

# The marginalisation of violence in Bible stories in RE

Lynn Revell  
Canterbury Christ Church University UK

## Issues

The research described in this poster is informed by two issues in the teaching of RE in the UK. The first is the representation of religions in schools and the second is the expectation that RE will play a key role in the way tolerance, radicalization, extremism and violence are addressed with children and young people.

Recent debates in Religious Education in the UK concern the representation of religion and the ways religions are taught through text books. Two of the most comprehensive and recent research projects on RE have identified text books as key factors in the way religions are misrepresented. The *Does RE Work?* Project, led by Jim Conroy at Glasgow University identified a context where the teaching of religion is influenced by exam boards and the relationship between examines and the publishers of text books. The *Materials used to Teach about World Religions in Schools in England* study conducted by the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit found that many text books represented religions in ways that were superficial. There was a tendency towards generalization and lack of depth. Research into the representation of specific religions has found that textbooks tend to present religion in idealized forms that minimize issues that are controversial or suggest that religions are ever involved in conflict in any way. The trend in textbooks is to present religions as vehicles for peace and tolerance.

Bible story books have a specific status in RE and there is a tendency to view them as merely shortened or abridged versions of *the Bible*. As such they are not subject to the same analysis as other textbooks because there is an assumption that they are shortened versions of a larger work, they are free from editorial and authorial bias and interpretation. The research for this poster suggests that Bible Story books are as representative of social, cultural, educational and theological trends as all other textbooks in RE and that the most contemporary trends suggest that Bible story books engage with conflict and violence in particular ways. The poster argues that a naïve reading of Bible Story books undermines the ability of teachers to use Bible stories in ways that critically engage pupils with issues of violence and conflict.

## Methodology

95 contemporary (1995 - ) Bible story books have been analyzed as resources used by RE teachers to explore dominant themes of representation in these texts. A further 70 textbooks published between 1838 and 1994 were examined in order to provide a historical overview of trends and development in Bible story books. Text as well as images and instructions to teachers were examined in order to gain a holistic understanding of the way Bible story books were used.

## **Findings**

The analysis suggests that the majority of Bible story books decontextualize/marginalize or reposition incidents of violence in Bible stories. Contemporary Bible story books display a startling homogeneity in the way conflict and violence is represented and also in the choice of stories that are selected. A comparison with Bible story books from the past reveals that not only has the canon of stories shrunk but that all forms of conflict are sanitized. Bible Story books for children used to include violence and conflict and in some cases to sensationalize and even elaborate certain narratives with violence.

This is in stark contrast with contemporary books. Even where violence or conflict is an essential part of the narrative, for example the Flood or the Good Samaritan modern Bible Story books tend to minimize conflict. The limited number of stories that are presented in Bible Story Books means that many incidents of violence or conflict are simply omitted. It is likely that pupils who do not come Christian families and whose only exposure to the Bible is in RE will never encounter many Bible stories where violence is a part because they have been edited from the texts.

## **Points for discussion**

The omission, sanitation and decontextualisation of violence in Bible Story books has several consequences for the way teachers approach the teaching of the Bible or violence in RE. This trend diminishes the capacity for these texts to be used as resources for opening discussions of the relationship and meaning of violence in religion in two ways. Many violent incidents in the Bible are key to the meaning of certain parables/narratives or as explanations of the nature and actions of God. The representation of the Bible as free from violence and conflict means that young people are unable to engage with certain interpretations of the Bible. The omission of conflict from Bible stories diminishes and limits the ways that pupils can understand the meanings of the Bible and also the development of their own critical awareness of the Bible.

The second way in which the trend towards omission of violence from the Bible impacts of how teachers approach issues of conflict is that it suggests that conflict is an aberration or abnormal in relation to Christianity, that Christianity has 'nothing to say' about conflict. This suggestion not only misrepresents the Bible it also misrepresents many Christian traditions where engagement with violence and conflict has been a key part of their mission.