Beyond the Bullet Points: Teaching the Bible in Norwegian Upper Secondary Religious Education

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ABSTRACT
This qualitative study examines semi-structured interviews with four Norwegian teachers to explore how they teach biblical texts in upper secondary religious education (RE). The theoretical framework combines one model from biblical hermeneutics with one from RE. The former differentiates between the worlds behind, in, and in front of the biblical text, the latter between the universal, common religious, and religion-specific dimensions of religious narratives. Chief findings: All teachers utilize examples from the reception history of the biblical texts; they thus extend Ricoeur’s notion of the world in front of the text. The common religious aspects of biblical texts are mostly overlooked.

KEYWORDS
Religious education; Bible; interpretation; RE teachers

Introduction
Biblical texts are taught by RE teachers in various countries and contexts; they face similar challenges, i.e., to make contemporary pupils who adhere to different religions and outlooks interpret and perceive the relevance of this ancient, sacred book. RE teachers respond to these challenges in different manners, depending on the contexts in which they teach. This article examines the reflections of four Norwegian upper secondary RE teachers on how they approach this task.

Socio-cultural and religious plurality characterizes most local communities in Norway, but above all Oslo and other main cities. According to Statistics Norway (2019), 3,740,920 (71%) are members of the Church of Norway, 355,070 are members of other Christian religious communities, 166,861 are Muslims, 95,030 are members of organizations such as The Norwegian Humanist Association, 20,077 are Buddhist, 10,427 are Hindu, 3,704 are Sikh, 1,115 are Baha’i, and 789 are Jews. RE pupils may thus be committed or passive religious believers, agnostics, atheists, or they may not have a personal stance on this subject.

In Norway, RE is a pluralistic subject that focuses on religions, life stances, ethics, and philosophy. In contrast to many other countries, RE is regulated by a national curriculum. Upper secondary RE is a common, compulsory subject which all pupils who
have chosen an academic education study during their third year. The subject is divided into four main areas: “Theory of religion and criticism of religion,” “Islam and an elective religion,” “Christianity,” and “Philosophy, ethics and views on life/humanism.” Eighty-four units of 60 minutes are set aside for RE, which amounts to two hours per week. All public schools teach RE in multi-religious classrooms in line with the national curriculum. At some schools, the pupils may choose to attend school services before the Christmas holiday, but activities such as school worship are not practiced. Only eight percent of the pupils attend upper secondary private schools (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2019).

At present, all religious private schools are Christian (Catholic or Protestant). In upper secondary education, religious private schools may add more competence aims to the national curriculum in RE, or they may supplement the national curriculum with an additional subject with its own curriculum, for instance Christianity (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2011/2017). The pupils who attend Christian private schools are not necessarily Christian; they may go to these schools for academic reasons. Some Muslims attend these schools because they appreciate the fundamental values of the school and its esteem for religion (Augestad 2016).

Only one of the competence aims for upper secondary RE mentions the Bible. It is listed under the main subject area “Christianity”: “The aims of the training are to enable the apprentice to interpret some important texts from the Bible and Christian tradition” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2006). Pupils who choose Judaism as their elective religion are also required to “interpret some of the religion’s key texts,” which may include biblical texts. In upper secondary RE, the basic skill being able to read is defined as “being able to interpret and reflect on relig[i]ous and philosophical texts and pictures. Reading also means understanding issues, uncovering arguments and identifying main points of view in different texts, and processing and assessing information” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2006). All Norwegian upper secondary RE teachers must therefore teach their pupils how to read, interpret, and reflect on biblical texts.

The curriculum does not specify which biblical texts the pupils should interpret or the methods they should employ. Moreover, the skills associated with the reading of religious texts may apply to all types of texts. The phrase “important texts” suggests some restrictions, but the curriculum does not state for whom the texts should be important (religious groups, society, pupils). The open-endedness of the competence aims imply that the pupils’ knowledge of the Bible to a large extent is influenced by the decisions made by each RE teacher. This study is therefore designed to examine how a selection of RE teachers approaches biblical texts and their reflections, explanations, and arguments for their choices.

1On RE in Norway, see Skeie and Braten (2014).
2Private schools are allowed if they demonstrate that they offer top athletic training, alternative pedagogy, are affiliated with a distinct religion or worldview, are international, are designed for the disabled or teach rare handicrafts (Skeie and Braten 2014).
3All Norwegian subject curricula focus on five basic skills, which include the ability to read (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2006).
**Previous empirical research**

With the exception of master’s theses submitted to the University of Oslo by Kristina Tørresen (2018)⁴ and Miriam Rindal Opsal (2010),⁵ research into how the Bible is taught in Norwegian upper secondary RE is almost non-existent. Tørresen interviews two RE teachers, one from a public school and one from a private Christian school, and analyzes the assignments presented in the three textbooks produced for upper secondary RE in Norway. She concludes that the teachers and textbooks focus on the religion-specific dimension of the biblical texts and behind-the-text concerns. None of these teachers focus on the pupils’ personal interpretations of the biblical texts, but they are positive to such an approach. Other Norwegian studies examine assignments associated with the reading of biblical texts in primary RE (Lied 2001) or upper secondary RE (Opsal 2010). Drawing on Mikhail M. Bakhtin, Opsal’s comparative empirical study of the teaching of the Prodigal Son in two RE classes suggests that the reading of a Christian interpretation of this parable does not delimit the pupils’ own interpretation of this text. It merely constitutes one of many voices in a polyphonic encounter between a polyphonic biblical text and the polyphonic responses of the pupils. The pupils’ interpretations show a great degree of autonomy, both with regard to the parable and the Christian interpretation. Vestøl (2014) examines interpretations of religious texts based on Norwegian secondary school RE textbooks. The limited number of studies of how the Bible is taught in upper secondary RE in Norway suggests that further research is warranted.

Some foreign studies explore how the Bible is taught in RE. Julia Ipgrave (2013) focuses on primary and secondary RE in the UK; Maria Trenda (2017) on primary RE in Austria; and Ruth A. Walfish and David L. Brody (2018) on primary RE in Israel. Other studies examine issues that are relevant to the teaching of the Bible in RE—namely, the attitudes of the pupils toward the Bible (Freathy 2006); pupils’ knowledge and understanding of the Bible (Worsley 2004) and Jesus (Walshe 2005; Aylward and Freathy 2008; Freathy and Aylward 2010); how pupils respond to Jesus (Copley and Walshe 2002), passages from the Bible (Copley 1998; Copley et al. 2001), and the New Testament (Loman and Francis 2006); and the relevance of the Bible to the pupils (Keränen-Pantsu and Ubani 2018).

Some studies highlight various challenges associated with teaching the Bible in contemporary schooling contexts. In *On the Side of the Angels: The Third Report of the Biblos Project*, Terence Copley et al. (2004, 46–47) state that pupils who exhibit negative attitudes toward the Bible express difficulties with its format and credibility, whereas pupils who exhibit positive attitudes toward the Bible find its meaning, language, and contradictions difficult. Moreover, these scholars find it problematic that RE teachers often secularize biblical passages. Walfish and Brody (2018) report two related problems, i.e., unfamiliar biblical linguistics and problematic content. Ipgrave (2013) and Trenda (2017) claim that as pupils grow older, it becomes more difficult to make biblical texts relevant and interesting to them. In the article “From Storybooks to Bullet
Points: Books and the Bible in Primary and Secondary Religious Education,” Ipgrave (2013) argues that pupils and teachers in UK primary schools express positive attitudes toward reading the Bible, whereas both pupils and teachers in secondary schools demonstrate negativity toward this activity. According to Ipgrave, the subjectivities of both the Bible and the pupils are limiting in RE:

The Bible is bound by behind the text concerns about the literal truth of its narratives…; it is trapped in the time of its writing and perceived as unable to speak to the contemporary world. The students are likewise bound by their own subjectivities, constrained by the limitations of their understanding to that which is easy to grasp or empirically provable, confined to the present by lack of interest in the past, and to their own life experience by lack of exposure to that which challenges or is “foreign” to it (Ipgrave 2013, 278-279).

Ipgrave (2013, 268–269) claims that negative attitudes of pupils and teachers toward books feed each other and, as a result, scriptural study has become less important in RE in the UK. In this regard, it is interesting to mention the contrast Copley et al. (2004) find between some results of the first and the third phases of the Biblos Project (UK). According to teachers in Devon who were interviewed in the first phase, their pupils regarded the Bible as “boring; old fashioned; out of date; rubbish; uncool; weird and irrelevant” (46). However, the later empirical investigation of UK pupils’ attitudes toward the Bible revealed that they were ambivalent, not necessarily negative. For instance, the pupils recognized that the Bible was important and relevant, but not to themselves (46). Extensive knowledge about the attitudes of the pupils toward the Bible may secure that RE teachers do not base their teaching on their own stereotypical impressions of their pupils.

Previous studies have suggested some approaches to the teaching of the Bible in RE. For instance, the Biblos Project recommends that pupils learn about the production of the Bible, the changing nature of language, and “the diversity of biblical interpretation” (Copley et al. 2004, 47). On the basis of Paul Ricoeur (1984), Ipgrave (2013, 274–275) argues that in front of the text and behind the text concerns should be properly balanced.

**Theoretical framework**

Our theoretical framework illuminates the processes involved in biblical interpretation. In contrast to previous research, our framework draws on the first author’s up-to-date expertise in biblical research. Insights from biblical hermeneutics are combined with a model of the three dimensions of religious texts developed for Norwegian RE (Breidlid and Nicolaisen 2000, 2011).

Ipgrave’s study (2013, 275) draws on Ricoeur’s differentiation between the worlds behind and in front of the text. This is, however, a simplification of his approach. Ricoeur mentions three worlds, i.e., the world of the author/behind the text, the world of the text, and the world of the reader/in front of the text (1981, 139–142; 2013, 18). The prevalent model of biblical hermeneutics is indebted to Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer, but their insights are complemented by up-to-date knowledge and methods from biblical scholarship (Bergant 1997; Fretheim 1996; Barr 2006). The world behind the text refers to all aspects of the historical and social world in which
the text was composed. The *world in the text* designates the narrative world described in the biblical narrative, including its characters, settings, actions, literary devices, and images utilized to create this world. The *world in front of the text* refers to the entire period after the text was written, and therefore includes how biblical texts are understood by contemporary readers, but also how these texts have been interpreted in different periods and media (texts, paintings, plays, movies) by members of diverse social, cultural, and religious groups. The main difference between Ricoeur’s hermeneutical model and the model employed in biblical scholarship is that the latter extends the *world in front of the text* by including the reception history of the biblical texts.

To Ricoeur (1981, 143) and Ipgrave (2013), reading is an activity where the readers understand themselves in front of the text. From this perspective, the study of artifacts from the text’s reception history can be regarded as an obstacle to this process. In contemporary biblical scholarship, however, the reception history of the biblical texts is considered a resource which demonstrates how interpretations of the Bible have developed over time and how they differ in various communities. In plural RE classrooms, where people belong to different Christian communities, other religions, or life stances, examples from the reception history may enable the pupils to explore and learn from interpretations which differ from their own. If the pupils are already familiar with the biblical texts, this may actually constitute their main opportunity to extend their understanding of the texts and of themselves. The reception history may thus be an asset, not a hindrance, to the pupils’ interpretation of biblical texts.

We will now turn to a compatible approach to religious narratives. In their book *I begynnelsen var fortellingen* [In the beginning was narrative], Halldis Breidlid and Tove Nicolaisen (2000, 2011) present a model which differentiates between the universal, common religious, and religion-specific dimensions of religious narratives. These three dimensions are not regarded as exclusive; they overlap slightly. Their model suggests how the Bible may meaningfully communicate with RE pupils who belong to various backgrounds. The *universal dimension* of religious narratives concerns existential questions which pertain to all human beings, including the meaning of life, the relationship between good and evil, ethical dilemmas, etc. This dimension is fairly open-ended, and recognition of these motifs depends on the previous experiences and knowledge of the pupils. The *common religious dimension* designates themes which several religions have in common. The *religion-specific dimension* pertains to characteristics of the religion to which the narrative belongs (Breidlid and Nicolaisen 2011).

In Norway, the first edition of the Breidlid and Nicolaisen’s (2000) publication initiated a discussion about the relative importance of these dimensions to the teaching of religious narratives in RE. Hovdelien (2002) claimed that pupils should not interpret religious narratives on their own terms. He argued that the owners of religious narratives and their interpretive communities should be considered (religion-specific dimension). Sidsel Lied (2002) suggested that a religious narrative cannot be properly

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6 The Biblos Project recommends that the pupils learn about “the diversity of biblical interpretation” (Copley et al. 2004, 47).
7 See Opsal’s (2010) study.
understood without paying attention to its historical and religious contexts (religion-specific dimension). In response, Breidlid and Nicolaisen (2001) emphasized both the universal and religion-specific dimensions, but they argued that one should first present the universal dimension of the narrative. The themes addressed in this debate relate to Ipgrave’s (2013) concern of balancing emphasis on the worlds behind and in front of the text, and the fear of Copley et al. (2004) that RE teachers secularize biblical texts.

A combination of insights from the two models facilitates a nuanced discussion of how the Bible can be interpreted in different contexts. Each of the worlds behind, in, and in front of the text can be associated with the three dimensions of biblical texts, but the context of plural RE classrooms narrows our focus. In this context, the three dimensions suggest the potential of the biblical texts to communicate beyond the boundaries of the community of believers who initially created them (behind the text), to pupils with different backgrounds (in front of the text). Depending on their backgrounds, academic abilities, and interests, the pupils may (with some assistance from the RE teachers) recognize the universal, common religious, and religion-specific dimensions of the biblical texts and how they overlap. If a biblical text is interpreted on the basis of all three dimensions, all pupils may discover one or more dimensions of the text which they may value, regardless of their personal convictions. Moreover, knowledge of behind-the-text and historical in-front-of-the-text concerns may extend their knowledge of how biblical texts have been interpreted in different contexts, Christian or other. Below, these two models constitute the main analytical framework.

**Material and method**

In this explorative study, data on how the four RE teachers approach biblical texts and their reflections, explanations, and arguments for their choices were collected using the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews. The interviewees were selected from the researchers’ extended networks, which facilitated the identification of teachers who were willing to talk about their teaching in an interview situation. All teachers work in schools located in southern Norway. Three of the teachers, “Solveig,” “Geir,” and “Mari,” work in public schools, whereas “Tor” works in a private Christian school. Both public and private schools are thus represented. All teach the same compulsory RE course, which the pupils take during their third year of upper secondary education. Tor also teaches the Bible in the subject Christianity, but the focus of this study is on how he teaches the Bible in RE. Our concentration on the compulsory subject of RE in all schools—public and private—facilitates exploration of how the open-ended competence aims concerning the Bible are implemented in four different contexts. The teachers have different teaching experiences: Solveig is recently qualified, while the other interviewees are experienced teachers. In addition to being ordinary teachers, Geir and Mari instruct future RE teachers during their period of supervised professional training and Mari has experience with special needs education. The teachers work at schools located in different areas and adapt their teaching to pupils with different interests,

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8In the Christian school, this subject is taught two hours per week during the first and second year.
9During their studies, future RE teachers have supervised professional training in local schools where they are trained by ordinary RE teachers.
backgrounds, and academic abilities. The number of informants is limited; this ensures that the data is manageable, but it does not allow for generalization.

Each author conducted and recorded two semi-structured interviews, which lasted between forty and seventy minutes respectively. The interview guide was divided into two main parts: (1) The teachers’ general experiences with teaching the Bible and their reflections on this topic, and (2) Their teaching of a specific biblical text which each teacher brought to the interview. The questions reflected the results of previous empirical research in the UK, insights from biblical hermeneutics, and the context of Norwegian RE. Most of the main questions were open-ended with suggestions for follow-up questions. This design ensured that important themes were covered, but the interviewers were free to follow up on interesting or unclear answers.

The researchers transcribed their respective interviews and the first author analyzed them by means of thematic qualitative text analysis (Kuckartz 2014). Initially, she read through all transcripts to form a general understanding and to judge whether the theoretical framework was appropriate for the analysis. The transcripts were then uploaded as four units to NVivo and segments of each interview were coded with this software. If one segment included multiple topics, it was assigned to multiple categories. The following thematic categories were generated deductively based on the theoretical framework: behind the text, in the text, in front of the text, universal dimension, common religious dimension, and religion-specific dimension. Other categories, such as interest in the Bible and approach employed to teach the Bible, were created deductively based on the interview guide. The passages coded under each category were compiled by NVivo. These compilations were read closely to detect similarities, differences, and patterns.

Research findings

The first two subsections treat the teachers’ deliberations on circumstances which determine their teaching of biblical texts in RE. The third focuses on the teachers’ hermeneutical approaches to the biblical texts and the dimensions of these texts which are in focus.

Interest in and time set aside for the Bible in RE

The attitudes of the pupils and teachers toward reading the Bible diverge. According to the teachers, the pupils’ interest in reading the Bible appears to be rather low. Tor stresses that even though several of his pupils regard themselves as Christian, many of them have primarily heard, not read, biblical narratives prior to attending the Christian school. Solveig and Mari state that their pupils’ interest in the Bible varies and Geir’s pupils find this topic heavy. In light of the report of Copley et al. (2004), the teachers’ impressions may not necessarily reflect the pupils’ overall opinions of the Bible, but similar to Ipgrave’s (2013) findings, their impressions do affect the teaching. Contrary to UK secondary school teachers, who tend to eliminate biblical interpretation (Ipgrave 2013), the four teachers respond to their pupils’ lack of interest in the Bible with a willingness to engage them in this activity.
In contrast to the UK teachers (Ipgrave 2013), the four Norwegian teachers are interested in reading and interpreting biblical texts in RE, but they do not devote much time to the Bible. Solveig assigns two hours, whereas Mari spends six. Tor and Geir position themselves somewhere in-between. Tor explicitly states that the scope of the subject curriculum in RE restricts the time he can spend reading biblical texts. The limited time set aside for the Bible in RE constitutes an important premise for how the teachers approach Bible studies.

Selection of Biblical texts suitable for RE

The competence aim regarding the Bible only presents one criterion for the selection of biblical texts in RE, i.e., their importance. During the interview, the teachers were asked to reflect on the meaning of this competence aim and later they explained why they chose a specific biblical text. Together their answers reveal that the teachers actually consider many criteria: the significance of the texts to Christian congregations (Tor), the relevance of the texts to Christians today (Solveig), the centrality of the Christian themes and concepts mentioned in the texts (Geir, Mari), the reception of the texts in art and literature (Tor), the pupils’ familiarity with the texts (Solveig), the extent to which the texts may elicit the pupils’ interests (Mari), the texts’ relevance to other competence aims in RE (Mari), and the extent to which the texts thematize big questions in life, ethical dilemmas, various ways of thinking, and current events (Mari). All the criteria focus on historical or contemporary in front of the text concerns. Whereas the first three criteria clearly concentrate on the religion-specific dimension of the biblical texts, the latter are more difficult to classify. They focus on the relevance of the biblical texts in different milieus throughout history, but primarily on their significance to contemporary RE pupils with different backgrounds, the society at large, and the current aims of RE. They may thus reflect religion-specific, universal, and common religious dimensions of the biblical texts, but such dimensions are not specified by the teachers.

Approaches to the biblical texts

The competence aims do not mention specific interpretive approaches; therefore the teachers may choose these. Our main findings show that all four RE teachers address aspects of the worlds behind, in, and in front of the text, but they place the least emphasis on the world in the text. Solveig and Tor focus more on literary devices and genres than the other two teachers, possibly because Mari and Geir prefer to differentiate between how they interpret texts in RE compared with subjects such as Norwegian and English. Geir and Mari, however, enhance their pupils’ comprehension of the essence of the texts by explaining difficult words. They thus address one of the problems earlier research has identified regarding the pupils’ interpretation of biblical texts, i.e., difficult language (Copley et al. 2004; Walfish and Brody 2018).

The four teachers balance the worlds behind and in front of the text in dissimilar manners and focus on different aspects of these worlds. When Mari is asked which of the three worlds she accentuates, she states “a bit of everything,” but ultimately, she chooses the world behind the text. Mari wants to incorporate the pupils’ own
interpretations *in front of the text*, but she argues that these are weakly founded if the pupils are ignorant of the proper historical contexts of the biblical texts. Mari’s descriptions of how her pupils approach biblical texts and her criteria for choosing such texts, however, suggest that she also prioritizes the *world in front of the text*. For example, Mari employs the parable of the Good Samaritan in three ways: (1) as an initial introduction to Christianity with emphasis on love of one’s neighbor (*in front of the text, religion-specific dimension*), (2) as an example of Christian ethics (*in front of the text, religion-specific dimension*), and (3) as a practical exercise which encourages ethical deeds (*in front of the text, universal, common religious, or religion-specific dimensions, depending on the pupils’ background*). The practical exercise substitutes a beggar for the man who is robbed. The pupils are then presented with various common ways to respond to beggars. They must indicate which of these responses they have chosen previously, reflect on their choices, and are then encouraged to choose again. This exercise illustrates the relevance of the text today in plural RE classrooms, i.e., what does it mean to be a Samaritan today? or how can one behave decently toward other people? The exercise may primarily alert the pupils to the *universal dimension* of the text. In that case, it may secularize the biblical text, a concern which was mentioned by Copley et al. (2004). In Mari’s classroom, however, the exercise is balanced by the first two approaches to the text, which both emphasize the *religion-specific dimension*. By starting out with the *religion-specific dimension*, Mari inverts the order recommended by Breidlid and Nicolaisen (2011). This choice probably reflects the fact that she generally prefers to emphasize emic perspectives on religion.

Geir also mentions aspects constituting all three worlds. His lessons normally start out with the pupils’ interpretations *in front of the text* (all dimensions are possible, depending on the backgrounds of the pupils), then they work with the *world in the text*, and then with the *world behind the text*. Geir focuses on the pupils’ interpretations, but he finds it important to supplement them with his own knowledge about research into the historical context of the texts (*behind the text*). He states that it is often difficult to say something certain about this context because biblical researchers often disagree. The pupils could therefore get the impression that everything is uncertain. The interview with Geir thematizes the challenges that knowledge of the original historical and social contexts of biblical texts poses to biblical researchers, RE teachers, and pupils alike. The latter two groups cannot, however, be expected to be constantly informed about recent developments in biblical research, even though such knowledge may advance their interpretation of biblical texts.

Solveig and Tor primarily emphasize the *world behind the text*, but they also work with the *world in front of the text*. According to Solveig, many of her pupils have not thought of the historical context of the Bible. As it provides background, they thus find information about this context more interesting than other approaches to biblical texts. Solveig focuses on when and where the text was written, the author (if known), and information about the historical and social context. Solveig also teaches how the biblical texts currently function as ritual texts and holy texts (*in front of the text*). Tor regards the historical context of the biblical text and its original readers as invaluable, but he also focuses on the reception history of the texts (*in front of the text*). He claims that individual interpretations isolated from history, present time, and fellowship are dead
ends because you need to know the background and intention of the text. Tor’s choices 
probably reflect the fact that many of his pupils are familiar with the biblical texts, but 
his choice is to expand their comprehension of them beyond what they learned at 
Sunday school.

All four teachers extend the world in front of the text by including different aspects of 
the reception history, in contrast to Ipgrave’s (2013) article. For instance, Geir reads an 
excerpt of the Markan passion story and compares it to two screen versions of this 
scene (Jesus of Nazareth (1977) by Zeffirelli and The Last Temptation of Christ (1988) 
by Scorsese). Geir wants to present different portrayals of the crucifixion and of Jesus. 
He argues that he could have asked the pupils to read the four versions of the crucifix-
ion presented in the gospels, but he wants them to compare their own notions of Jesus 
with these modern, and to some extent, controversial depictions. In contrast, Tor 
focuses more on historical aspects of the world in front of the text, by utilizing classic 
interpretations of biblical texts or by reading and showing examples of how biblical 
texts have inspired literature and art. Mari employs a related strategy when her pupils 
are asked to read selected biblical texts and interpret a recent Norwegian movie in light 
of these texts. Through such assignments, the pupils are encouraged to compare their 
own interpretations of the biblical texts with the interpretations of former and contem-
porary artists. Depending on the background and contexts of the artists, their artistic 
interpretations may focus on universal, common religious or religion-specific dimensions 
of the biblical texts. In contrast, Solveig focuses on the reading of a document which 
clarifies how The Lord’s Prayer is employed by the Church of Norway. Thus, she 
emphasizes how this text is employed in a contemporary Christian setting (religion-spe-
cific dimension). The four teachers’ extension of the world in front of the text is in keep-
ing with the abovementioned developments in recent biblical scholarship. However, 
none of the teachers justify their choices by referring to these developments. Their 
approaches may thus rather reflect the teachers’ desire to demonstrate the relevance of 
these texts through history and the present day, an aspiration which has also influenced 
their selection of biblical texts.

In sum, all teachers consider the worlds behind, in, and in front of the text. They 
thus have a broader perspective than Ipgrave (2013), but they do not focus on bal-
ancing these worlds perfectly. Even though Mari stated that she focused on the world 
behind the text, the overall material indicates that she and Geir primarily focus on 
the world in front of the text; Mari by recontextualizing the texts in our modern soci-
ety; Geir by focusing on the pupils’ own interpretations. Tor and Solveig are both 
open to including the pupils’ interpretations in front of the text, but they rather focus 
on the world behind the text and aspects of the reception history in front of the text. 
Tor’s choice probably reflects the fact that his pupils are familiar with Christian con-
temporary interpretations, but not with the world behind the text and the reception 
history in front of the text. The teachers mention themes or utilize approaches which 
illustrate the religion-specific and the universal dimension of biblical texts, but they 
hardly refer to the common religious dimension of biblical texts. They thus fail to rec-
ognize an important aspect of how these texts may function as resources in plural 
RE in Norway. This dimension has similarly been a blind spot in previous theoretical 
discussions in Norway. Consciously or unconsciously, the teachers’ focus on the
reception history complies with recent developments within the field of biblical scholarship.

Discussion

As indicated in the analysis, our findings both corroborate and contrast with previous studies on the teaching of the Bible in RE. Below, we focus on how the teachers extend the world in front of the text by employing artifacts from the reception history. This history has been essential to recent biblical scholarship, but it was not included in Ipgrave’s study (2013) due to Ricoeur’s theoretical influence. Ricoeur limited the world in front of the text to the current reader, and in Ipgrave’s case, RE pupils. In our opinion, the reception history of the biblical texts could bridge the temporal gap between the worlds behind and in front of the text. It could alert the pupils to the Bible’s relevance to cultures and societies over time (universal, common religious, and religion-specific dimensions), the plurality of Christian interpretations (religion-specific dimension), and how these texts have been interpreted in different religions (common religious dimension). The former two points are exemplified in our material, with the latter almost absent, as it has been in the previous debate on the teaching of religious texts in Norway. In plural RE classrooms, the common religious dimension of religious texts constitutes a resource which should be further explored by both RE teachers and researchers.

One challenge associated with interpreting artifacts from the reception history is that this activity could replace or prevent the interpretation of biblical texts, but Opsal’s (2010) study shows that knowledge of a Christian interpretation (and by extension other artifacts) does not necessarily dominate the pupils’ interpretation processes. We believe that artifacts from the reception history may extend the pupils’ understanding of the biblical texts because they highlight their main or subsidiary themes. They also enable the pupils to explore these themes in new historical or contemporary contexts, both Christian and other. The pupils are thus made aware of the diversity of biblical interpretation, as recommended by Copley et al. (2004, 47). The manner in which the teachers relate the biblical texts to the artifacts is, however, important: Should the biblical texts or their subsequent interpretations be in focus or should the two be balanced? Further research into this area is required.

Geir’s reflections on the teaching of knowledge about the historical context of the biblical texts illustrate one additional challenge: The interpretative activities involved in analyzing artifacts from the reception history are more familiar to RE teachers and pupils than the historical contexts of the biblical texts, but artifacts from the past introduce their own historical contexts which teachers and pupils must comprehend. Further research into the selection, introduction, and interpretation of such artifacts in RE is therefore required.

Notes on contributors

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Prepare the Way of the Lord: Towards a Cognitive Poetic Analysis of Audience Involvement with Characters and Events in the Markan World, part of the BZNW series, Aseneth’s Transformation, part of the DCLS series, and “Knowledge about the Bible and Skills for Biblical Interpretation Imparted by Norwegian RE Textbooks for Upper Secondary Education,” Religious Education.

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