

The Bible for children in a postmodern context: How do children form explanatory concepts?

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A previous paper on methodological considerations in interpreting the Bible for children explored the problem of the cognitive gap between biblical interpreter and child. This research is a follow-up as a result of recognition of necessary adjustments in the way that child evangelism is usually approached (via 'original sin'). In our current context of postmodernism, the manner and consequences of biblical knowledge transfer between adult and child need to be explored. Recent research suggests that children are sensitive to the underlying causal structure of the world and seek to form new causal representations at a much earlier age than we had previously supposed. 'Intellectualists' in the anthropology of religion hold that religion is primarily concerned with providing explanatory theories, thus indicating that children need help to achieve coherence between biblical and scientific views on creation. This article presents the rationale for an early intervention to avoid the cognitive dissonance that often arises as children grow up and find a lack of coherence between their early evangelisation and the latest scientific discoveries. To test this hypothesis a multilingual illustrated booklet in English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa was designed to be individually read by parents in each language group to their own 5–8-year-old children. Children's Bible stories have always been 'pretexts for passing along values' and this booklet is no different. The purpose of the booklet was to lay a foundation for children to find Christianity relevant even in the multi-cultural context of vast scientific and technological advances. The subjects' responsiveness was recorded by video camera, and afterwards the parents were individually interviewed and asked to assess the child's level of interest and to comment on the booklet. Results of this pilot study indicated that the booklet was well received.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: In today's postmodern, global cultural context children need help to achieve coherence between biblical and scientific versions of creation. This pilot study tests an evangelical booklet designed to lay a foundation for children to find Christianity relevant even in the multi-cultural context of vast scientific and technological advances.

Introduction

In a previous paper (Evans 2010) the problem of the cognitive gap between biblical interpreter and child was addressed by means of a field test and it became clear that adjustments need to be made to the conventional approach to child evangelism. Recent research by the *Protestante Kerk van Nederland*, who since 1980 have lost half their members (more than two million), showed that in spite of the presence of a spiritual hunger, the youth are not being reached. What was found to be necessary is to relate evangelism to the 'here and now', not to a vague future resolution of current problems. To be relevant to its audience, biblical interpretation must yield 'adequate contextual effect' (Adamo 2008:579–587; Gold 2004:7; Jonker 2004:327). In South Africa, the 'here and now' for a vast number of young children, is abject poverty. And the problem is exacerbated because of easy and rapid access to information technology, even for the poorest of the poor. Thus cognitive dissonance is inevitable for youthful recipients of traditional, conservative child evangelism unless they are helped to achieve coherence between such current issues as the discrepancies between wealth and poverty, science and religion, multiculturalism and Christianity (for examples, see Claasen & Gaum 2012; Evans 2012).

The approach to the methodology of this pilot study is based on two aspects of recent research. Firstly, Gopnik (2000:302, 304) demonstrated that children are sensitive to the underlying causal structure of the world and seek to form new explanatory representations at a much earlier age than we had previously supposed. Secondly, Scarlett (2006:1, 28, 29) reports that there is an emerging sense amongst developmental scholars that something has been missing in stage-structural scholarship (such as that of Piaget) and that is spiritual development. For purposes of scholarship the term 'spiritual development' needs to be clearly defined, but at this stage we have a variety of working definitions. For instance Tobin Hart (2006:163–165) defines spirituality

as ‘the very direct and intimate experience of divinity’, whereas Roehlkepartain *et al.* (2006:5, 6, 8–10) see spiritual development as a universal multi-dimensional, life-shaping process that depends on the person’s interaction with his or her cultural context. Roehlkepartain *et al.* warn that attempts to define spirituality too closely will only misrepresent its complexity, depth and fluidity. In the following definition by Benson, Roehlkepartain and Rude (2003) the connection between spirituality, spiritual development and the formation of causal representations is made clear:

‘Spiritual development’ is the process of growing the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred. It is the developmental ‘engine’ that propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose and contribution. (pp. 205–206)

Independently of each other, Tobin Hart (2006:163–168) and Johnson and Boyatzis (2006:220) reported a growing body of evidence that from early on young children have spiritual capacities and experiences that shape their lives in enduring ways. Hart identified a general type of childhood spiritual experience before the age of six, which he labelled ‘wonder’ (in the sense of what St John of the Cross called ‘infinite incomprehension’). He deduced that an experience of ‘wonder’ can shape a world view and even the course of one’s life. My exploration of this aspect is partly indebted to the work of Jerome W. Berryman who developed ‘Godly Play’.¹ Godly Play is an approach to Christian nurture which respects the innate spirituality of children, and uses wondering questions to encourage curiosity and imagination. Berryman explains that in essence, the encouraging of ‘wondering’ in a child, as opposed to a ‘what is your answer’ habit (or worse still, a ‘what’s the answer?’ habit), is about enabling response rather than drumming religious information into a child in an authoritarian or overly emotional manner (Berryman 2010).² The practitioners of ‘Godly Play’ claim that the playfulness that wondering can foster can help children find a way to enter and even express an abstract ‘higher’ level of thought.

Causal representations and explanation

The existence of a natural and fundamental ‘drive to explain’ which entails general mechanisms of cognitive development has recently been proposed. It is very much

1. Godly Play was founded on the principles of the Montessori Foundation. Jerome W. Berryman has spent close to 40 years creating the Godly Play methodology. The approach of Godly Play is quite different from the traditional model in which the teacher tells the children what they need to know. It is a non-coercive way to encourage them to move into larger dimensions of belief and faith through wondering questions and open-ended response time. It aims to enable children to become rooted in their own religious tradition but at the same time open to others, to new ideas, and to the future (see Berryman 2010).

2. If this sounds harsh, see Willemien Brummer’s description of her torment when exposed to well-meant child evangelism in Claassen and Gaum’s (2012:202–204) collection of conversations with prominent Christians and agnostics or atheists. Conversations reported in their book indicate that more than half of their respondents who became atheists or agnostics, were subjected as children to a narrow-minded, dogmatic type of Christianity in which questioning was not acceptable. Berryman (2010) stresses that the phrase ‘I wonder’ is meant to imply that the storyteller *is* wondering about this, rather than merely asking the children to wonder about this. He says: ‘You are inviting the children to *join* you in wondering about this or that.’ He notes that sometimes we may have settled on our own answer to a particular question, but often the creativity of children’s responses can re-open our eyes to other possibilities.

like the mechanisms of theory change in science and also applies to children (Gopnik 2000:302, 304). Over the past 10 years, developmental psychologists have increasingly used the model of scientific theory change to characterise cognitive development, and the view that younger children cannot manage abstract thinking has been increasingly challenged (Van Oers 2007). ‘Intellectualist’ scholars in the field of developmental psychology maintain that young children’s conceptual development is, as in science, a process of theory formation and change. Like scientists, children are sensitive to the role evidence can play in improving their conceptual structures (McCauley 2000:61, 65). In her work on developmental psychology Gopnik (2000:302, 304) has proposed a ‘theory formation system’, which describes how young children are continually testing and forming new causal representations. Gopnik (2000:300) argues that if children’s knowledge is structured in a theory-like way, then it follows that their knowledge is likely to change in a way that is analogous to theory change in science, that is, on the basis of new evidence. The theory formation system constructs ‘causal maps’, which are coherent, abstract representations of the causal structure of the world around us.

Explanation entails ‘why?’ and ‘because’ – the ‘hmm’ and the ‘aha’. Explanation depends on what is relevant or important to the one doing the explaining, it satisfies a special kind of explanation-seeking curiosity (Gopnik 2000:309–312). Uncovering causes is the central feature of the theory formation system. Gopnik (2000:309–312) observes that finding an explanation for something is accompanied by a satisfaction that goes beyond the merely cognitive: ‘It even seems possible that some aspects of explanatory phenomenology might qualify as a kind of “basic emotion” e.g. surprise and interest’ (Gopnik 2000:312). She notes that children who are presented with problems that are relevant to a newly-formed theory often display intense satisfaction and joy, yet this sort of ‘cognitive emotion’ has been surprisingly neglected in the psychological literature, perhaps because of the old oppositions between emotion and cognition.

Keil and Wilson (2000:2–5) investigated when, and how, explanatory understanding emerges in the young child. They found that by two and a half or three years, children show extensive causal reasoning both about living beings and about psychological processes, and as interaction with the social or natural environment increases, a change in explanation is required. The theory formation system is perpetually faced with counter-evidence and thus perpetually revises theories (Gopnik 2000:306–307). The process involves seeking a coherent causal representation of perceptual input. When the system fails to find such a representation in enough cases and over a long enough period of time, it changes the theory by restructuring the procedures it uses to assign causal representations. The system takes all forms of evidence into consideration and seeks a consistent causal account of objects on that basis. Slaughter and Gopnik (1996) explored the dynamic character of children’s changing conceptions of the world through an ingeniously designed experiment which demonstrated that by three, when children classify objects

they are able to override perceptual observations in favour of causal information. Thus, although the relation between cause and explanation is complex and multifaceted, there is usually a strong sense that a causal account is the essence of a good explanation. Children who received evidence that was conceptually relevant showed a new understanding and extended that understanding to contexts very different from those in which they had been trained (Keil & Wilson 2000:9). This understanding of the process whereby a child forms causal maps explains how it comes about that a child may experience cognitive dissonance and implies a pressing need for change in the approach to child evangelism.

The role of explanation in the evangelism of children

The spiritual world view upholds a time-honoured way of finding truth, that is, 'revelation'. The problem is that the reception of revelation depends upon a belief in divine action which is not empirically testable (Veldsman 2009:189). The religious domain has its own types of explanatory goals and standards, and these can vary from naïve to sophisticated, thus even though causal maps are coherent representations of the causal structure of the world around us, they are not necessarily true – they are liable to forfeiture. However, Christian theology 'should be answerable to canons of enquiry defensible within, and across, the various domains of our common discourse' (Van Huyssteen 2006:308, cf. also 18–23, 33–34, 309). This is where postmodernity and the implications of evolution challenge religious faith, because in the contemporary context, religions can only be seen as 'sets of beliefs, symbols and practices about the reality of superempirical orders that make claims to organize and guide human life' (Van Huyssteen 2006:291). By the same token, it is also where religious faith in the postmodern context, can trump empiricism: Van Huyssteen (2006:308) points out that although 'it is no longer possible to return to a premodern notion of tradition as a repository of privileged data and specially protected, exclusive criteria', neither is it possible to return to 'modernity's notions of universal rationality ... the rigid, modernist disciplinary distinctions need to be collapsed'.

The complex implications of postmodernity and such contributing factors as globalism and pluralism are discussed in a forthcoming article on Christian education.

Methodological considerations

In addressing the question of how – with integrity and coherence – belief in the love of God can be facilitated in young children growing up in our postmodern context, Ford and Wong (2004:317–319) recognised that:

children need to see the biblical narrative within an all-encompassing reality, to encourage discovery of the ways they too can participate in God's redemptive mission for the world ... Youngsters must be inspired to become lifelong learners – a requirement for genuine discipleship. (p. 319)

The assumption of this pilot study is that in the quest for meaning, spiritual development and reason go hand in hand. Throwing open possibilities whilst wrestling together with a biblical text would promote a response of lifelong exploration and spiritual engagement which children thrive on. Thus the rationale for the methodology of this current exploration is primarily that, in the process of what may be called 'evangelical wondering', the biblical text must be brought into a coherent relationship with postmodern realities, ranging from the shocking historical baggage of Christianity to natural disasters and scientific discoveries such as evolution. The goal is to stimulate a wondering attitude by exposing young children to scientific discoveries in a biblical context, and to provide a foundation for ontological questions of meaning in a contemporary context. The overall goal is, as it were, to inoculate children against later cognitive dissonance by engendering a Christian foundation that is oriented towards an openness to lifelong learning.

Spiritual development is shaped both within and outside of religious traditions (Benson *et al.* 2003:205), thus in the context of child evangelism the question arises as to how a *biblical text* can facilitate the nurturing of spiritual life in young children and what factors would influence the child's receptivity? Ruth Bottigheimer (1996:218) recognised that in order to shape a meaningful present, children's Bible stories have tended to mingle sacred text with secular values. The approach of this article is no different. Child evangelism is inevitably based on 'fideistic assertion', but children need to be allowed to discuss questions of Christian faith in a safe, loving environment. In an ideal situation that would be the family. Thus, the secondary aim is to promote family bonding and literacy.

Method: The booklet

As an investigative tool for this qualitative pilot study I devised a very simple multilingual, illustrated booklet to be individually read by mothers or fathers to their own children aged 5–8 years.³ Two Xhosa, one Afrikaans and one English-speaking family were selected. The children were unknown to me. The parents were specifically asked to allow their children to comment, and to engage in discussion in an open-ended way during the reading if the child wanted to. The child's responsiveness was recorded by video camera and the parents were afterwards asked to assess the child's level of interest (not at all; slightly; moderately; very) (video recorded by author, with permission of parents and publication with permission of the parents). Parents were also asked whether or not the booklet made sense to them and to their child; whether there was something in the booklet they did not like; whether they thought there was something that should have been included and whether they had any suggestions for improvement. The text used in the trial is given below. Each number represents a page. Each page has a colour illustration (not given in this article). The illustrations in this booklet aim to stimulate the child's 'wondering' and

³This booklet was based on experience gained from a previous study utilising two booklets which I specifically designed for the research purpose (Evans 2010, 2013).

to widen the young child's cultural perception. Rather than being explicit, the illustrator emphasised a spirit of emotional togetherness, in keeping with the text which aims to suggest rather than prescribe, leaving space for the child's own input and encouraging the child's participation in the reading experience. It is necessary to adapt illustrations to the prospective target readers' cultural context and frame of reference, but it has been noted that if all cultural elements are adapted, there will be a loss of international outlook and understanding (Alvstad 2010:22, 25, 26).⁴

The repetitive phrase 'the Bible says ...' is not intended as an authoritative statement, but as a supplementary perspective to be considered in a modern scientific context. For instance, at the first phrase on page 8 ('Jesus grew up just like we do') 'The Bible says ...' can be dispensed with because the fact that Jesus lived on earth has been historically established. Biblical texts are referred to, but not intended as empirical evidence of scientific facts:

- Title: 'I Wonder ...'
- How did the world begin? Nobody knows.⁵
- The Bible says 'In the beginning' when God began to create the world there was just darkness, emptiness and water. But how did 'the Beginning' happen?
- God said 'Let there be light!' And there *was* light. Most scientists think that the world started with a huge explosion. That would have produced light. The scientists say that as the very great heat from the explosion cooled, very many stars and planets formed. We live on one of the planets called 'earth'.
- More and more things and more and more living plants and animals developed on earth, even eventually, us human beings.
- The Bible says God loves and cares about the world that God started and God wants us to know that God loves us too. God wants us to learn to choose to love God too.
- So, the Bible says, one day long, long ago, God sent God's Spirit to our world in the form of a tiny seed which grew just like any real baby. The Bible says this baby was born from a special Jewish woman. Her name was Mary. The baby's name was Jesus.
- Jesus grew up just like we do, but unlike us, the Bible says he became a person who was always kind, loving and completely unselfish and always told the truth and helped others. He always did what God, his father in heaven, wanted him to do, even when it was very, very hard. The Bible says Jesus did some amazing things to

4. Another challenge presented by illustrations for children is that, where a verbal and a visual code co-exist, the illustration can be more explicit than the text intends. For instance Ellen van Wolde (2009), professor in exegesis of the Old Testament at Nijmegen, Netherlands, suggests that the Hebrew word *xrb* (*bara*, created) in Genesis 1:1 'In the beginning God created (or: when God began to create ... the heavens and the earth)' could mean 'separated', rather than 'created'. The usefulness of such a translation for the purposes of a scientific explanation of creation is obvious, but the suggestion has been rejected by foremost Hebraicists. The illustrator was aware of Van Wolde's hypothesis, hence the sharp separation between light and dark in Figure 2d. However, the picture broadens and opens the text to wondering and exploration, telling the story from a slightly different perspective.

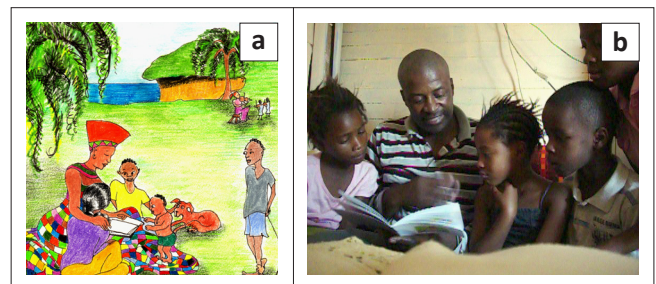
5. As yet we have no scientific evidence of the pre-Big Bang circumstance. It is observationally inaccessible and lies outside the reliability of the classical (non-quantum) cosmological models scientists depend upon. There is no scientific evidence for the agency that brought the Big Bang about. Carroll (2011:38) points out that 'the core sense of creation refers to a pre-Big Bang dependency upon God'.

help people, even healing some people who were sick or disabled. Jesus told stories to help people know that God in heaven is also their Father and loves them very much. Even when people do not choose to do the right thing, God still loves them and if they are really sorry God forgives them and completely forgets that they did not choose well.

- Many people wanted to be like Jesus, but then something very sad happened. The people in charge of the government did not like what Jesus told the people about God. So they killed him by hanging him on a wooden cross. Jesus' friends felt very sad. They thought that everything that was bad was stronger than God's love and goodness.
- But the Bible says 2 days later, something very wonderful happened: Jesus' friends saw him again! He was alive! Jesus cooked and ate some fish on the beach with his friends. God, his loving heavenly Father, had brought him back from death to life.
- The Bible says that Jesus told his friends to spread the good news all over the world: the news that God brought Jesus back to life; the news that those who trust in Jesus will be safe with God for ever, even when they die.
- The Bible says that soon after, Jesus went back to heaven to be with God forever.
- If we accept God's love for us, we do well, and can help God to make the world a better place so that Jesus' unselfish Spirit of love and care can be everywhere on earth, just as it is in heaven.

Results and discussion

In the first session, in an informal settlement, surprisingly and gratifyingly, the gathering of the reading group actually echoed the illustration for page 8 (see Figure 1). A father figure commences reading to a 7-year-old boy. A little later the intended subject of the trial, his own 7-year-old daughter arrives with her cousin. And then a passing child joins the group. The reader and the four children actually reflect the emotional intimacy and interest which the illustrator tried to express in the illustration of a mother figure reading to a group of children and drawing in a passing child. In his feedback this father assessed the children to be very interested and responsive, but said that the children did not understand



Source: (a) Picture from booklet illustrated by Sarah Evans; (b) video recorded by author, with permission of parents and publication with permission of the parents

FIGURE 1: (a) Illustration on page 8 in the booklet and (b) unexpectedly, a stop-frame from the video shows how, as the group spontaneously gathers, the intimacy envisioned by the illustrator on page 8 is echoed.

about the scientists. It is possible that the inclusion of the scientific view seemed strange to him. He asked for the addition of references to biblical chapters and verses, thus usefully highlighting the very important element of the fundamental importance (and power) of the biblical text. Additionally, this response may be explained by Mitchell's (1996:273–277) observation that in the threatening context of a predominantly secular environment, religious insistence on the ideal of purity and integrity tends towards resistance of any revision of the tradition. Reluctance to accept a new understanding of an ancient biblical text could become a hindrance to the reception of this research, therefore the building of a trusting and mutually respectful relationship between reader and researcher was highlighted as a priority. In the second session a grandmother spontaneously asked the subject questions, and although very gentle, by her authoritarian attitude counteracted the wondering purpose of the booklet. For example, when she asked the little girl 'who made the moon and the stars?' (not 'who do you think'), she answered 'Jesus', as if on cue. This perfectly confirms the observation by Ratcliff and Nye (2006:479)

that when expectations are imposed on them, children tend to provide acquired religious knowledge, as is clearly the case here. The grandmother confirmed that the subject had not really followed the gist of the story, although she was brightly attentive. For instance, she could not supply the name of Mary or Jesus at the appropriate places even though she could say that Jesus had made the moon and the stars.

In the third session by a grandmother to her grandson, the subject was allowed to express his own idea of how creation took place. At a certain point in his explanation he became hesitant and uncertain, as though he recognised that the Bible story did not provide a satisfactory explanation for the world in which he lives, seeming to reflect that he was struggling for coherence and had clearly started wondering. Figure 2 portrays four consecutive stages taken as stop-frames during the video. By noting the position of his head as the reading progresses, one can see how he was beginning to be drawn into the story. His grandmother confirmed what was perceptible in the video: by the end of the reading he had a feeling of resolution and satisfaction.



Source: Video recorded by author, with permission of parents and publication with permission of the parents

FIGURE 2: (a–d) Four sequential stop-frames taken at intervals from a continuous video-recording during a eight minute reading session record how the child's interest was gradually increased, as can be observed by noting the position of his head in relation to the booklet.

Rebecca Nye (quoted in Scarlett 2006:28) observed that there were special moments whilst the subjects she interviewed were relating their spiritual experiences when they seemed to 'shift into another gear'. These non-verbal moments could not be captured by the transcripts. I too, saw at the last page of the booklet, fleeting moments of recognition of meaningfulness in all the children living in an informal settlement. These children all seemed to be sobered by the portrayal of their own township environment on the last page. The subject in the fourth session for instance, who lives with his mother in a leaking, unstable shack, looked up during the video and gave me a very direct, almost shocked look of recognition, seeming to say 'yes, this is what it's about'.

Conclusion

The nature of this pilot study is such that results can only be assessed qualitatively. Indications thus far seem to suggest that the effective reception of an evangelically motivated text depends largely on the quality of the emotional content of the total experience of reading together with a significant other that is, sharing of enjoyment. Boyatzis, Dollahite and Marks (2006:306) recognised the 'potential power of religion and spirituality in family life and children's development'. Andrew Murray (1984:16) put it explicitly: 'Love inspires, and this inspiration is the secret of training.' Hart (2006:172, 174) noted that it is the quality of interactive human encounters that is the basis of a relational spirituality. He observed that an empathic interconnection in human relations may help shape a morality that emphasises care.

Although the booklet was well received by all the trial subjects, indications from the adult readers and criticisms offered at conferences where this research was presented suggest that biblical textual references should be inserted and that an alternative wording to the phrase 'the Bible says' such as 'we read in the Bible' should be considered. The methodology of the mixing of *genres* in the booklet has been criticised, but it is the foundation of the methodological approach and results make it clear that as a method it works. After presentation of this research at two separate conferences, one interdisciplinary and one international, the advisability of combining a biblical *genre* with a scientific *genre* was questioned, and constructive criticism was offered regarding the assertiveness of this statement. My argument is that this kind of juxtaposition is exactly what happens in real life. The ideas are juxtaposed so that the child can work towards some sort of coherent understanding. Family sharing of wondering, discussion and exploration strengthens bonding and critical thinking and such an experience is stimulating to the parent as well. The ideal of a loving ethos that encourages and shares in questioning facilitates the process of bringing the precepts of Christianity into coherence with today's postmodern cultural context.

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Competing interests

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