

The Speech of Angels

Ninety-eight young people talk about the Bible

**An extension to the 3rd Report of the
Biblos Project
2005**

by

*Terence Copley, Rob Freathy, Sarah Lane,
Heather Savini and Karen Walshe*



Copyright © 2006 Biblos Project, University of Exeter School of Education
First published in 2006 by University of Exeter School of Education

The right of Terence Copley, Rob Freathy, Sarah Lane, Heather Savini and Karen Walshe to be identified as the authors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN 0 56 404396 6

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Design and production by Bible Society, Swindon

Printed in Great Britain by Acorn Press Swindon Ltd

Contents

Contents	3
Acknowledgements	4
Introduction from the director	5
Background	7
1. Methodology	9
1.1. Selection of interviewees	9
1.2. Interview format	10
1.3. Analysis	11
2. What do young people think about the Bible?	13
2.1. ‘The Bible is true’	13
2.2. ‘Science has proved the Bible is wrong’	15
2.3. ‘The Bible is important’	17
2.4. ‘The Bible is interesting’ versus ‘The Bible is boring’.	19
2.5. ‘The Bible is old-fashioned’	21
2.6. ‘The Bible has influenced my life’	23
2.7. The Bible in a multi-faith context	23
2.8. The Bible’s content	25
2.9. God, Jesus and other concepts in the Bible	26
3. Influences on young people’s attitudes	29
3.1. Family	29
3.2. Friends	31
3.3. School	32
3.4. Other influences	34
4. Conclusions	35
5. Recommendations	37
Biblos Project Publications	39

Acknowledgements

We record grateful thanks to those teachers and pupils from the schools who participated in this project and helped us with our research. For reasons of research confidentiality the schools remain anonymous, but sincere thanks are due, as without them the work could not have been undertaken.

Special thanks are due to our sponsors, the St Gabriel's Trust, for their generous support and keen interest in the findings of the Project.

Independence of research

The comments and opinions expressed in this report are the independent conclusions of the Biblos Project. They do not necessarily represent the views of the St Gabriel's Trust, nor did the sponsors expect us to conform to any particular view.

Introduction from the director

When we completed Phase Three of the Biblos Project, we reported the results in *On the Side of the Angels*, published in 2004.

But we were conscious at the time that a great deal of data, richer in quantity and quality than we had imagined, remained unanalysed through lack of time and resources. This data consisted of most of the 98 pupil interviews conducted as part of the Phase Three research.

Thanks to the generosity of the St Gabriel's Trust we were able to employ a research assistant to go through the interview transcripts and produce the analysis that lies at the heart of this report. For postgraduate researchers this extension to that report should be read in conjunction with *On the Side of the Angels*. But for the general reader, interested via an educational or perhaps a faith community link in what young people have to say about the Bible and what they think has shaped their attitudes towards it, this report can be read as a self-standing piece of work.

Finally, we owe our title to the British historian and essayist Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881). For him, music is the speech of angels because nothing among the utterances of humankind is felt to be so divine or to bring us so near to the Infinite. Certainly his tortuous use of words does not appeal today. But on the other hand the voices of today's children sometimes have a knack of stating truths that adults neither understand nor wish to hear.

To the 'angels' behind this report – thanks!

Terence Copley
Professor of Religious Education,
School of Education & Lifelong Learning,
University of Exeter.

Background

The University of Exeter School of Education and Lifelong Learning boasts an established Religious Education (RE) research team, currently comprising ten members of staff (not all full-time) and one Honorary Research Fellow (a title bestowed in recognition of research eminence on a semi-retired member of staff). The team includes Professor Terence Copley as director of the portfolio of projects that have been developed over the last decade or so including:

- FARE (Forms of Assessment in Religious Education)
- WISSP (Worship in Secondary Schools Project)
- The Figure of Jesus in Religious Education

Perhaps the most significant project undertaken by the RE research team is the Biblos Project which was funded by the British and Foreign Bible Society from 1996 until 2004 and afterwards by other charitable trusts. The project was founded with the aim to investigate how the Bible is, and should be, taught in RE in England. The research was divided into three phases. Each phase resulted in articles in academic, educational and church periodicals based on research reports. The research reports were written and published thanks to financial aid from the All Saints Educational Trust (*Echo of Angels*, 1998 and *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, 2001) and the Westhill Endowment Trust (*On the Side of the Angels*, 2004). A summary report of these first three phases was also published (*Teaching Biblical Narrative*, 2004). This was intended for ‘people in a hurry’ for whom the full research report might be unwieldy. A full list of associated articles is included at the end of this report.

The first phase of the project tackled the problem of how to teach the Bible in a society variously labelled ‘plural’ and ‘secular’ and the role of narrative in this task. Empirical research was conducted in Ealing and Devon schools. Subsequently, classroom materials for Key Stage (KS) 2 and KS3 were published which advocated a new approach to teaching biblical narrative through the three selected themes of Encounter, Destiny and Vulnerability. Two key ideas were proposed: that the Bible is a multi-religious text (Jewish, Christian, with implications for Islam) and that it should not be reduced in teaching to secular moralisms.

The second phase of the project tested the established Biblos approach in KS1 and KS4. We worked with schools mainly in Lancashire and Devon and approximately seven hundred children were surveyed through questionnaire.

The Speech of Angels

A parallel project was also conducted pertaining to *The Figure of Jesus in Religious Education* (2002) which set out to investigate the picture of Jesus being transmitted in RE and why RE did not seem to be presenting the Jesus of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Rastafarianism or the Jesus of New Testament scholarship.

The research findings outlined in this report emerged from the third phase of the project. This phase had three main foci:

1. To test pupils' knowledge and understanding of biblical material
2. To investigate pupils' attitudes towards the Bible
3. To investigate the social and cultural factors which may have shaped these attitudes.

These foci were translated into three research questions:

1. What is the relationship between western culture and Christianity?
2. What do young people today know and think about the Bible?
3. What have these attitudes and perceptions been shaped by?

The first research question was answered by means of literature review. The second and third research questions were answered by means of a questionnaire survey of 1066 pupils in the nine participating schools from the South West, Midlands and North East of England. However, in order to get a deeper understanding of pupils' knowledge of, and attitudes towards, the Bible, as well as of what factors they believe influenced these attitudes, it was deemed necessary to undertake interviews with individual pupils.

Thanks to the sponsorship we received from the St Gabriel's Trust it is now possible to publish the outcome of this aspect of our research.

1. Methodology

1.1. Selection of interviewees

The number of pupils who completed the Biblos Phase Three questionnaire survey was 1066. There were 518 males (48.6%) and 548 females (51.4%). There were 117 pupils from Year 6 (11%), 610 from Year 9 (57.2%) and 339 from Year 12 (31.8%). The number of pupils who belonged to or identified with specific religions is listed below:

Christianity	70.5%
None	15.1%
Sikhism	6.2%
Hinduism	3.4%
Islam	2.4%
Other (but did not specify)	1.5%
Buddhism	0.8%
Judaism	0.2%

One item in the Biblos Phase Three questionnaire asked the pupil respondents whether they would be willing to take part in a follow-up interview. Of the 355 who volunteered, we conducted 98 individual semi-structured interviews lasting between twenty and thirty minutes each. The pupils came from the following nine participating schools:

a. Primary

- A Church of England Voluntary Aided primary school in the West Midlands (Mixed).
- A Foundation primary school in Berkshire. (Mixed).
- A Church of England Voluntary Aided primary school in Yorkshire. (Mixed).
- A Church of England Voluntary Aided primary school in Devon. (Mixed).

b. Secondary

- An Independent secondary school in Worcestershire. (Selective. Mixed).

The Speech of Angels

- A Church of England Voluntary Aided High School in North Yorkshire. (Comprehensive. Mixed).
- A Community secondary school in Coventry. (Comprehensive. Mixed).
- A Foundation grammar school in Berkshire. (Selective. Mixed).
- A Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided secondary school in Derbyshire. (Comprehensive. Mixed).

The eventual sample included:

- 53 Males
- 45 Females
- 26 Year 6s
- 43 Year 9s
- 29 Year 12s

When analysing our questionnaire data (Copley, C. *et al.* 2004. p.44) we noted that the Kruskal-Wallis statistical test showed that there was a significant difference between the groups of pupils who were selected for interview, the groups of pupils who agreed to be interviewed (but were not selected) and the groups of pupils who did not agree to be interviewed, in terms of their attitudes towards the Bible. They were ranked in this same order from most positive attitudes to the least positive attitudes. This result was surprising as the process by which we selected interviewees from our volunteers was designed to ensure that the selected pupils represented a variety of attitudes towards the Bible and a variety of religious traditions and none. Therefore, it is probable that willingness to be interviewed was itself generally indicative of a positive attitude.

1.2. Interview format

The purpose of the interviews was to elicit key quotations, which illustrated recurrent themes, ideas and problems, and to explore in greater depth the reasons behind the attitudes expressed in the questionnaires. The interviews were conducted according to the same schedule each time. Before the interviews started, the interviewer introduced herself, thanked the pupils for agreeing to help with the research and explained that the purpose was to find out what young people really think about the Bible and why. The interviewer stressed that there are no right or wrong answers and that no one outside the research team would be able to identify what each individual pupil had said.

She then outlined the interview format, asked the pupils whether there was anything they would like to ask before commencing and checked whether it would be possible for the interview to be tape-recorded.

At the start, the interviewer gave the pupils seven cards on which were written the following opinions: 'The Bible is interesting'; 'The Bible is boring'; 'The Bible is important'; 'Science has proved the Bible wrong'; 'The Bible is true'; 'The Bible is old-fashioned'; and 'The Bible has influenced my life'. These statements form some of the sections in chapter two. The pupils were then asked to place each card under one of three headings: 'I agree', 'I disagree' and 'I'm not sure'. After this, the pupils were asked which statements they felt most strongly about in any of the piles and why they had placed the cards where they had. In the second stage of the interviews, the interviewer asked the pupils a number of questions. Firstly, they were asked where they got most of their ideas about the Bible from. They were encouraged to provide specific examples and asked whether these encounters were positive or negative experiences. Secondly, pupils were asked what people in their family think about the Bible and they were encouraged to think about reasons why these attitudes might be held. Thirdly, pupils were asked what their friends think about the Bible and why they might hold those attitudes. Fourthly, the interviewer asked pupils why people have different ideas about the Bible. Lastly, they were asked whether they had anything else they would like to say.

1.3. Analysis

The ninety-eight interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each transcription was analysed using the method of interview analysis outlined by Radnor (2001). This entails coding and sorting responses into overarching topics and categories. Sometimes the same data piece is used to illustrate different topics and/or categories. We have attempted to incorporate pupils' own voices as much as possible so that they are speaking for themselves. Quotations may not be grammatically accurate and use of *sic* has been kept to a minimum. However, pupils' ideas and reflections are also woven into the text in the form of paraphrase or summary statements. We have also attempted to explore and seek out relationships and patterns in order to make connections across topics and categories. It is a systematic approach, but it still leaves responsibility for interpretation with the researcher who has to interrogate the data in a creative and constructive intellectual process in order to make sense of it and to theorise from it (Radnor, 2001. p.91). Finally, it should be noted

The Speech of Angels

that each quotation is followed by some details about the interviewee: year group (Y6, Y9 or Y12); pupil number (P); gender (M or F); and religious affiliation (if any).

References

Radnor, H. (2001). *Researching Your Professional Practice*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

2. What do young people think about the Bible?

2.1. 'The Bible is true'

'Religion [is] itself quite a confusing thing because we can't really say if something is true or not like the Bible, because it is mainly a faith kind of thing [...] there is no real hard evidence that it is true and there is no hard evidence that it isn't true so it is one of those things which I'm not really sure about.'

(Y9. P614. M. Other religion)

Only three out of our ninety-eight pupils say categorically that the Bible is not true. The first states, *'I really do [...] pity the people who do totally believe in it. [...] I can't understand how [they] can, and that just annoys me'* (Y12. P218. F. No religious affiliation). The second says that the Bible *'has just been made up of old stories that aren't true'* (Y9. P347. M. No religious affiliation). Meanwhile, the last declares, *'I don't think [the Bible] was intended to be taken as seriously as it is today.'* (Y9. P355. F. Other). By contrast, a much larger proportion of pupils are sure that the Bible is true and many of these are able to give reasons for their views, such as: (i) it sounds realistic; (ii) it has already happened so it must be true; (iii) it is true otherwise Christians would not worship God and Jesus; (v) it is an historic account; (vi) there is no reason for people to make it up; (vii) it is the focus of personal religious beliefs and practice; and (viii) television programmes prove it to be true. However, the large majority of pupils in this sample are unsure about the truth of the Bible. They credit parts of it with truth, but query the veracity of other parts either in general terms or by alluding to specific passages.

For some pupils, the truth of the Bible depends on the existence of God and Jesus. For others, the issue of biblical truth raises theological questions, such as the problem of evil and suffering and how the presentation of God differs in the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible. A small number of pupils discuss biblical truth in terms of whether the Bible is the 'Word of God', although they understand this concept in terms of God simply dictating to the author(s) what to write. An interesting perspective on this is provided by a Muslim pupil who states, *'Like the Bible is God's Word and the Qur'an is Allah's Word; it's like, kind of the same'* (Y6. P98. F. Muslim). Other pupils maintain that the Bible is the means by which God communicates with individuals (e.g. *'I think it is a way that God can speak to you [...] so I suppose, it*

The Speech of Angels

is not really a Bible, it is more God', Y12 P564. F. Christian). A more esoteric understanding of divine communication is proposed by a Year 12 pupil who states, *'I believe that God gave them words to the scriptures for a reason, and it was like he put a very lengthy like lock on this code of words that, you know, only modern people could break'* (Y12. P291. M. Christian). However, the same pupil argues that *'A lot of the later stuff in the Bible is actually word of mouth. [... They] weren't actually the words from God to the scriptures, to the prophets, and things like that'*. Another pupil supports this argument by stating that direct divine communication with individuals is not possible. A further pupil argues that discrepancies within the text between a punishing and a loving God prove that it was not the Word of God.

For some pupils, the truth of the Bible depends on whether it is possible to verify its historicity. This issue leads a proportion of pupils to declare that historical verification is impossible because of the wide time gap between biblical times and now. Many pupils demand empirical evidence, eyewitness accounts or even firsthand experience of the events. Others question the reliability of the oral tradition by which the narratives were transmitted from generation to generation. Finally, some pupils express concern about authorial bias, exaggeration and modification through transmission (e.g. through translation).

The miracle accounts raise more questions for pupils about the truth of the Bible than anything else. Only a few accept that the miracle narratives are literally true. More regard miracles as impossible. Many pupils who are unable to understand miracles demand empirical proof that they occurred (e.g. video evidence). Other pupils note how they cannot believe in or imagine miraculous events. Inevitably, a lot of pupils provide their own naturalistic explanations for miracles, for example, Jesus freed the paralytic from the psychological guilt which was causing his paralysis. Meanwhile, some pupils dismiss miracles as legends and myths, while others state that miracle accounts were exaggerations to make Jesus appear great. Finally, it is interesting to note the selection of miracles which pupils cite: (i) Moses and the Red Sea; (ii) the virgin birth; (iii) the incarnation; (iv) Jesus turning water into wine; (v) the feeding of the 5,000 (or 10,000); (vi) walking on water; (vii) Jesus' healings in general; and (viii) the resurrection.

A small minority of pupils are not sure why it matters whether the Bible is true or not. One pupil states that while the Bible gives lots of good advice, very few people take any notice of it and those who do not read it live their lives *'just as good as anyone else'* (Y9. P810. M. No religious affiliation). Another argues that what matters more are *'the ideas in it and the lessons like what you*

should do and not do rather than actually some of the miracles and that sort of thing' (Y9. P653. M. Christian).

2.2. 'Science has proved the Bible is wrong'

'I don't know, because [...] in science books it says stuff like, 'The world was created from a meteor,' or whatever. And I'm just not sure [...] because my heart says that God made the world, but my brain thinks that science, basically, made the world.' (Y6. P1065. M. Christian)

Most pupils are clear that science poses problems for the Bible's credibility and truth claims, but some argue that it can be used to support biblical narratives as well as to discredit them. Pupils give examples to support their answers, but their responses often lack precision and clarity. A few interviewees do not understand the question and so dodge the answer with some excuse (e.g. *'I'm not really into science'*, Y9. P950. M. Hindu). The specific biblical material referred to by pupils is predictable and small in extent. It focuses on the creation accounts and the miracles, including the birth and resurrection of Jesus. In general, the creation narratives are regarded as pivotal to this discussion and are talked about in relation to the Big Bang, Evolution and Darwinism. Some older pupils were actually studying the relationship between science and religion at the time of these interviews and that is reflected in their ability to be precise and logical in their arguments. By contrast, some pupils find it very difficult to express their ideas and produce convoluted arguments.

Only a few pupils hold the view that the Bible cannot be reconciled with science at all. One states that biblical narratives seem implausible: *'science has given us a far more credible, a far more realistic explanation as opposed to the rather children's story-like Genesis story. It's just, it's written for people who didn't have any scientific knowledge who were interested in stories'* (Y12. P787. M. Christian). Others argue that there is not much evidence to back up some of the biblical narratives and that scientists would regard many of them as impossible. Many pupils argue that the Big Bang and Evolution theories have proved the Bible wrong. Their reasons include: (i) the world was made by chemical reactions and the Big Bang; (ii) there is no mention of dinosaurs in the Bible; (iii) humans evolved from apes, not Adam and Eve; (iv) scientific explanations are more realistic and credible; and (v) it is just a matter of time before science has proved everything. The passages which pupils cite to demonstrate that science has proved the Bible wrong include: (i) the entire Old Testament;

The Speech of Angels

(ii) the seven days of creation; (iii) Adam and Eve (e.g. *'the human gene pool is too big to have started with two people'*, Y12. P562. M. Christian); (iv) the burning bush (e.g. *'I don't believe it can mysteriously just combust out of nowhere'*, Y9. P361. M. No religious affiliation); (v) Moses parting the Red Sea (e.g. *'it's very unlikely the sea's going to split into two'*, Y6. P130. M. No religious affiliation); (vi) Jonah's survival in the stomach of the big fish; (vii) the virgin birth; (viii) Jesus' miracles; (ix) the crucifixion (e.g. *'if you dig a hole [for the base of the cross] and you come back to it five years later it will still be there'* [i.e. scientific proof in the form of archaeological evidence should be available], Y6. P1064. M. Christian); and (x) the resurrection (e.g. *'coming alive as a ghost – I don't think can be done'*, Y9. P628. M. Christian).

Fewer than ten pupils say science has not proved the Bible wrong. Their reasons include: (i) the Bible is quite believable; (ii) it is not right to disprove the Bible because it is all true; (iii) it cannot be disproved because it happened so long ago; (iv) faith allows us to believe the Bible over the Big Bang theory; (v) humans are more significant than science would suggest; (vi) humanity is too complex to have arisen from an explosion; (vii) evolution is just a theory; (viii) future advancements in science may disprove current scientific theories and/or create new gaps in knowledge; and (viii) despite the challenge of science, it is right *'to try and keep the Bible going'* (Y6. P60. M. Christian). One pupil argues that *'there's so much stuff which science hasn't been able to prove and so some people might put that down to, I don't know, God or whatever'*. As an example he cites the feeding of the 5,000 and suggests that it could be *'a story to help people's faith'* (Y12. P199. M. Christian). Interestingly, some pupils feel that science supports certain biblical material, such as: (i) God's command 'Let there be light' (Genesis) which is identified with astronomers' discovery of a 'big light'; (ii) geology confirms that there was a flood in the Middle East; (iii) the Ark has been found by archaeologists; (iv) reasons have been given to explain how the sun stood still in Joshua 10:13; and (v) Isaiah 40:22 supports scientific discoveries regarding the shape of the Earth. Furthermore, in an attempt to reconcile scientific knowledge with the biblical creation narratives a Year 9 pupil states, *'It's quite obvious God used the 'Big-Bang' to create the world'* (Y9. P948. F.Christian), while another pupil maintains, *'I think scientists have said that although they don't say that it was made in seven days they say that the order is the same as it says in the Bible'* (Y12. P564. F. Christian).

Many pupils are unable to decide whether science has proved the Bible wrong. A minority of these pupils claim to have insufficient knowledge of the Bible or of scientific theories on which to base an opinion. By contrast, the majority are clear that there are no means of making a judgement between:

What do young people think about the Bible?

(i) the Bible and science; (ii) the Bible and Darwin; and (iii) the Adam and Eve narrative and evolution from apes. This conclusion has been reinforced for some pupils as a result of watching television documentaries where scientific methods have been used to evaluate particular biblical narratives (e.g. *‘in the end the position was, “Yes, it could be quite true, but it might not be exactly the way they explained it”*, Y6. P60. M. Christian). Furthermore, some pupils question whether there really is a dichotomy between the Bible and science, for example, one states that *‘the Bible is more sort of explaining like what the point of life is and everything like why we are here and everything and science is more sort of like how did it happen’* (Y12. P564. F. Christian). Along the same line of argument, a minority of pupils argue that the Bible contains spiritual and moral truth, but not scientific or historical truth. A related argument is provided by those pupils who maintain that biblical narratives should be interpreted in non-literal ways, for example, the six days of creation in Genesis should be interpreted as longer periods of evolutionary history. In addition, some pupils are able to relate these differing interpretations to fundamentalists, liberals and literalists, as well by referring to concepts such as metaphor and symbolism.

2.3. ‘The Bible is important’

‘Yes, the Bible is important because it tells us how to live our lives and it helps us understand things.’

(Y9. P806. M. Christian)

Pupils see the Bible as a key source for moral guidance because it teaches us how to live a good life and gives guidelines for ways of doing things and making decisions. It does this by means of the 10 Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer and Bible stories. Some non-Christian pupils also share this view, such as those who state that the Bible teaches *‘people how to be a good person’* (Y6. P125. M. Muslim) and tells *‘everyone how they should like lead their life’* (Y9. P899. M. Hindu). Although pupils know the Bible is an ancient document, many believe its content can still be relevant by re-applying it to modern situations. Also, even though they accept biblical morality, they do not necessarily consider themselves religious or Christian. One pupil states, *‘I don’t believe in God or Jesus but I do believe in the morals that the Bible teaches and that we should stick to them’* (Y9. P641. M. No religious affiliation).

Some pupils see the Bible as important because it is a source of comfort to people. Several illustrate this from their own personal experience. One states

The Speech of Angels

that he carries an Old and New Testament ‘*little red book*’ (perhaps a Gideon Bible) in his bag all the time. Although, he does not read it, he knows it is there and it makes him happy. Speaking as a motorbike rider who realises the dangers involved, he continues, ‘*it’s like a little comfort in my bag*’ (Y12. P291. M. Christian). Other pupils identify the following situations where the Bible might provide comfort: (i) in times of sickness, bereavement and death (e.g. ‘*It’s good to see what The Bible has to say about death and things*’, Y9. P638. F. Christian); (ii) whenever people have bad times, problems or dilemmas (e.g. ‘*[It’s] very symbolic, to someone at a time of need, their last resort, they will always put their hand on the Bible*’, Y12. P786. M. Christian); and (iii) when people are sad and down (e.g. ‘*If I’m feeling down I can read it and I’ll start thinking about things, and my worries seem to go away*’, Y9. P781. M. Christian).

Only a few pupils value the Bible for its teaching about God and Jesus. They mention God in terms of creation, the personal relationship which can be built with God through reading the Bible and for founding the church. Jesus is mentioned for his life, his death ‘for us’ and for the Bible’s hidden teaching about him. Similarly, not many pupils attribute the Bible’s importance to it being ‘true’, ‘the Word of God’ or ‘the will of God’. When they do, the phrases are left unexplained. Just a few query the concept of ‘truth’ and ‘God’s word’. One enthusiastically applies the ‘Bible Code’ theory to explain how the Bible contains ‘God’s words’. However, pupils are clear that the Bible is important for believers and those with faith. They accept that a ‘belief’ response is required and they see this as something which some people possess and others lack. They do not explore what ‘believing in’ or ‘having faith in’ God involves and they assume that anyone who wishes to take the truth claims of the Bible seriously must suspend reason and engage faith.

There is little reference to the Bible’s importance as the sacred writing of a world religion or its importance as a historical document. However, pupils from non-Christian faiths seem more aware of the Bible’s status as the sacred text of Christianity because they have to relate it to their own sacred texts. By contrast, the majority of pupils are divided between those who state that the Bible is important for everyone and those who claim that it is important for some people, but not others. Many pupils regard the Bible as important for everyone – Christians, people of non-Christian faiths and no faith (e.g. ‘*Everyone can learn from it*’, Y6. P123. M. Muslim). Many reasons are suggested for this, for instance: (i) the Bible is familiar to most people; (ii) it can offer good advice about life; (iii) it provides background information about Judaism and Christianity; (iv) it is the root of our society and laws; (v) it is important for all segments of society; and (vi) it is worthy of respect as the

sacred book of Christianity. Some of these ideas are encapsulated in the following quotation: *'Even though we are not religious as a family, we keep [a Bible] in the house, I don't know why I just think it is a tradition that everyone always has a Bible in the house or a holy book'* (Y12. P786. M. Christian).

Some pupils feel the importance of the Bible is limited to Christians (e.g. church-goers, old people, vicars, nuns and 'Catholics') because it is their holy book, the origin of their beliefs and that which they live their life by (e.g. *'If a vicar lost a Bible, he would probably be distraught. If I lost a Bible, I wouldn't be that bothered'*, Y9. P628. M. Christian). Yet, two pupils directly mention the importance of the Bible to both Jews and Christians and a few more imply it (e.g. *'it's important for Jews because obviously they have the Old Testament, and it's important for other religions because, you know, particularly Islam, because Jesus was a prophet'*, Y9. P948. F. Christian). Only three pupils specifically state that the Bible is important to 'other religions' with one explaining that the holy books of the various religions have similarities. Many pupils feel the Bible is important more generally to those who are religious, believe in God, need or want faith and who use it. Religious people are defined as those who believe in God, need or want faith, go to church, want guidance from, or a relationship with, God and who use the Bible. This may include teachers of Religious Education (e.g. *'[The Bible is] not an important thing in my life, but for, like, some people, like the RE teachers and stuff, it could be important for them'*, Y9. P52. M. Christian), but not necessarily church members (e.g. *'even the church don't [rate the Bible] that much any more'*, Y12. P785. M. No religious affiliation).

2.4. 'The Bible is interesting' versus 'The Bible is boring'.

'Some of the sort of like Old Testament rule books and everything, they can be boring, so I wouldn't say the whole Bible is interesting or the whole Bible is boring, I would say some bits are interesting and some bits boring.'
(Y12. P564. F. Christian)

The interest which the Bible generates among young people is described enthusiastically by some, more moderately by others, while there is often a bluntness to the remarks of those who find it boring. The latter are more likely to be pupils with no religious affiliation. However, many pupils attempt to differentiate between what is boring and what is interesting and they are aware that attitudes towards the Bible are often dependent on a reader's perspective. This influence is evident in the replies of those pupils who speak

The Speech of Angels

from a faith perspective and those who do not. Other pupils have a more academic approach influenced by 'A' level studies. Pupils readily identify their own reasons for labelling the Bible interesting or boring and they are able to suggest why others might label it differently from them. Pupils generally assume that religious people believe the Bible to be the 'Word of God' and accept it literally and uncritically. This contrasts with the majority's own view which does not regard the Bible as unique and which judges it by the same standards as other books. For them, it is a special book which is very old, but they are easily disillusioned by negative encounters with it. Furthermore, the general points about the Bible which they make, are not always supported with reference to examples from the text. In addition, when biblical evidence is cited, it is from a limited and repetitive range of references, a minimum of detail is given, facts are sometimes muddled, and only occasionally is the meaning of passages mentioned.

Pupils who argue that the Bible is interesting refer to many appealing aspects of it, such as: (i) the interesting narratives and passages (*'I can't find a better storybook which is true'*, Y12. P291. M. Christian); (ii) the suspense, excitement, amazement, adventure and the unexpected; (iii) the intellectual challenge; (iv) the questions of 'belief' and 'truth' which it raises; (v) the information it provides about Christianity (e.g. *'The Bible is a good way of learning about God and the prophets and stuff and the foundation of the church and things'*, Y12. P562. M. Christian); (vi) its messages and meaning; (vii) its impact on people's lives; (viii) its interest for people of all religions and none; and (ix) its interest in comparison with other sacred writings (e.g. *'I compared them, the Qur'an and the Bible together [...] like the Bible is God's word, and the Qur'an is Allah's word and it's kind of the same'*, Y6. P98. F. Muslim). Some pupils even criticise those who claim the Bible is boring on the basis that they lack biblical knowledge (e.g. *'People think it's boring because they take other people's word for it and haven't read it'*, Y6. P1062. M. Christian).

Pupils who argue that the Bible is boring refer to many unappealing aspects of it, such as: (i) it is just not interesting (e.g. *'It drones on about what one must do and what one mustn't'*, Y12. P785. M. No religious affiliation); (ii) it does not provide the enjoyment expected of a book; (iii) it is not inspirational; (iv) it is repetitive (e.g. *'So and so was born from so and so and he lived to be so old and then had a son'*, Y12. P784. F. Christian); (v) the narratives and teaching are too lengthy; (vi) the language is too difficult and unfamiliar; (vii) the material is too complicated; (viii) the text demands serious application; (ix) it is not true (e.g. *'If you don't believe in it, you would just think, "This is just a load of old stories that aren't really interesting. I can't be bothered to listen to them"'*),

Y9. P911. M. Christian); and (x) the material is irrelevant to modern life because it is too ancient, too far-fetched, only for the young and lacks personal significance.

For the pupils above, the Bible has an image problem. Firstly, it is described as difficult because: (i) it uses old and different words; (ii) it is too wordy and repetitive; (iii) the writing style is old-fashioned; (iv) the stories are not very interesting; and (v) Bible stories are different from normal stories in ordinary books. Secondly, it is described as ‘uncool’ because: (i) it is not cool to be interested in the Bible or things connected to the church; (ii) people are embarrassed to talk about the Bible in case they are seen as religious; and (iii) young people do not want to be connected with something associated with old people. Thirdly, the Bible’s appearance is described as visually unappealing because of its boring look, style, age, language, cover, make-up, pages, writing, length and thin pages.

Other pupils argue that the Bible is boring on the basis of how it had been taught to them. Their criticisms target: (i) the limited range of material studied; (ii) the version of the Bible used (e.g. ‘...some bits can be quite boring but it depends what version you get because there’s like simplified versions and versions for teenagers’, Y9. P652. F. Christian); (iii) the element of compulsion in learning about the Bible; (iv) the seemingly random selection of material for study, assemblies, church services, and so forth (e.g. ‘In the Bible you don’t hear it like all in the right order, people take parts out of it so you don’t really follow it [and] you can’t really get into it’, Y9. P640. F. Christian); (v) the necessity to read it at all; (vi) material which remains unexplored (e.g. ‘I came across a passage in which Jesus destroys an olive tree, and it’s always fascinated me, simply because we’ve always been taught how Jesus loves everything. [The Bible] is full of revelations that we are just not taught about’, Y12. P222. M. Christian); (vii) the way the material is presented; (viii) the type of tasks set (e.g. the need to memorise passages); and (ix) repetition of material in school and church.

2.5. ‘The Bible is old-fashioned’

‘I’d say a huge percentage of people my age think that it’s boring, old fashioned, out of date [...] and to be just put on a shelf and forgotten about. There’s a little percentage who believe in it very strongly and are willing to uphold their views even though people sometimes mock them.’

(Y12. P284. F. Christian)

The Speech of Angels

Just under a third of our interviewees judge the Bible to be old-fashioned. This includes half of the Year 12 pupils and roughly a quarter of both the Year 6 and Year 9 pupils. Many reasons are given by the pupils to justify the claim that the Bible is old-fashioned: (i) it was written 2,000 years ago; (ii) it relates to 'olden times'; (iii) its language, style and appearance are old-fashioned (e.g. *'I suppose it's not old fashioned in its teachings, but I suppose in the actual language and the things it refers to [...] I don't know – things like wine skins and stuff'*, Y12. P164. M. Christian); (iv) it is based on an out of date set of morals, particularly in terms of sex, sexuality and marriage; (v) it is sexist and male-orientated; and (vi) it has served its purpose (e.g. *'[The Bible] has been important because it's given us rules, and it's the basis of the western civilisation, the whole legal system evolved over time. [But now you] don't get [the majority of people] coming to the Bible'*, Y12. P785. M. No religious affiliation). For the pupils this means that: (i) it is hard to understand; (ii) it is complicated to read; (iii) it has no relevance; (iv) its truth claims have been proved wrong by modern learning, science and technology; and (v) it is not as good as other books (e.g. *'It's been beaten by a lot of best-author books like the J K Rowling Harry Potter, and things, and so it's not as, best book in the library any more, is it?'*, Y6. P60. M. Christian).

Over a third of pupils do not regard the Bible as old-fashioned. This includes more than half of the Year 6 pupils. The largest number of pupils to reject the idea that the Bible is old-fashioned come from Year 9, such as the following pupil who states, *'Because it's never out of time: it's timeless. There's no sense of time in it. I know things happened a time ago, but it still is important today'* (Y9. P781. M. Christian). The arguments these pupils employ to substantiate their case include: (i) it is still in use in churches and RE; (ii) parents still read the stories to their children (e.g. at bedtime); (iii) it is timeless (e.g. *'It is not like a fashion accessory where it goes out of date, it stays with people for like their lives'*, Y9. P369. M. Hindu); (iv) it still has meaning for people's lives today; (v) it is about Jesus, who is present now; (vi) everything in today's world has been influenced by the Bible; (vii) its teaching on morals and values remains can still be used (e.g. *'[You] use your head and think to yourself like what could I apply this to that is relevant to me or relevant to today's world'*, Y12. P563. F. Christian); (viii) the old-fashioned language has replaced in modern translations and children's versions (e.g. *'It's getting up-dated every so often with new versions'*, Y9. P628. M. Christian); and (ix) it is the foundation of western culture (e.g. *'The Bible influences everybody's life in Western culture, especially, because it's a mainly Christian-dominated society, so the Bible is important'*, Y12. P218. F. No religious affiliation).

What do young people think about the Bible?

A third of all pupils are not sure how to respond to the statement, such as the following pupil who maintains, *'It's become a little obsolete, but it still has its uses. You can still learn stuff from it.'* (Y12. P787. M. Christian). When pupils have opted for the 'Not Sure' category, it is not primarily because they have nothing to say, but because they can see arguments on both sides and do not wish to compromise themselves (e.g. *'It's in between with arguments for and against'*, Y12. P785. M. No religious affiliation). A few are 'Not Sure' because they do not know enough about the Bible to decide one way or the other. This applies chiefly to pupils from non-Christian religions.

2.6. 'The Bible has influenced my life'

'It helps me to be a better person because sometimes I don't know what to do.'
(Y9. P24. F. Christian)

Most pupils are very clear about whether the Bible has influenced their lives or not, with equal numbers responding positively and negatively. Fewer than a quarter of pupils who comment on the Bible's influence in their lives admit to 'not really knowing' or 'a bit of both'. A third of pupils declare positively that the Bible has influenced their lives. They describe clearly the ways in which they have experienced that influence: (i) in spiritual growth; (ii) personal behaviour; (iii) human relationships; (iv) in formulating beliefs; (v) in times of need; (vi) in school; (vii) in church life; and (viii) in life in general. The Bible even inspired a Year 12 pupil to design a nightclub on the theme of the 'Apocalypse' in her graphics class. In terms of those who state that the Bible had not influenced their lives, the most frequently cited reason is that they have never read it. Things learnt at home and pupils' own reflections have greater influence on their lives, but it is suggested that 'vicars and Christians' might be influenced by it. Pupils from non-Christian faiths do not feel influenced by the Bible (e.g. *'I have my own holy books'*, Y9. P919. F. Sikh). Pupils who are unable to decide whether the Bible had influenced their lives are open, honest and state that their indecisiveness is due to a lack of evidence regarding biblical truth, a lack of appeal and its demands. However, they acknowledge that the Bible can meet personal needs at times and inform behaviour.

2.7. The Bible in a multi-faith context

'[Different people have got such different ideas about the Bible because] they believe in different prophets, and they believe that their stories are true. Meanwhile,

The Speech of Angels

other people think that their stories are true, so it's, like, a bit of a war between the religions.'

(Y6. P125. M. Muslim)

Several of the schools where pupils were interviewed serve multi-faith communities and consequently many of the interviewees belong to faiths other than Christianity. No specific question was asked about the relationship between the Bible and non-Christian religions, but other questions produced interesting references to these religions. In addition, when commenting about family and friends, reference is made to a variety of religious affiliations. Pupils often state that people of different faiths or none have different ideas about the Bible. For one pupil, this is the result of how a person is brought up *'because you can be brought up [...] being a humanist or something, not being Christian or different religions'* (Y9. P614. M. Other religion). Other pupils mention the sacred writings of other faiths, such as how the Hebrew Scriptures were adopted by Christians as their Old Testament. However, it is the relationship between the Bible and the Qur'an which is discussed most. One Muslim pupil concludes that *'the Bible is God's word and the Qur'an is Allah's word and it's like kind of the same, but it's a different type of [...] language and things in it'* (Y6. P98. F. Muslim). Another pupil notes that the Bible and the Qur'an have similar material because Islam reveres Jewish and Christian 'prophets'. A different pupil reflects on his Islamic beliefs by stating, *'I'm a Muslim, and I don't think that, like, Jesus is God's son [...] and you won't believe that he was put on the cross, and all that. So I'm not sure if the Bible is true or not'* (Y6. P125. M. Muslim). The importance of these differences in belief is spelt out starkly by a pupil with no religious affiliation: *'[The Bible should not] be taken word for word [because] as much help as it's given our society, it does an awful lot of damage, as well. [...] I mean we've got whacking religious wars from [Islam and the Qur'an], so they're almost behind the Christian faith. I mean, you could almost imagine them catching up in another 300 years, or something'* (Y12. P785. M. No religious affiliation).

Generally, Muslim and other non-Christian pupils, readily give the Bible respect and show an understanding of what it means to those who treat it as a sacred text. One states, *'To most Christian people the Bible is really important and it feels quite important because it's got all of the holy words and God's words in it.'* (Y6. P98. F. Muslim). Another challenges everyone to show respect for each other's beliefs: *'You could believe in a different religion or you could not be religious at all, but I think you have to understand and respect other people's beliefs like to get along and things like that.'* (Y12. P563. F. Christian). Yet, some pupils are

clearer about the influence of the Bible on their lives: *'I don't live my life by the Bible. I have my own holy books.'* (Y9. P919. F. Sikh).

Despite the above, there is a general consensus about how little religion is discussed. One pupil states, 'It's really strange that people just don't talk about religion. [People] don't openly go round saying [...] "This is the way – follow me". It's just not done. People, especially teenagers, are just too scared to admit what they actually think' (Y12. P568. F. Christian). However, other pupils demonstrate a natural curiosity about religions: 'I have looked into lots of different religions and I find they're are very, very interesting beliefs and I like them a lot. They are very well based.' (Y9. P614. M. Other religion). Also, the benefit of learning about other religions in RE is acknowledged (e.g. 'It is not good to have one view of one thing', Y12. P864. M. Sikh), even if there are no means of deciding which of the stories from the different religions is true (e.g. 'all different religions they have their own idea of how the Earth began [...] not everyone can be right with their different stories', Y9. P938. F. Christian).

2.8. The Bible's content

'Like, how amazing God can actually be, like, creating the world and how Jesus died for us. I find them really interesting. And, like, the miracles that Jesus did, and stuff like that.'

(Y9. P633. F. Christian)

When discussing the Bible's content, pupils refer to biblical narratives which they find appealing. These include the following Hebrew Bible/Christian Old Testament passages: (i) Noah's Ark; (ii) Abraham sacrificing Isaac; (iii) Joseph; (iv) Moses (the Red Sea and Ten Commandments); (v) David and Goliath; (vi) Daniel in the lion's den; and (vii) Esther. Appealing passages from the New Testament include: (i) the birth of Jesus; (ii) the temptations; (iii) the feeding of the 5,000; (iv) the transfiguration; (v) the healing of the paralysed man; (vi) Jesus turning water into wine; (vii) the betrayal by Judas; (viii) Jesus' trial before Pilate; (ix) the crucifixion; (x) Pentecost and (xi) the book of Revelation. Pupils find narratives appealing which contain miraculous elements and action. They also appreciate the diversity of topics (e.g. love and hate and life and death), the fascinating themes (e.g. '[How] *amazing God can actually be, like, creating the world and how Jesus died for us*', Y9. P633. F. Christian) and stories about prophetic figures like Daniel. For some pupils, the Bible appeals because it is relevant for life today and is enjoyable

The Speech of Angels

(e.g. *'I like the parables, as well. They have good endings'*, Y12. P218. F. No religious affiliation). Some narratives are also familiar and endure in one's memory (e.g. *'like Noah's ark and things like that – you just remember that all the time'*, Y12. P568. F. Christian). Other pupils have rediscovered biblical narratives through modern media, such as films and musicals (Y6. P60. M. Christian).

Despite the appeal of the Bible noted above, some pupils complain about the repetitive cycle of biblical narratives which they learn about. One pupil stated, *'[They] say the same stories over and over again. There's not really much difference between the stories.'* (Y9. P628. M. Christian). Pupils find such repetition off-putting and boring. They also find that the same narratives are used in school and church. Despite this, one pupil notes that repetition can be positive, for example, *'you hear [the parable of the Good Samaritan] so many times and yet there is always something you notice each time different'* (Y12. P784. F. Christian). Another criticism of the Bible's content pertains to the sentimental presentation of biblical narratives offered by teachers (e.g. *'I think they make it too much of a story. Like Disney's interpretation of the Bible'*, Y12. P786. M. Christian). Finally, some pupils state that the Bible's lack of credibility hampers enjoyment (e.g. *'It's just stories passed down from person to person. [...] It's like Chinese Whispers. You always get a bit of sort of over-exaggeration here, and they miss bits out there, so I don't think that it can possibly be true'*, Y12. P158. F. Christian).

2.9. God, Jesus and other concepts in the Bible

'The God in the Old Testament, he says, "I'm a jealous God" [...] and he is vicious and destroys other cities and tells the Jews he's their [God]. He's almost quite racist, isn't he? He just chooses the Jews. [Then] in the New Testament he tells us to love everyone through Jesus. And so suddenly [...] he becomes almost a schizophrenic God, and changes.'

(Y12. P785. M. No religious affiliation)

Pupils mention God while talking about the Bible for numerous reasons. Some refer to the Bible as God's word, while others state that it is necessary to believe the Bible in order to believe in God. For a few pupils, the Bible teaches them how God created the world (e.g. *'I think it had to take something more than a big explosion to sort all that out. So I think that's God'*, Y9. P652. F. Christian). Other pupils maintain that the only way to get to know God personally is through Bible reading and prayer. By contrast, some pupils maintain that

whilst the Bible's moral messages should be believed, its references to God and Jesus should not (e.g. *'I don't believe God is a person sat up there on clouds going "blah, blah" at people. I just think it's a sort of entity [...] I don't believe the Bible is the word of God'*, Y12. P158. F. Christian). Other pupils note that God's vengeful side is kept from children to avoid upsetting them and that heaven is presented in a boring way (e.g. *'you just stand there and gaze on greatness and it certainly seems rather a long time just to do one thing, even if you do have your harps, or something'*, Y12. P785. M. No religious affiliation). Overall, consideration of the Bible leads pupils to voice queries regarding God's existence, creation and nature (e.g. the tension between his loving benevolence and the existence of evil).

Occasionally, Jesus is mentioned in relation to the Bible, particularly in regard to the following: (i) the virginity of Mary; (ii) the birth; (iii) the temptations; (iv) Jesus' disciples; (v) specific miracles; (vi) encounters with difficult people; (vii) Roman persecution; (viii) the Last Supper; (ix) the betrayal and crucifixion; and (x) the resurrection (*'I enjoyed when I heard that Jesus rose from the dead. I was very happy about that'*, Y6. P1065. M. Christian). When Jesus is mentioned, pupils refer to him as: (i) a miracle worker; (ii) the son/child of God; (iii) Messiah and (iv) someone worthy of worship (e.g. *'I believe that Jesus was definitely a miracle man. He was the Son of God. The Holy Spirit. And that he was alive, he was there for us. And he did die for us, really, he was the saviour of humanity, really'*, Y6. P1065. M. Christian). Furthermore, some pupils state that Jesus was God incarnate and that through his death and resurrection he saved humanity and continues to affect lives now.

In terms of Jesus' teaching, pupils note various things, including: (i) *'Jesus taught people how to read and how to see'* (Y6. P125. M. Muslim); (ii) he *'spread the story of God and how people should live their lives'* (Y9. P641. M. No religious affiliation); (iii) he taught people that if they follow him, they would be much better off; (iv) he often said unexpected things (e.g. *'Jesus says, "Don't bother burying your father, I am more important, come and follow me" and things like that. I think that is highly interesting, the way that it is not always what you expect'*, Y12. P784. F. Christian); and (v) Jesus' teaching helps people to make their decisions. Pupils also make reference to aspects of Jesus' personality. They state that he was a really good person and kind and helpful to everyone. They also note that he handled situations well without putting people down. Furthermore, pupils refer to his leadership and to the influence of his personality on people today (e.g. *'I heard about Jesus and how good he was, and stuff like that, and I thought, "Oh, I want to be kind, and stuff."'*, Y6. P74. F. Christian).

The Speech of Angels

Some pupils refer to Jesus to question the Bible's credibility (e.g. 'I don't dispute whether Jesus existed [...] was a great man [...] the Messiah, or whatever you want to believe. Personally I don't believe that, but I can't believe he performed all those miracles', Y12. P204. M. No religious affiliation). In this regard, they note that the Bible is the only record of Jesus' life and that the gospel writers wrote different things about Jesus in their own ways. Furthermore, one pupil questions the traditional image of Jesus by stating that Jesus was probably black 'whereas he is always counted as being white' (Y 12. P218. F. No religious affiliation).

The concepts of heaven and hell (with a vague reference to purgatory) are mentioned more frequently than any other concepts and primarily by Year 6 pupils. For some, heaven is a paradise devoid of the world's problems (e.g. *'I just hope there's a heaven. [It would] be more calm [...] you wouldn't have any bad things going on, like wars or murders, or anything, it would just be, like, all peaceful and nice'*, Y6. P74. F. Christian). For others, it prevents them being scared of death and enables them to cope with the death of a family member (e.g. *'It's good to think that, if you have like a family death or something, it's good to think, believe in Heaven, 'cause it helps you get through that sort of thing'*, Y12. P199. M. Christian). Another pupil states that we will find out the truth about the Bible in heaven or hell. Finally, other pupils are concerned with how one is selected for heaven or hell (e.g. *'One of my friends, has very, very strong views, and she believes that if you don't go to church every week you're going to go to Hell'*, Y12. P284. F. Christian).

Other concepts mentioned by pupils when talking about the Bible include: (i) prayer (e.g. *'When anything goes wrong, my mum will pray but she's not over the top about it'*, Y6. P1067. F. Christian); (ii) morality (e.g. *'[My Christian cousins from Ireland] don't believe in sex before marriage'*, Y12. P284. F. Christian); (iii) the Holy Spirit; (iv) the cross; (v) the church; and (vi) communion (e.g. *'I go to the Salvation Army [...] so it's quite different from the Church of England. We don't have Communion or anything. So it's quite strange, really, having it [in school]'*, Y9. P652. F. Christian).

3. Influences on young people's attitudes

3.1. Family

'My mother and my brother and my mum's fiancé all go to church frequently and they are all positive about it. My Dad on the other hand, I don't think owns a Bible and I don't think he's, well he may have read it I don't know, but he is not quite as enthusiastic about it.'

(Y12. P784. F. Christian)

The majority of pupils are clear that upbringing is the most important factor in determining a person's attitude towards the Bible (e.g. *'People that don't come from very Christian backgrounds won't have any grasp on the Bible or they won't have learnt enough to find it particularly interesting'*, Y12. P562.

M. Christian). However, two pupils challenge the general view that familial background is important (e.g. *'Even if your family aren't religious you can still like be religious [...] because if you do philosophy then, it's changed my views on God a lot. [...] But the Bible's a bit too much for me.'* (Y12. P866. M. No religious affiliation). When asked about family attitudes towards the Bible, many pupils respond with a comment about religion in general or church attendance.

In terms of parental influence, pupils are aware of instances where a particular faith is inculcated and instances where children are given the freedom to decide for themselves (e.g. *'The way their parents are, generally that's somehow instilled into the child and whether their parents have drummed it in or not or let them make up their own mind'*, Y12. P158. F. Christian). However, pupils believe that it is the mother who is most important in terms of influencing a child's attitude towards the Bible. The majority of pupils speak about their mother's positive religious stance and view of the Bible, although some say their mothers are 'a bit in the middle'. When pressed, pupils often admitted that their mothers' views were influenced by the attitudes of the pupils' maternal grandparents. Mothers read the Bible to their children, talk about it and answer questions about it.

Fathers are usually referred to after the mother in pupils' comments. Dads are *'not quite as enthusiastic about the Bible'* (Y12. P784. F. Christian) and *'not that upbeat about it'* (Y9. P911. M. Christian). They do not go to church or read the Bible as much as mothers. Only a few pupils declare that their fathers are Christians and have influenced their ideas on the Bible, God and religion.

The Speech of Angels

While one father, '*is probably the most religious in the family*' (Y9. P653. M. Christian), most pupils place their fathers 'in the middle', with several fathers 'completely unreligious'. Little conversation about religion appears to take place in homes, so it is not surprising that a few pupils do not know their father's (or even their mother's) views on the Bible. Some comments suggest that the religious influence from parents on male members of the family is more likely to be negative than positive.

Grandparents' attitudes to the Bible have been passed on indirectly through the pupils' parents or directly when the grandchild has a close relationship with the grandparent (e.g. '*I've been taught by my parents who've been taught by my parents' parents*', Y9. P911. M. Christian). Some pupils accompany grandparents to church where '*they tell us about the Bible*' (Y9. P357. F. Christian). An explanation as to why grandparents are 'strong Christians' is that when they were young, schools were more focused on Christianity and pupils '*were quite heavily into it*' (Y9. P341. M. Christian). One Grandmother '*tries to follow it more, with things like eating fish on Fridays*' (Y12. P164. M. Christian). A few grandparents are said to interpret the Bible very literally. One grandfather '*just looks at something and that's what it means – it can't mean anything else*' (Y12. P284. F. Christian). One grandmother has stopped going to church and another set of grandparents '*haven't ever believed in religion*' (Y9. P641. M. No religious affiliation). Some parents have reacted against the strict religious rules they grew up with and do not wish their children to endure such a narrowly religious life-style.

In contrast to the pupils above, some pupils refer to the influence of the whole family. Some demonstrate their family's serious commitment to the Bible by citing the frequency with which they read it or the number of copies they have around the house. Some pupils state that their families are fairly positive towards the Bible, while others record some familial reservations regarding its credibility or how it can be manipulated to condone certain bad behaviour. One pupil's comment provides evidence of an easygoing approach: '*If you want to believe you can, if you don't then that is fine*' (Y12. P786. M. Christian). Those pupils who say that their families have negative attitudes explain this with reference to a lack of church attendance and personal interest, as well as an adoption of negative attitudes from parents and grandparents who '*don't worship [the Bible] like other people do*' (Y12. P204. M. No religious affiliation). Meanwhile, other pupils do not know what their families attitudes are because the Bible is never mentioned.

It should also be noted that many pupils' families are divided in their views regarding the Bible. Those who are more into it, read it and believe it is true

are contrasted with those who do not think much of it, do not really read it and are total atheists. The family can form a variety of combinations dependent on their views, although more positive attitudes tend to be attributed to female family members more than male ones.

3.2. Friends

'Some of [my friends] believe it, but others don't. And I don't have a problem with that. And they don't have a problem with me believing it.'
(Y9. P633. F. Christian)

Some pupils are certain that friends, as much as families, affect a person's attitude towards the Bible (e.g. *'A lot to do with it is peer groups, you know, people around you'*, 2. P291. M. Christian). When discussing the attitude of their friends towards the Bible, pupils refer to their friends' belief in God, church-going and Christian faith or to a lack of these characteristics. Most pupils' circle of friends includes those who are affiliated to a religion and those who are not. While some pupils make a distinction between committed Christian, nominal Christian, non-Christian and anti-Christian positions, friends are not chosen because of their religious beliefs. Pupils claim to respect each other's different views. Also, although outside of school some friendships revolve around church life, this is not the norm.

Pupils confidently classify their friends' differing attitudes towards the Bible, but note that a person *'shouldn't be influenced by what [their] friends think'* (Y12. P793. M. Christian). Generally, there are some friends who like and respect the Bible and find it interesting, brilliant and true. Other friends from non-Christian faiths know about the Bible, even though they have their own holy books. Meanwhile, Christian friends have to read the Bible because they live by it, take it to heart and believe that it has meaning for today. By contrast, some friends (i) are apathetic; (ii) do not believe it; and (iii) cannot see how it might apply to their lives. Finally, some friends attack the Bible by making fun of it, being completely against it, not paying it any attention or just switching off because *'it's a pack of lies'* (Y9. P633. F. Christian). These friends are frequently described as ignorant or apathetic and their criticisms are deemed to be the result of previous bad experiences, general negativity, theological concerns or merely a desire to be cool.

Even though the vast majority of pupils claim never to discuss the Bible, only a few refrain from commenting on their friends' attitudes towards it. One pupil states, *'you tend to [...] think about it a lot, but you don't discuss it'* (Y9. P837.

The Speech of Angels

F. Christian). The reasons given to explain this include: (i) there are more important things to discuss like football; (ii) pupils prefer to play; (iii) it is embarrassing to be seen as religious; and (iv) some prefer to discuss it within the family. Just a few pupils claim that they talk about the Bible quite a lot, while others note that RE lessons provide an occasion when the Bible can be discussed. However, although pupils speak of freedom, choice and mixed views within friendship groups, some experience pressure to conform to whatever their peers' stance on the Bible may be.

3.3. School

'I suppose younger people these days want a bit of violence, action, fighting, and there's nothing like that in it [...] it was alright when I heard it the first time, when I was in junior school, with pictures up, and stuff, they jazz it up a bit, but now when it's serious and it's, like, word for word, it's a bit, you know, you've heard it all before in church.'

(Y9. P628. M. Christian)

Pupils are clear that the type of school that children attend influences their attitudes towards the Bible, as well as how much they are likely to learn about it. This is evident in the comparison which one Catholic school pupil makes about the positive attitude to the Bible found in his school compared to that in the school next door where *'not many [pupils] would actually read the Bible or pay any attention to it'* (Y9. P810. M. No religious affiliation). Other pupils note that some schools have a culture of mocking and teasing about the Bible, such as one who states that it would be *'kind of sad'* for a boy to be positive about the Bible (Y12. P564. F. Christian). This discrepancy between schools is explained by one Year 12 who states, *'there are schools that are incredibly religious and you're frowned upon to not be, and there are schools that are religious but you're allowed your own opinion, and there are schools that are not really religious at all'* (Y12. P158. F. Christian). Interestingly, a pupil without a religious affiliation offers a personal perspective on the experience of attending a Catholic school by stating that it has made him see *'how other people can believe so wholeheartedly something'* that he does not (Y12. P204. M. No religious affiliation).

Pupils are also aware that RE lessons influence pupils' attitudes towards the Bible. For some pupils, studying the Bible within RE has been a positive experience for numerous reasons, such as that it provides an opportunity to learn about: (i) new biblical material; (ii) the application of biblical material to

modern life; (iii) the effect of biblical narratives on personal behaviour; (iv) the consequence of reading the Bible in terms of spiritual progress; (v) other pupil's beliefs; and (vi) new challenging ideas (e.g. *'My teacher made me think'*, Y12. P291. M. Christian). Pupils also appreciate the space for discussion and expression of personal views in RE and they commend the impartial delivery of biblical material and those teachers who listen to rebellious or anti-religious pupils. Generally, Bible teaching is seen as more interesting in primary school, but for some pupils the appeal returns when doing examination work because it consolidates past learning and broadens it.

Some pupils have found their encounters with the Bible in RE to be negative experiences. They are also able to cite numerous reasons, such as: (i) the same biblical material is frequently repeated; (ii) narratives are read too quickly and are selected in a disjointed way; (iii) teachers ignore narratives about the judgement of God or violent stories (e.g. *'I think [RE teachers] try to make it a positive [experience] by telling you lots of little happy stories like Noah's Ark, the parting of the Red Sea and things like that [but] I think they make it too much of a story, like Disney's interpretation of the Bible'*, Y12. P786. M. Christian); (iv) the versions of the Bible chosen use old translations; (v) the teachers are over-zealous or biased; and (vi) the explanations of biblical narratives are deficient (e.g. *'A lot of things aren't explained: things that aren't explained people have different ideas about'*, Y9. P24. F. Christian). Some pupils provide examples of the gaps in their own knowledge including: (i) how to use the Bible; (ii) whether the Bible is true or not; (iii) why the Bible should be studied; and even (iv) *'I don't have a clue what it's going on about'* (Y9. P810. M. No religious affiliation).

Pupils also refer to the use of the Bible in collective worship. Some report that attention is held when biblical narratives are dramatised. Others state that listening to teachers and the vicar's humour on biblical themes is popular. By contrast, one pupil maintains that *'[The teachers] just sort of read out a random bit and no-one really gets it, they don't explain it and say how it is relevant to us now, and I think also [...] they just use bits and kind of say 'Oh it means be nice' or something'* (Y12. P564. F. Christian). Other pupils are turned off biblical material which is repeated frequently, and lastly, one Year 12 pupil is critical of occasions when the Bible is used by repentant *'hardcore criminals'* who *'go round schools preaching and saying, you know, "There's another way,"'* (Y12. P291. M. Christian).

3.4. Other influences

'Well their home life for a start, and when you go out someone can just say to you "Oh the Bible is rubbish, I mean what is the point?" and then you find that you never read it because it wouldn't be in the house or something and you never go to church and you may not go to a Christian school so you would never find out about it, or [...] your family could be deeply religious, send you to a church school, your father could be a vicar or something. It's just circumstances which affect you.'

(Y9. P654. F. Christian)

Pupils state numerous other factors, besides family, friends and school, which influence young people's attitudes towards the Bible, such as whether a person: (i) has found the Bible to have been of help in times of need; (ii) has undergone a religious experience; (iii) has reconciled Christian belief with the presence of evil in the world; (iv) accepts biblical truth (e.g. 'If they believe it, they believe it: if they don't, they don't', Y9. P899. M. Hindu); (v) has been bewildered by contradictions within the Bible; (vi) has read different versions of the Bible; (vii) believes or disbelieves in God (e.g. '*It is not cool to believe in God. People would take the mickey if you start going around talking about God, being all religious*', Y9. P653. M. Christian); (viii) accepts literal, liberal or other interpretations of the Bible; (ix) adheres to a different faith; (x) attends church; (xi) lives in a Christian culture; (xii) has actually read it; and (xiii) resides in society characterised by a plurality of views (e.g. '*Because we're all individuals, to a certain extent. Because of this, kind of, massive change in the '60s that came about. We all suddenly began to become a lot more non-conformist [...] People began to think up radical new ideas, and everything*' (Y12. P785. M. No religious affiliation). However, other pupils maintain that personality and intelligence influence people's response to the Bible (e.g. '*I'd say the more intelligent of the Christians find it difficult to stomach some of the things that the Bible says, so they try to work round it and understand it in different ways. Whereas those [...] who don't think about it that much, just accept it*', Y12. P785. M. No religious affiliation).

4. Conclusions

1. Our interviewees appeared to take the interviews seriously and gave open and honest answers. Their views and judgments are generally logical and valid, albeit limited by a lack of knowledge and evidence. They justifiably query what they do not understand and criticise what fails to ring true for them.
2. The quality of interview dialogue ranges from the lively and relatively informed to the hesitant and limited. Very few religious technical terms are used and a general vagueness is epitomised in the phrase ‘and stuff’. Certain pupils are particularly articulate and make most interesting contributions. This appears to depend more on intelligence and innate curiosity than religious commitment.
3. The attitudes towards the Bible held by the interviewees were relatively positive. Most acknowledge its importance even though their knowledge of it is limited. They do not dismiss the Bible as irrelevant, in spite of any poor teaching, its integral difficulties, its ‘uncool’ image and often-unattractive presentation.
4. It is clear that those pupils personally affiliated to Christianity and those attending church foundation schools speak with greater confidence and knowledge about the Bible than those with no religious affiliation. Pupils of non-Christian faiths empathise with the Bible’s status and importance because they appreciate the place of sacred writings within a religion.
5. Some pupils are wary of the Bible because they are not able to differentiate between studying the Bible in an educational setting and having to ‘believe in’ the Bible in a confessional sense.
6. Where pupils are addressing key biblical challenges in RE, their sound learning is reflected in the improved quality of their responses. So this research indicates that good teaching does make a difference to pupils’ understanding and appreciation of the Bible.
7. At present pupils’ esteem for the Bible focuses on the moral values it inculcates and even then there is a very narrow interpretation of what that entails. But this implies that pupils would be favourably disposed to a more in-depth investigation of the revolutionary standards and values for Christian living. Only a few pupils realise

The Speech of Angels

how the Bible can influence all aspects of life and embrace more than a moral code. However, both religious and non-religious pupils admit to the Bible's influence in diverse ways in their personal lives. The broader socio-political aspects of the Bible are not mentioned.

8. Family, and in particular mothers, play a key role in influencing pupils' attitudes towards the Bible. Friends and school play a lesser, but nonetheless significant, part. Issues regarding the influence of gender and genes are thus raised.
9. Pupils' mixed friendship groups witness to the crossing of religious and cultural boundaries. RE's multi-faith curriculum could well be one of the factors encouraging and facilitating such vital social integration in Britain.
10. This research reveals that pupils have no context in which to set the Bible. It floats in their understanding, unanchored to culture, religion, history, literature or worldviews. The Bible's literary make-up, complicated compilation and methods of interpretation are largely unknown. Its link to Christianity is acknowledged, but few connect it to Judaism and Islam. The Bible's relevance to the modern age remains elusive for young people with little understanding of its major influence in the building of western civilisation. Very few pupils had any questions to ask about the Bible at the end of the interview, but one Year 6 pupil epitomises the general confusion by asking, '*I just wondered who like, who wrote the Bible and where did they get all, how did they know all about the Bible?*' (Y6. P1067. F. Christian). In addition, the Bible is presented in a piecemeal fashion with little regard for the theological framework of its overarching story from creation to recreation, into which the individual narratives fit.

5. Recommendations

The pupil interviews have provided further evidence of the need to meet some of the previous major recommendations of the Biblos Project:

1. To ensure that teachers have the theological knowledge and understanding, professional training and enthusiasm necessary to handle the challenges posed by teaching biblical narratives. In particular, to ensure that they can address positive and negative pupil perceptions and (mis)understandings of key Christian concepts, such as God and Jesus, with reference to the biblical text and contemporary theological scholarship.
2. To promote the highest level of teaching in regard to biblical narratives by encouraging: (i) initial teacher education RE course leaders to demand high levels of biblical knowledge from their recruits; (ii) theologians to attempt to bridge the gap between academic scholarship and youth culture; (iii) Local Education Authorities and church boards of education to fund in-service training and continuing professional development for teachers.
3. To ensure that RE lessons on biblical narratives have broad, deep and theologically focused aims which do justice to the Bible and allow pupils space to develop their critical thinking skills and curiosity through innovative, challenging and purposeful activities. This includes presenting pupils with a broad, but coherent, range of narratives so that they can understand them and so that there is progression from one Key Stage to another.
4. To reject the use of Bible stories (i.e. selected biblical narratives usually chosen at random without coherence and with no regard towards, or perhaps even awareness of, the whole Bible) and to present biblical narratives linked to themes which have immediate meaning in the lives of pupils and which relate to the Bible's story (e.g. destiny, vulnerability, encounter). Other biblical themes (e.g. salvation, redemption, compassion and hope) and topics (e.g. prophets, women and codes of living) could also be discussed.
5. To be fair to the narratives themselves by allowing them to speak without being censored as writing about God and humankind and not simply secular moral or ethical or citizenship issues of current

The Speech of Angels

concern. God should be recognised as the ‘hero’ of biblical literature, while at the same time recognising that ‘God’ is not a reality to many pupils.

6. To present pupils with a knowledge and understanding of the story of the book (i.e. how the Bible came to be written and eventually compiled into one unit) and of the culture and context in which the narratives were written. This might lessen the difficulties which pupils have with the language, format and image of the Bible. This can also provoke discussion of the idea that the Bible is the ‘Word of God’, revelation and inspiration.
7. To present the theological search for truth in biblical narratives as an activity in which all people can engage regardless of their beliefs and values, whilst developing a greater awareness of its theological meaning and of their own theological assumptions, whether these be Christian, Jewish, Islamic, agnostic, atheist etc. Pupils need to be challenged into a theological response, in other words to learn from the biblical narratives and not merely learn about them. There should be a dialogue between pupils’ beliefs, knowledge and experience and the text. The former affects the interpretation of the latter and the dialogue leads pupils to gain critical self-awareness. Awareness of this provides an ideal opportunity to raise the multiplicity of Christian and other interpretations of the Bible and to tackle important pupil questions regarding truth, belief, contradictions, inconsistencies, ambiguities and the relationship between science and religion.
8. To let the Bible be heard as Jewish and Christian writing and as a text of importance to Muslims. By enabling pupils to see that the Bible is a multi-religious text they may be less willing to dismiss it as something only of relevance to Christians.

Biblos Project Publications

- Bowness, C. (2005). *Everybody Hurts, Sometimes*. Norwich: RMEP/SCM Canterbury Press Ltd.
- Brimicombe, M. (2005). *Where Are We Going?* Norwich: RMEP/SCM Canterbury Press Ltd.
- Copley, C., Copley, T., Freathy, R., Lane, S. & Walshe, K. (2004). *On the Side of the Angels: The Third Report of the Biblos Project*. School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of Exeter.
- Copley, T., Freathy, R. & Walshe, K. (2005). *Teaching Biblical Narrative: A summary of the main findings of the Biblos Project, 1996–2004*. University of Exeter: School of Education and Lifelong Learning.
- Copley, T. (2004). From Shopkeepers to Keyholders: Pedagogies in Religious Education. *Journal of Religious Education*. Australian Catholic University. 2.
- Copley, T., Savini, H. & Walshe, K. (2002). *Biblos Secondary Teacher's Handbook*. Norwich: RMEP/SCM Canterbury Press Ltd.
- Copley, T. (2002). *Mysterious Encounters*. Norwich: RMEP/SCM Canterbury Press Ltd.
- Copley, T. (8th June 2001). Why Bible stories are like hot cross buns. *The Church Times*.
- Copley, T. (March 2001). Children 'theologising' in RE: The Joseph story as case study in three religions and competing cultures. *Education Today*. 51:1.
- Copley, T., Lane, S., Savini, H. & Walshe, K. (2001). *Where Angels Fear to Tread: The Second Report of the Biblos Project*. School of Education, University of Exeter.
- Copley, T. (2000). Teaching the Bible in Religious Education. *Journal of Religious Education*. Australian Catholic University. 48:3.
- Copley, T & Walshe, K. (Autumn 2000). The Bible in the Upper Secondary School: Not always more boring than 'watching paint dry'. *Resource*. 23:1.
- Copley, T. (Summer 2000). Can we set right the legacy of Bible-bashing? *Times Educational Supplement Curriculum Special*.
- Copley, T., Lane, S., Savini, H. & Walshe, K. (July 2000). *Summary Recommendations from the Biblos Project*. School of Education, University of Exeter.
- Copley, T & Walshe, K. (eds). (1999). *Teaching the Bible: Perspectives 59*. School of Education, University of Exeter.
- Copley, T. et al. (eds). (1999). *Splashes of God-light*. Swindon: Bible Society.
- Copley, T. & Savini, H. (Autumn 1998). The state of the Bible in state schools. *The Bible in TransMission* (Bible Society).
- Copley, T. (1998). *Echo of Angels: The First Report of the Biblos Project*. School of Education, University of Exeter.
- Lane, S. (2005). *Meetings with Mystery*. Norwich: RMEP/SCM Canterbury Press Ltd.
- Lane, S. & Walshe, K. (2001). The Bible: More boring than watching paint dry? *The Bible in TransMission* (Bible Society).

Savini, H. (2002). *The Riddle of Destiny*. Norwich: RMEP/SCM Canterbury Press Ltd.
Walshe, K. (2002). *Troubled People*. Norwich: RMEP/SCM Canterbury Press Ltd.

Related Publications

Copley, T. (29th November 2002). Jesus in the world. *Times Educational Supplement*.

Copley, T., & Walshe, K. (2002), *The Figure of Jesus in Religious Education*. School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of Exeter.

Copley, T & Walshe, K. (2000). *Teaching about Jesus in Religious Education*. School of Education, University of Exeter.

Copley, T & Walshe, K. (2000). *What about Jesus?* School of Education, University of Exeter.

Walshe, K. (2005) What do young people today really think about Jesus? *British Journal of Religious Education*, 27(1), 65–78.

Walshe, K. (Summer 2003). The Jesus Factor. *Teaching Thinking*. Issue 11.

Walshe, K. & Copley, T. (2001). The Jesus of Agreed Syllabuses and the Jesus of Theology and Religious Studies in KS2. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 24:1.