionally, the teacher made verbal observations that were not recorded in their written observations; I recorded these separately in note form. Teachers were made aware of the purpose of these observations.

The third source of data was students' written work in exercise books. I obtained permission from the school to use this work on condition of anonymity. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic prevented me from collecting copies of all students' written work for every lesson. I was, however, able to scan three Year 10 exercise books and three Year 9 exercise books. This quantity of data is obviously far from optimal, and it would be methodologically perilous to extrapolate universal trends from it, but my research is not positivistic in this way. Of course, limited data presents a problem for interpretivists too: if social reality is plural and subjective, then interpreting it requires access to a range of voices, experiences and perspectives. Fortuitously, the students to whom the books belong constitute a diverse and somewhat representative sample of their respective classes (see Class Profiles and Sequence of Lessons). Consequently, while there may not be many examples of student work, the examples I do have are at least not limited to a single gender, attainment level or SEN code. This may help to ensure that my analysis is based upon a plurality of perspectives and experiences. Furthermore, this work can be triangulated with my other four data sources, mitigating the risk of selection bias influencing my overall findings.

The fourth source of data was students' assessments. Again, I obtained permission to use these assessments as data provided students' identities were anonymised. Students completed three formal exam-style assessments over the course of my sequence of lessons (see Class Profiles and Sequence

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of Lessons). These were completed in separate assessment books, under exam conditions. I was able to scan full sets of answers for each of these assessments before leaving my placement school.

My final source of data, relevant only to my final research question, was the AQA GCSE Religious Studies A assessment resources, freely and publicly available online. Specifically, I downloaded the most recent publicly available question papers and mark schemes for the study of Christianity (AQA, 2018a) and non-textual thematic studies (AQA 2018b).

Method of data analysis

My analysis of the data obtained from these five sources took place in three stages, one for each of my research questions.

How, and under what circumstances, did students draw upon context to help them understand or interpret the meaning of a text?

Data analysis for this research question began with reading and categorising the data gathered from my first four sources. Instances where students used context to help them interpret a text's meaning were recorded and categorised as 'use of context.' Instances where students might have been expected to draw upon relevant context but did not, were recorded and categorised as 'surprising neglect of context.' I annotated each example with details that were suggested, either by my own reflections or by teachers' observations, to be potentially relevant to students' use or neglect of context. I included a note about the accuracy and depth of the student's overall interpretation. I made a list of details common to most of the 'use of context' examples, and a separate list of features shared by the majority of the 'surprising neglect of context' examples.

How, and under what circumstances, did students demonstrate an understanding of diverse possible interpretations of a text?

Again, I began by categorising data from my first four data sources. Examples where students accurately described diverse interpretations of a passage were recorded and categorised as 'understanding of diverse interpretations'. Where students failed to reference different interpretations of a notably ambivalent or ambiguous text, this was categorised as 'surprising absence of diverse interpretations'. Again, teachers' observations were included as examples.

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I then annotated these examples with details that were suggested to be potentially relevant by either my own reflections or teachers' observations. I made a list of features common to most examples in each of the two categories.

In what ways did the structure and requirements of GCSE examinations affect students' ability to demonstrate biblical literacy?

I separated examples from the previous research questions into two new categories: assessment examples and non-assessment examples. I recorded whether the assessment examples were mostly characterised by strong biblical literacy or a lack thereof. I completed the same activity for the non-assessment examples and compared the results. I then compared examples of written work that I had scanned, along with any observation comments about these students, with assessments produced by the same students on the same topic. After each comparison, I noted whether biblical literacy was more evident in the lesson or the assessment, or equal in both.

I analysed my fifth data source by conducting a close reading of the mark schemes. I marked students' assessments using the mark schemes' criteria. For answers which included exegesis, I recorded whether their mark would have suffered had they merely used the passage as a proof-text. I noted whether any full-mark answers engaged superficially with texts.

Ethical guidelines

Throughout the process of designing and carrying out this research, I have followed the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) as well as the ethical guidance provided by the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge. Participating students were made aware of the nature of my research, and consent for the project was also obtained from my subject lecturer and both classes' regular teachers, one of whom was also my mentor. All students' names have been anonymised.

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Class Profiles and Sequence of Lessons

Class Profiles

I conducted my investigation with two classes, one in Year 9 and one in Year 10, both studying the AQA Religious Studies A GCSE specification. According to the school's data, the Year 10 class had 17 pupils, 11 females and six males, none of whom had Special Educational Needs (SEN). Two pupils spoke English as an Additional Language (EAL), and one was classed as Pupil Premium (PP). The ability level ranged from two pupils forecast to attain a Level 9 in their GCSE to two pupils predicted Level 5. The Year 9 class had 10 females and 10 males, including three EAL pupils, four SEN and three PP. This class featured a wider achievement range, with two pupils at the very lowest stage of the school's flightpath system. I focused on the Year 10 class because I was teaching them more consistently and they were more familiar with GCSE exam requirements. I therefore felt that this class would generate more useful data for my third research question. However, I trialled my strategy in one Year 9 lesson to provide comparative data with which to compare the findings from my Year 10 class.

The six students whose exercise books I was able to scan before leaving my placement constituted a very small but not wholly unrepresentative sample of these two classes. The three Year 10 books belonged to two females and one male, with an achievement range from a predicted Level 6 to a predicted Level 8. The three Year 9 books belonged to two females and one male, including one SEN student. The achievement level ranged from one student at the middle stage in the school's flightpath system, to one student at the highest stage.

Sequence of Lessons

When planning my lesson sequence, I wanted to allow sufficient time to cover necessary non-textual specification content, e.g. background to ethical issues, key concepts etc. I therefore decided to interpose my text-based lessons between lessons with a different, non-textual focus. It was also clear that time would not always allow me to implement my full strategy within every lesson. Instead, I aimed to include the first four stages in every lesson, and to include the final stage ('Examination') in at least three out of five lessons. Based on my literature review, I also decided that my research would benefit from a specific focus on ethical topics. Within these parameters, I devised the following sequence of five lessons.

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Lesson One: Jesus and the Woman Caught in Adultery (Jn. 8:3-11); Year 10; Thematic Studies

This was my first lesson with the Year 10 class. It took place during their study of the death penalty. I chose this passage because of its balance between forgiveness of sin and an insistence on holy living, as well as its explicit reference to the death penalty. Each student was given a copy of this passage, with a text based on the New International Version (NIV) but with some sentences taken from the Contemporary English Version (CEV) instead. This text was accompanied by Guercino's 1621 *Christ with the Woman Taken in Adultery*. Students read the passage and underlined the words and phrases that they thought were most important. I then very briefly explained the scholarly debate around the passage's origins and authenticity. Then, students were asked to write a one-sentence summary of the passage, and we discussed differences in the ways that students summarised it. Students then wrote how this passage might apply to the death penalty, and we discussed their answers. This took the majority of the lesson; the subsequent final activity focused on nonreligious ethical arguments for and against the death penalty.

Lesson Two: Do Not Worry (Mt. 6:25-34); Year 9; Thematic Studies

This lesson took place while students were studying human use and abuse of the environment, specifically the use of natural resources. I selected this passage because of its nuanced presentation of the respective value of humanity and the natural world. Each student had a sheet explaining the passage's context, followed by the passage itself. Given the younger age and wider ability range of this class, I relied entirely on the CEV for the text. The text was accompanied by Carl Bloch's 1877 *Sermon on the Mount*. Students read the text and underlined key words, then answered a series of questions in their books. These began with simply identifying natural resources mentioned in the text, working up to more analytical questions linking the passage to concepts of stewardship and dominion. We then discussed whether students thought meeting human needs was more important than taking care of the environment, and how Jesus might respond to that question. Several lessons later, students completed an exam-style assessment based on this unit, including a 12-mark question: '"It is a religious duty to care for planet Earth". Evaluate this statement'.

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Lesson Three: God's Covenant with Noah about Human Life (Gen. 9:5-7); Year 10; Thematic Studies

This lesson followed immediately from the first Year 10 lesson on Jesus and the woman caught in adultery. Genesis 9 contrasted well with this previous story, as it occurs in the Old Testament, is usually cited to support the death penalty, and focuses on a different sin. Students were given an A5 sheet with the full text of Gen. 9:5-7 (NIV) in mono-textual form. Students filled in a table explaining what they thought the passage as a whole was trying to say. As a class, we reviewed and built upon students' prior knowledge to contextualise the passage and then interrogated its meaning. Finally, students were asked to first write down and then discuss with a partner what they thought this passage implied about the death penalty. I then facilitated a discussion about this question, and we compared it with Jn. 8:3-11. These activities took nearly half a lesson. In the second half, students attempted a 12-mark question: '"The death penalty can never be justified". Evaluate this statement'.

Lesson Four: The Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31); Year 10; Christianity

Students had recently researched how Christians help those in poverty; in this lesson, we considered *why* Christians help those in poverty. I felt this parable would provoke interesting questions about audience and would be relevant to the topic of study. On the whiteboard, students were shown an illumination of this story from Codex Aureus of Echternach (c. 1000 CE), consisting of three images in a sequence with Latin captions. Students discussed in pairs what story they thought these images might be telling. I then displayed the text (translation from NIV and CEV) over four slides, each slide accompanied by a different artistic interpretation of the relevant part of the story. I also included verses 14-15a so that students would understand the background to Jesus telling this story. Students took it in turn to read parts of the story together. Students glued a copy of the Codex illumination into their books, then annotated it with a narrative summary. They were given three 'interpretation and analysis' questions to consider their own responses to and then discuss with a partner. As a whole class, we discussed their answers and how the story might apply to the modern world. Students then answered a 5-mark exam question in their assessment books: 'Explain two ways in which Christians living in Britain can support people in poverty around the world'.

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Lesson Five: Wrongdoers will not Inherit God's Kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9-11); Year 10; Thematic Studies

This lesson took place during students' study of prejudice and discrimination in religion. I chose this passage because the text's context plays a significant role in its interpretation, its meaning is contested, and it highlights the importance of translation. Students had a sheet which introduced Saint Paul and his letter to Corinth, followed by the text of 1 Cor. 6:9-11. My translation primarily followed the NIV but borrowed from the CEV; I followed the NIV for *malakoi oute arsenokoitai*. I also displayed the text on the board, and we read the passage together. I presented students with the Greek text and explained why it is difficult to translate. We compared several different translations. I explained the context of homosexual relationships in Graeco-Roman society. We discussed how this contextual information might affect one's reading of the passage. Students answered questions on the text in their books. Students then discussed questions on their tables, e.g. 'Is Paul being homophobic in this passage?' Students were then given a range of statements summarising different Christian attitudes towards homosexuality. In groups, they decided which one(s) best matched what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians. We compared the groups' decisions and discussed why they reached their conclusions. Finally, students wrote an evaluative paragraph in their exercise books on whether religion encourages homophobia, with reference to 1 Corinthians.

Findings

As discussed in the research design, data from these lessons was drawn from four main sources: my own reflections and observations; the observations of classroom teachers; a small sample of students' written work; and students' exam-style assessments. I also downloaded two recent question papers and mark schemes from the AQA exam board. I then analysed this data following the method outlined in the research design. In this section, I will provide a brief summary of my key findings in answer to each of my research questions.

How, and under what circumstances, did students draw upon context to help them understand or interpret the meaning of a text?

To answer this research question, I identified examples of students drawing upon context and conspicuous examples where students neglected to do this. Examples were annotated with relevant

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details, as well as a note about the accuracy and depth of the student's overall interpretation. I identified factors common to the successful examples and factors common to the unsuccessful examples.

Most of the students who successfully drew upon context to help them understand or interpret the meaning of a text were high prior attainers. For example, in the lesson on the Rich Man and Lazarus, I observed that two students, both predicted to attain Level 9 in their GCSE, independently drew on verses 14-15a to argue that this story is aimed at people who love money, since it is Jesus' response to the Pharisees. While other students also gave thoughtful answers, only these two students referred explicitly to context. This may be explained by my unrealistic and undifferentiated expectations of students' ability to recall and apply specific details from the text that we had read earlier. The observing teacher suggested "how about having the questions to begin with so that they can look for the answers as they encounter the story?" My activity required students to recall information from the story and recognise which details were relevant to the questions. This is a demanding task which may have made some of the contextual details less accessible to most students.

Most often, the contextual information that students drew upon to assist them in interpretation was information that they found interesting or engaging. Notably, students drew upon context most frequently during the lesson on homophobia. This was also the lesson in which their engagement during the contextualisation stage was highest; neither I nor the observing teacher noticed any disruption or inattentiveness, and many students reacted with obvious surprise and interest to the information. By contrast, the relevant contextual details most ignored by students tended to be information that they had not been interested or engaged by. For example, in the lesson on the Rich Man and Lazarus, as already noted, students drew upon context very infrequently. While insufficient access to contextual details when answering questions may have been a factor in this (as discussed above), I also observed a distinct lack of engagement and attention even when discussing the Pharisees in verses 14-5a for the first time. The observing teacher similarly noted that "reading the text from the board can make it quite difficult to focus", and the lack of attention during this activity appeared to negatively influence students' ability and willingness to draw upon context later in the lesson.

Students who drew upon some form of context tended to show at least a good basic understanding of the text, but this was also true of many students who did not draw on context. More interestingly,

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students who drew upon context *beyond the passage*, i.e. historical or wider biblical context, showed much more nuanced and sophisticated understandings of the text. During the discussion on whether Paul was homophobic (in lesson five), one student answered:

> *"It depends on what he's talking about. If he's talking about just being gay in general, that's homophobic, but if he's talking about grown men having sex with teenage boys or prostitutes like they did in Greece, then it's not necessarily homophobic."*
>
> (Year 10 student, oral response)

The student's reference to *historical* context allowed her to explain diverse interpretations and implications of the passage. By contrast, another student's written response to the question of whether religion encourages homophobia was more limited:

> *"In many biblical quotes such as 'men who have sex with men' this is in the context of how wrongdoers will not inherit God's kingdom, this shows that they don't agree with same sex relationships and they believe they are wrong, and they shouldn't be accepted."*
>
> (Year 10 student, written response)

This answer ignores context from outside the passage itself, producing a less nuanced understanding.

How, and under what circumstances, did students demonstrate an understanding of diverse possible interpretations of a text?

My analysis method for this research question was very similar to my analysis method for the first research question. Examples were identified and categorised as 'understanding of diverse interpretations' or 'surprising absence of diverse interpretations'. They were annotated with details that were suggested to be relevant by my own reflections and other teachers' observations. I identified factors common to the successful examples and factors common to the unsuccessful examples.

Again, most of the students who showed a clear understanding of ambiguity and ambivalence in biblical passages were higher prior attainers. For example, in the Year 9 lesson, many of the students at the highest stage of the school's flightpath system consistently referenced and explained multiple interpretations of Mt. 6:25-34 both orally and in writing. By contrast, the two SEN students at the lowest stage were unable to summarise even their own understanding of this passage and did not reference the passage at all in the assessment.

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Examples of students showing a clear awareness of diverse interpretations mostly occurred in relation to texts to which more time had been devoted, e.g. 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Mt. 6:25-34. Students who referenced these passages often discussed competing interpretations, as in this answer:

> *"[Mt. 6:25-34] could be interpreted as meaning that we have no duty to care for the earth because God will always provide and ensure we have the best life possible. I don't agree with this because I think it should be interpreted in a way that suggests God will always give us lovely things if we behave well like the flowers and nature [so] everyone still has the duty of stewardship."* *(Year 9 student, assessment answer)*

By contrast, many of the most striking omissions of any reference to diverse interpretations were in relation to Gen. 9:5-7, which students only spent 20-25 minutes studying. One student wrote "there is no differing interpretations to this quote; it is clearly supporting the death penalty." Other students used the biblical context of this passage to challenge its *authority*, but not its meaning or application, e.g. "this is not a strong argument because it is from the Old Testament which Christian teachings are not heavily based upon and it contrasts what Jesus preached."

In most of the examples where students demonstrated an awareness of diverse possible interpretations, the relevant text had been de-stabilised in some way during its presentation. This echoes the research of Hancock (2019) on comic book Bibles, but the use of images was neither necessary nor sufficient to achieve this effect. The lesson which produced the clearest examples of sensitivity to ambivalence and ambiguity in the text was the lesson on homophobia, where the 1 Corinthians passage was presented mono-textually but then a key phrase was de-stabilised by comparing alternative translations. This suggests that notions of uniformity, originality and definitive authority can (and should) be called into question even when the Bible is presented mono-textually.

While most references to multiple interpretations come from Year 10 lessons, examples of students volunteering their *own* interpretations of a text come mainly from the Year 9 lesson on Mt. 6:25-34. One student voluntarily raised his hand and said, "Isn't it also kind of saying that we don't need to care about climate change, because God will look after us?" I later asked this student to repeat his idea, sparking a wide-ranging exegetical class discussion. Some Year 10 students questioned the interpretation and application of passages in written work, e.g. "adultery isn't as severe as murder, so the punishment may not fit her crime, but may fit others." However, these Year 10 students were less eager to share or volunteer their own ideas vocally, making my goal of eliciting diverse interpretations from students more difficult. My observations also suggested a deeper quality of conversation among

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the Year 9 students when discussing texts. In my judgment, the relevant factor was not that more Year 9 students interrogated the text, but that those who did, did so more openly and vocally; this helped to encourage and normalise student-led exegesis.

In what ways did the structure and requirements of GCSE examinations affect students' ability to demonstrate biblical literacy?

To answer this research question, I sorted the examples from my previous two research questions into two new categories: assessment examples and non-assessment examples. For each category, I recorded whether the examples were generally positive/successful or negative/unsuccessful. I compared specific examples of written work (and teachers' observations) against assessment pieces by the same student on the same topic. I recorded whether the student demonstrated more biblical literacy in the assessment, the lesson or approximately the same in both. My data analysis for this research question also involved a close reading of the AQA assessment resources. I marked students' assessments according to the AQA resources. For students who included detailed biblical exegesis in their answer, I made a note of how their mark would have been affected if they had simply used a proof-texting approach.

My data analysis showed that students generally demonstrated greater biblical literacy during lessons than they did in exam-style assessments. A clear example of this was in the lesson on the Rich Man and Lazarus. During the lesson, one student contributed well, commenting that part of the story's message might be to obey existing scripture. He also produced a summary which indicated a good grasp of the narrative and its possible meanings. Yet in his assessment, his discussion was more limited: "[by] helping those in poverty, Christians show they are not like the rich man from the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus." Another student, who also showed good understanding in the lesson activities, used the story essentially as a proof-text: "one teaching, shown in the Rich Man and Lazarus, was treat others how you wish to be treated." A similar trend was evident in the other assessments.

There may be multiple explanations for this. With the Year 9 class, one possible factor was my failure to revisit Mt. 6:25-34; the observing teacher noted that "revision of teachings/quotes is <u>*essential*</u>." Yet exam questions themselves may also have limited students' scope for demonstrating biblical literacy. None of the exam questions are formatted with an explicitly textual or exegetical focus. 5-mark questions merely require students to "refer to sacred writings" (AQA, 2018a; AQA, 2018b),

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and a mark is awarded simply for "reference to sacred writing(s)" (AQA, 2018a; AQA, 2018b). There is no incentive for exegesis here; proof-texting suffices to obtain this mark. My observations suggested that the Year 10 class were familiar with these assessment criteria, which may have discouraged them from engaging in unnecessary and unrewarded exegesis; those few who did successfully attempt it did not get higher marks for it. My analysis of the 12-mark questions yielded a more complex picture. For these questions, students are instructed to give "reasoned arguments" for and against a statement, "refer to religious arguments" or "refer to Christian teaching" and "reach a justified conclusion" (AQA, 2018a; AQA, 2018b). The highest level descriptor demands "logical chains of reasoning leading to judgement(s) supported by knowledge and understanding of relevant evidence and information" (AQA, 2018a; AQA, 2018b). "Relevant evidence and information" presumably includes scripture, but the focus is on using texts as evidence to support reasoning, rather than using one's reasoning to understand texts. The most impressive assessment answers contextualised and interpreted texts and then logically demonstrated how this might affect one's response to the statement. Nonetheless, other answers also met the highest level criteria without detailed exegesis. The 12-mark questions thus seemed to reward biblical literacy where this was relevant to the wider argument but did not specifically require or encourage it.

Finally, in the light of the findings from my second research question, GCSE requirements affected biblical literacy indirectly by constraining the available lesson time. As discussed above, shorter lengths of study resulted in a shallower 'proof-texting' approach. Yet these shorter lengths of study were partly due to a content-heavy course specification. Three lessons to explore the death penalty in Christianity and Islam allows little time for in-depth exegesis.

Conclusion

Discussion

A recurring theme from the findings is that my implementation of the strategy was insufficiently inclusive of lower prior attainers. Contextual information was not equally accessible or easily grasped by all, which affected some students' confidence in using it. However, the students who did draw upon context, especially context from beyond the passage, offered more nuanced and sophisticated interpretations, supporting the emphasis placed by Bowie and Coles (2018) on the value of

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contextualising biblical passages. My findings also highlight the importance of student interest in passages' context.

De-stabilising English texts, e.g. by presenting them as one translation or version among many, led to a greater understanding of textual ambiguity and diverse interpretations. This translation-focused method is therefore an alternative option to the use of comic book bibles explored by Hancock (2019) that achieves a similar aim to that of Horrell and Davis (2014): opening students' eyes to the polysemic richness of the biblical text. Eliciting diverse interpretations from students themselves led to a greater sense of ownership and a deeper quality of conversation, echoing the findings of Bowie et al. (2020). This may provide a solution to the problem, first identified by the Biblos project (2004) and more recently addressed by Docherty (2018), of the Bible's perception as an exclusively Christian book.

Students were found to demonstrate greater biblical literacy during lessons than they did in exam-style assessments. The questions themselves neither required nor explicitly encouraged genuine biblical literacy beyond proof-texting. However, students who did include exegetical comments in 12-mark answers were rewarded, as these comments helped students to explain and evaluate different possible responses to the statement. This positive but limited relationship between biblical literacy and exam success echoes the findings of Bowie et al. (2020) and arguably lends support to the earlier criticisms of the new GCSEs made by Bowie and Coles (2018).

Recommendations

Moving forward, this strategy should be implemented in a way that is more inclusive of lower prior attainers. This includes making text and relevant context easily accessible to students when answering questions, as well as further differentiation by question and outcome. Students' engagement and focus needs to be improved during the contextualisation stage, e.g. by ensuring the text is easily visible and giving students focus questions. This also includes contextualising passages in a way that students are likely to find interesting; research into students' attitudes towards learning about topics such as ancient Judaism, the Graeco-Roman world and the history of the Bible may be helpful in this respect. Students should be encouraged further to share their own interpretations, e.g. by calling more deliberately upon quieter students and praising and rewarding original ideas.

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These findings also indicate difficulties in implementing my strategy given the requirements of GCSE examinations, which may be resolved in a number of ways. Firstly, the full strategy could be focused on passages relevant to multiple topics, allowing students to investigate relevant texts without requiring an additional lesson for every sub-topic. It might also be possible to develop 15-20 minute activities based on this strategy. When I attempted to implement my full strategy in less than half a lesson, the results were unsatisfactory. Yet the exegetical process might proceed more quickly if students were already familiar with it. Lessons focusing explicitly on hermeneutical methods, while demanding an initial time investment, might help students to move through this strategy more quickly later. The AQA specification itself could also be altered to better promote biblical literacy. Questions that specifically require some level of exegetical discussion could be included in question papers. The volume of required subject content could be reduced to allow for deeper exegesis and the study of hermeneutics. I do not deny the importance of the other skills and content currently included in the specification, but if texts are studied, they should be studied properly. As Bowie and Coles (2018) put it, “teaching texts is not necessarily the sole thing RE should engage with, but to do it badly has significant consequences for understanding” (p.278).

Trialling this strategy on a larger scale would provide an opportunity to experiment more widely with the strategy. Students could explore non-propositional frameworks for biblical reading, where the experience is at least as important as the propositional content. Ignoring this dimension of Bible-reading risks reinforcing a “particularly propositional conception of religion” (Bowie & Coles, 2018, p.277). Non-propositional frameworks may be especially valuable for teachers who share the focus on children’s spirituality articulated by Nye and Hay (1996) as well as those who follow the ethnographic “interpretive approach” developed by Jackson (2011). Another potential variation on my strategy might be to present the texts in a wider variety of formats, e.g. comic books, videos or audio recordings of bible readings. Building on the research of Hancock (2019), comparing these formats may yield interesting insights concerning how different formats affect biblical literacy.

Finally, the lack of high-quality hermeneutical resources for RE teachers identified by Horrell and Davis (2014) does not yet appear to have been fully remedied. During this project, I often had to rely on knowledge from my own university studies, which might present difficulties for teachers whose specialisms lie outside biblical studies; I encountered similar difficulties myself when teaching the Qur’an as a non-specialist. Fortunately, during the writing of this essay, the ‘Texts and Teachers Practice Guide’ was published, which, as well as being a valuable resource itself, signposts existing

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resources and provides potentially helpful guidance for resource developers (Bowie, 2020). Within this guide, there is an introduction to the 'LAaSMO' pedagogy of Margaret Carswell (2020), which follows a similar structure to the classroom strategy trialled in my own research. The 'Texts and Teachers' project is a promising sign that RE may be moving towards a deeper engagement with sacred texts; I sincerely hope that this trajectory continues.

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