

# **Stage Development Theory and the Use of Elementary Exegesis in Bible Teaching to Children: A Child-Focused and Bible-Orientated Pedagogical Approach**

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## **Abstract**

This paper advocates the use of a child-focused and Bible-orientated stage development approach to the teaching of the Bible to children. Piaget's theories on the cognitive development of children and the adaptation of those theories to religious education by Goldman and others provide the overall framework for an evaluation of aspects of a presentation of a Bible story compiled from assignments submitted by South African theological students. The evaluation identifies several shortcomings in the presentation. The article then considers two major difficulties in teaching the Bible to children before proposing how the shortcomings in the students' presentation can be addressed.

## **Introduction**

This paper addresses the issue of how to assist teachers of the Bible who are untrained pedagogically and theologically to prepare and

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

present Bible material in a manner that is faithful to the meaning and message of the passage, and yet, is understandable and relevant to children. In view of the current renewal of interest in Child Theology, the issue is relevant and timely. However, it should be emphasised at the outset that the theological and philosophical approach advocated in this paper is one that fully recognises the Bible as the inspired Word of God, rather than adopting an anthropocentric pedagogical approach. In the context of this paper, the approach advocated may be termed *child-focused* and *Bible-orientated* in order to distinguish it from classical child-centred pedagogy.

The cognitive development theories ('stage' theories) of Piaget, Goldman *et al.* are discussed. Stage development theory is then utilised to critique the presentation of aspects of a Bible story compiled from assignments submitted by South African distance education theological students. Two major difficulties in teaching the Bible receive attention. The paper ends with suggestions as to how theologically and educationally untrained Bible teachers can improve the effectiveness of their teaching of the Bible to children.

## 1. Goldman's Adaption of Piaget's 'Cognitive Development Phases' to Religious Education

Jean Piaget, the Swiss biologist, philosopher, psychologist, and educationist, is regarded as one of the most important child development researchers of modern times (Hamachek 1979:83; Munari 1994:311). Flowing from his intensive clinical and empirical investigations, he isolated four distinct stages in the intellectual development of children. These four cognitive development stages are the sensorimotor stage (from birth to about two years of age), the preoccupation stage (two to seven years old), the concrete operational

stage (seven to about ten or eleven years), and the formal operations stage (about twelve years and older) (Mwamwenda, in Summers and Waddington 1996:97–101; Piaget and Inhelder 1972; Phillips n.d.:11). In England, Ronald Goldman (1964) utilised Piaget’s model to investigate the relationship between cognitive and religious development (Roux, in Summers and Waddington 1996:110–111). His ground-breaking findings exerted considerable influence on the theory and practice of religious education in Britain, Europe, and the U.S.A. Goldman, and others, such as Harold Loukes (1961) and Edwin Cox (1966), identified the inadequate presentation of biblical material as a major weakness in the Bible-centred religious education prevalent in British schools during the 1960s and 1970s. The researchers discovered, among other things, that children remembered little of what they had been taught, but, more seriously, they often had distorted understandings of what they did remember (Holm 1976:1). There was a strong critical response to Goldman from, among others, Hyde (1968), Francis (1976) and Murphy (1980) before McGrady (1994) strengthened the growing belief that Goldman’s research had not taken sufficient account of the metaphorical and operational aspects of religious thinking (Thomson 2009:2; Worsley 2004:203–204). Donaldson (1978) added to the existing criticisms of Piaget’s overall theory, postulating that Piaget had given insufficient weight to the developmental role of language, and that the rigid application of the developmental stages discouraged some religious educators from intellectually ‘stretching’ gifted and talented children (Worsley 2010:116). However, the broad assumptions of Goldman’s Piagetian developmental perspective have continued to enjoy wide acceptance in Sunday schools and in other religious education circles (Worsley 2004:203–204). James Fowler, for example, constructed his theories of the stages of human religious development on a Piagetian foundation. Fowler is regarded as a leading exponent of the ‘stage’ theory in the

development of faith in children (Roux, in Summers and Waddington 1996:113). Kohlberg (1969) and Kohlberg and Turiel (1971) attempted to adapt cognitive stage theory to moral development (Gordon 1975:204).

As Wood put it, while the theories of Piaget have undergone modification in the light of more recent experimental and observational work, they continue to be foundational to our understanding of how human beings develop and function (1981:70). Bidell and Fischer draw attention to the long-standing debate about 'age-stage' development theories, but comment that large-scale cognitive development from pre-concrete to concrete, and then to abstract thinking, has been frequently replicated and that such research has generally borne out Piaget's conclusions about the order of the stages and the approximate age Piaget assigned to each stage. However, research now suggests that there is more individual variation in cognitive development than Piaget's theory posits (Bidell and Fischer 1992:115).

The assumption in this article is that, notwithstanding the disagreement over details such as the fundamental characteristics of each stage, the general tenets of stage development theory are valid and applicable to religious education. The widely-accepted general didactic principle of proceeding from the concrete to the abstract (Duminy 1977:91) is in harmony with this assumption.

Based on the evidence the writer has gleaned from grading thousands of theological assignments at undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate levels over twenty-seven years, the issue of the unsatisfactory teaching of the Bible appears to be an on-going problem in South Africa. The scientific verification of this hypothesis awaits a properly-constituted academic investigation. In the absence of verifiable scientific data, this paper can do no more than address the general issue of how to assist

untrained teachers of the Bible to teach it more effectively. This issue is an important one, because the research of Goldman and others has shown that undesirable educational and spiritual consequences frequently follow the inadequate teaching of the Bible. One assumes that this will also be true in South Africa, even though the detailed findings of overseas researchers cannot simply be imposed on the local South African context. This assumption is supported by Cornelia Roux's empirical research (1988) in South Africa, which showed that:

The incorrect choice of biblical and other religious tales can, for example, lead to a fatalistic attitude. If the divine judgement of God is over-emphasised and taken out of context, the child can be negatively influenced. The child sees judgements primarily as punishment (Roux, in Summers and Waddington 1996:124).

Fortunately, the believing teacher of the Bible does not have to depend solely on human technique, wisdom, and effort in his or her teaching endeavours. The long-standing conviction of the church has been that God the Spirit empowers and guides those who, in sincerity and truth, seek to expound the teachings of scripture to others, and that he graciously assists those being taught to interpret biblical truth correctly.

## **2. A Bible Story as Presented by South African Theological Students**

Here is an example of how an apparently simple Bible story can be presented in a way that, in terms of stage development theory, is unsuitable for children. The presentation is a compilation of assignments submitted by several theological students. In the interests of concealing the identity of the students, their submissions have been blended into one document. This compilation should not be regarded as

a case study, because it was not possible to base it on a scientifically-verifiable sample. However, while the resulting document could be critiqued as being somewhat artificial and contrived, it is nevertheless contended that it is legitimate for the purpose of this article, in that it is based on actual presentations and is used solely to illustrate pitfalls in those presentations from a stage development perspective.

The selection of the work of these particular students should not be interpreted as an attempt to belittle them. The students chosen are not trained educators, and so, it is inevitable that they would fall short of the mark in some aspects of their pedagogical practice. Their work has been chosen for illustrative reasons because it is contended that stage theorists would regard it as being educationally deficient in several respects and because it therefore serves the purpose of this article. Those being taught were pre-adolescents between the ages of roughly nine to eleven years. This would approximate to Piaget's 'concrete operations' stage and would overlap his 'formal operations' stage.

The italicised words and phrases will be commented on in due course. As the extent to which the terms demand explanation from a teacher depends on the level of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual maturity of individual children within the group, as well as the average age of the group itself, the comments that follow are necessarily generalisations. While there are other aspects of the presentation that could also be selected for discussion, those chosen should be sufficient for the purposes of this article.

*Samuel the prophet anointed David with a horn of oil after the Lord gave Samuel sacrificial business to do.* David was put in the household of Saul for training. He played the harp to soothe Saul who was tormented by a demon. One day David volunteered to go out and fight the giant Goliath. His brothers did not encourage him

because he was very young; even Saul questioned his ability to overcome the boastful Philistine. So Saul gave him the armour but he refused it and took his staff, five stones and a sling. *David said to the Philistine, 'You come against me with the sword, a spear and javelin but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel whom you have defied' (1 Sam 17:45). So his strength was reliance on the Lord's name.* Then Jonathan made a covenant with David and they became great friends. Saul later became David's enemy because of jealousy. God sent an evil spirit to torment Saul in order to drive him to repentance. David used to play the harp to soothe Saul when the evil spirit came upon him. Saul appointed David commander of more than one thousand soldiers. Saul owed David a princess wife; but instead gave him another task. *He wanted David to bring him the foreskins of a hundred Philistines.* King Saul didn't really want the foreskins, he wanted David to get killed while fighting the Philistines. After the servants told David what the King said, David was pleased to be the king's son-in-law. So David and his men went and killed 200 Philistines and David brought their foreskins to the King. *David later pretended to be loyal to the Philistines, but he deceived them by destroying their cities.*

We learn from this story that when the Lord is with you, he gives you victory. The power of the Lord came on David immediately after he got anointed by Samuel (1 Sam 16:13). This enabled him to defeat Goliath though he was a giant. The next thing we learn is that, someone who appeared as a big and experienced man was overcome by someone who was a young man and without experience. Saul compared David to Goliath as a 'boy and Goliath as someone who has been fighting from his youth' (1 Sam 17:33). This teaches us that *experience without the Lord's hand or power on you is useless.*

### 3. A Critique of the Presentation from a Stage Development Perspective

An evaluation of the presentation from a stage development perspective detected the following deficiencies, among others:

#### 3.1. Little or no explanation of unfamiliar terms

*Samuel the prophet anointed David with a horn of oil after the Lord gave Samuel sacrificial business to do.*

The term 'prophet' is not explained. What would 'anointed' in the context of the story mean to children? Similarly, the term 'horn of oil' is obscure. What does 'sacrificial business' mean? The presenter either needs to explain these terms, or should simply omit those that are not essential to the thrust of the story and that are likely to cause confusion. Goldman's research suggests that much of the content of Bible-centred religious education syllabuses in British schools was too advanced for young pupils (1965:6–7).

*David said to the Philistine, 'You come against me with the sword, a spear and javelin but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty.'*

What is a 'Philistine'? What is a 'javelin'? How does a javelin differ from a spear? What does it mean to 'come against you in the name of the Lord'?

*Then Jonathan made a covenant with David.*

What does 'covenant' mean?



### 3.2. Use of terms that are too advanced for young children

*Saul wants David to bring him the foreskins of a hundred Philistines.*

From a modern perspective, this is a barbaric act. Explaining it to children is likely to be difficult and embarrassing, and likely to distract the class from the main aim of the story. Best draws attention to the inadvisability of exposing young children to certain concepts and incidents in the Bible before they are ready for them (2010:333).

### 3.3. The use of Christian jargon

*So his strength was reliance on the Lord's name.*

How can strength (in the child's mind this might well be physical strength, particularly as David was challenging Goliath to a physical duel) flow from relying on a name?

*Experience without the Lord's hand or power on you is useless.*

The meaning of 'experience' in this context probably needs clarification. What does it mean to have the 'Lord's hand or power' on us?

Older children from Christian families might understand some of the allusions above, but it should not be assumed that all Sunday school children necessarily understand them. Piaget's investigation into the level of understanding of secular proverbs by children between the ages of nine and eleven revealed that while they thought they understood the meaning of the proverbs presented to them, the majority of them did not understand them at all (1932:129). Wood observes that young children are prone to be confused by adult use of language, even when seemingly simple words are used (n.d.:68).

### **3.4. Use of concepts that can mislead children as to the true nature of the Lord and of Christianity**

*God sent an evil spirit to torment Saul.*

Does God still send evil spirits to torment people, including children who are naughty? How was Saul tormented? Was the Lord being cruel in doing this to Saul? Is the Lord unloving?

While it is not suggested that such concepts should not be taught to children, it is suggested that presenters should be aware of the difficulties inherent in teaching them and that they should therefore be taught with discretion and wisdom.

*David later pretended to be loyal to the Philistines, but he deceived them by destroying their cities.*

Is deceiving others legitimate, particularly in this extreme way? Are Christians expected to follow David's example?

### **3.5. The students' underlying error: presentation of material inappropriate to the children's developmental stage and life-world**

A common thread running through the errors the students made is that their approach to teaching the Bible to children is inappropriate to the children's developmental level. This issue is discussed in greater detail further on in the article. A second major shortcoming is that the students were so fixated on teaching the content of the passage that they overlooked the necessity of aligning their presentation to the life-world of the children. Naka and Malherbe (2011) comment in the course of their discussion of the incident in Matthew 18:1–6 (Mk 9:33–37; Lk 9:46–48) where Jesus made a child the centre of discussion: 'And so Jesus exposes the wrong theology and theologising of his disciples and

challenges them to theologise from the perspective of the child in order to see, understand and experience the Kingdom of God better.’ Thomson also refers to this passage as a reminder to us of the value Jesus placed upon children and, by implication, the importance of influencing them to their overall benefit in terms they understand (2009:4). While it is accepted that the Bible holds truths that all people of all ages and intellectual capacities can comprehend (Thomson 2009:13), it does not follow that the Bible should therefore be taught to everyone in the same way.

## **4. Two Major Difficulties in Teaching the Bible to Children**

The deficiencies in the students’ assignments underline the pitfalls inherent in teaching the Bible to children. Teaching the Bible to children is difficult for at least two reasons: these are the nature of the Bible and the nature of children (Schachter 1985:308).

### **4.1. The nature of the Bible**

Some of the factors that complicate biblical interpretation are the following:

1. The Bible was not written by one author with one specific viewpoint, but by more than forty authors, in three languages, in more than one continent, over many centuries. Admittedly, there is a unity that binds these diverse books together, but accurate interpretation of the peculiar message of each book requires that we should not lose sight of their differences (McDowell 1979:17).

2. The cultural background of the Bible is far removed from modern experience. The customs, laws, norms, social structures, and religious

practices of the Old and New Testaments must be carefully studied and understood, lest we simplistically apply them to life in the twenty-first century. According to Tate (1997:29), the best way to counteract the tendency of the interpreter to impose his or her contemporary view of the world on the world of the text is to undertake an in-depth study of the world from which the text emerged. Doveton illustrates this by commenting that for many of us, the sacrifice of animals and birds is distasteful, and that a prohibition on eating crayfish, langoustines, and prawns because they have neither fins nor scales sounds eccentric to modern ears. Similarly, any threat of being evicted from one's dwelling for a week because fungus has appeared on the walls would not be taken seriously today (Doveton 1986:4).

3. Literal biblical teaching is interwoven with symbolic language; therefore, the use of literary devices—such as Jesus' use of parables and the poetry of the Old Testament—must be identified and interpreted accordingly (Tate 1997:106–110, 127–128).

4. While the Bible is the principal source book of Christianity, it was written for adults and not for children. In order not to alienate and confuse children, biblical content must be taught in a way that children can understand (Goldman 1965:71).

#### **4.2. The nature of the children**

While the central message of the Bible about God's salvation in Christ might be easy to understand, there are other aspects of the biblical message that are so challenging, that a life-time of study cannot exhaust their spiritual and intellectual riches. Teaching the Bible to adults can therefore be difficult, but trying to make children understand it is far more difficult, given their intellectual immaturity, linguistic limitations, and restricted experience (Goldman 1965:38). The task is made more

difficult if we adopt a naïve teaching approach that takes little or no account of the limiting factors inherent within children, particularly the crucial one of adapting our presentation to their stage of religious development.

Any teacher of children must be aware of the development level of the children being taught (Roux, in Summers and Waddington 1996:127). The intellectual capacity of a fifteen-year old learner differs from that of a learner of six or ten years of age, so the type and level of learning to which the fifteen-year old is subjected should be more differentiated and advanced than that to which younger children are exposed (Ausubel, Novak and Hanesian 1978:30). Piaget's studies suggest that children of eleven or twelve years old begin to shift away from concrete, specific, 'black or white' reasoning, and begin to adopt the hypothetico-reasoning skills characteristic of adult problem-solving. His research revealed that it is between the ages of about eleven to fifteen that young people generally develop and perfect their ability to understand and use symbols (Hamachek 1979:159–160). However, research conducted in the U.S.A. indicated that many North American teenagers continue to function on a concrete operational level (Mwamwenda, in Summers and Waddington 1996:102). Fowler's research findings postulate that a child in what he terms the 'mythic-literal' stage (six to twelve years old), remains rooted in the concrete world of sensory experience and tends to avoid abstract concepts (Roux, in Summers and Waddington 1996:115). In the absence of evidence to the contrary, it is conceivable that this also applies to South African pre-adolescents and adolescents (Mwamwenda in Summers and Waddington 1996:102). Teachers of children should therefore be cautious in their use of symbolic, abstract expressions when teaching children who are still largely in a concrete 'here-and-now' developmental stage (Hamachek 1979:161).

The developmental level is significant for many aspects of the pedagogical process. Some of these aspects relate to the choice of teaching material, the method of presentation, the nature of visual and other teaching aids, and the degree of interaction demanded of the children (Conradie 1976:48). The current renewed emphasis on child theology (as distinct from humanistic child-centred theology) is a salutary reminder that while the message of the Bible remains constant, it needs to be re-interpreted in terms understandable to each new generation. One could add to this that the use of Bible translations written in the idiom of bygone eras hinders such re-interpretation, particularly when such outdated translations are used to teach children.

While the South African students referred to above should be commended for their efforts to remain true to the complexity of the biblical text, their pedagogical approach is likely to be ineffective in conveying the message of the text in terms that modern children can understand. The students, no doubt, believed that their approach was legitimate, but they made the mistake of not realising that the Bible is an adult book written within a cultural mindset vastly different from that of twenty-first century children living in Southern Africa. This criticism of the students' excessively Bible-centred pedagogy should not be interpreted as an argument for its replacement by an experience-orientated, humanistic, anthropocentric pedagogy that regards human life as the centre and aim of its philosophy (Cilliers 1975:88; Gunter 1977:54–55). Instead, the approach advocated is one that fully recognises the Bible's historic status as the inspired Word of God, but also recognises that its message cannot be communicated to children as if they are adults. In the context of this paper, the approach advocated may be termed 'child-focused' and 'Bible-orientated'.

The error the South African students made is one that has constantly occurred in the past. According to the recollections of an anonymous

teacher that appeared in *Christian Education*, a publication of the Christian Education Movement, Bible lessons in South African schools during the 1930s tended to be tedious. The anonymous writer had herself been a pupil during that decade. As many teachers explained nothing about the meaning of the story, most of the class allowed their minds to wander during the lesson. The children found the Old Testament books particularly irrelevant, as no attempt was made to match them to the pupils' developmental stage, or, to relate them to their own experience of life (*Christian Education Movement*, 1945:n.p.). At least one young person in New Testament times also reacted to inappropriate teaching by letting his mind wander. Florence observes that Acts 20:7–12 contains the first recorded incident of someone who was literally bored to death by Bible teaching (2007).

On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. 'Don't be alarmed', he said. 'He's alive!' Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted (NIV).

Florence describes this passage as a devastating indictment of the harmful effects of inappropriate Bible exposition. She says it exposes the potential of such exposition to marginalise and anaesthetise young people to the power of biblical preaching (Florence 2007).

J. M. MacDougall Ferguson wrote of the unintended confusion that can be caused in the minds of children, particularly young children, when Bible stories are narrated without explanation. Ferguson told of a teacher who was recounting the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4. 'Jesus therefore being wearied with his journey, sat thus on the well: and it was about the sixth hour' (Jn 4:6 KJV). It later transpired that at least one of the pupils had interpreted 'well' to mean 'whale'. Another child, after hearing the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, believed that the onlookers had spread their clothes on the road because they had no clothes-lines on which to hang them. Even senior primary school children were liable to be confused by biblical statements such as the one that the Queen of Sheba came to visit King Solomon 'with a great train', for this had occurred before the invention of railways (*Christian Education Movement*, 1946:2).

The rote learning of Bible passages without understanding their meaning has sometimes led to amusing results. One boy's attempt at rendering the Lord's Prayer began with 'Harold by Thy name' (Wilson 1946:81). Another pupil believed for years that the Lord's Prayer began like this, 'Our Father *witchard* in Heaven'. His understanding was that 'witchard' stood for a cross between a witch and a wizard (Wilson 1946:81).

While these examples of misinterpretations and misunderstandings culled from the past might amuse us, they should also alert us to the cardinal importance of ensuring that children understand and can relate to the biblical concepts we offer to them. Merely offering to them factual information—and even finding through testing that they can remember what they have been taught—is no guarantee that they have attained insight and an ability to apply the knowledge in functional situations. Even if a child learns a Bible story by heart, but fails to



connect meaningfully with the subject matter, then, education has not taken place (Duminy 1977:15–16). As Vrey expresses it, the child may learn much about the Bible, but ‘he has to give meaning to it in his personal capacity’ (1979:119–120). This is not to imply that knowledge of the Bible is unimportant, but De Wet reminds us that Bloom’s taxonomy places knowledge as the lowest of its six educational objectives (1989:23). The five that follow knowledge are comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Zais 1976:309).

## **5. A Proposed Solution**

### **5.1. Teach only material essential to the lesson aim and appropriate to the children’s developmental stage**

In view of the need to adapt teaching to the developmental level of learners, teachers of the Bible should divest themselves of the notion that they need to teach all the content within a passage of scripture to children. A recognised didactic principle is that a lesson, no less than an entire curriculum, should include only essential learning material (Van der Stoep n.d.:111–112). A teacher should, therefore, select only the material that is directly appropriate to his or her teaching purpose within a specific lesson, rather than overwhelming children with an over-abundance of irrelevant details. An examination of the biblical account of the interactions between David and Saul clearly revealed that some of the concepts recorded were too advanced for the pre-adolescent age group. This is not unexpected, as the Bible was not written for children (Schachter 1985:308). Sound pedagogical practice dictates that an explanation of such concepts should be postponed until the learners are mature enough to profit from a discussion of them. Schachter counsels us to free ourselves of the notion that we must be bound to the

sequence and structure of a biblical narrative. Young children have no need to hear biblical stories in sequence and as complete units. This can be done as they mature, details can be filled in, and the stories fleshed out in later years. The crucial issue is that children must find relevance and personal meaning in the way Bible stories are taught to them (Schachter 1985:309). Goldman distinguishes between 'teaching the Bible' and 'teaching from the Bible'. He maintains that endeavouring to transmit the sheer volume of biblical material ('teaching the Bible') is often counterproductive for teachers and children. Instead, he advocates an approach that eschews quantity in favour of selecting material according to the children's needs, capacities, and experiences (Goldman 1965:71). Berryman's research suggests that if a biblical story is presented in an abbreviated form, the possibility of children misunderstanding the meaning is reduced (in Burton *et al* 2006:7).

## **5.2. Elementary exegesis as an essential technique in teaching the Bible to children**

Achieving a sound understanding of what the Bible teaches and applying that understanding to one's own life and the lives of others through ministry can be regarded as the ultimate aim of theological study. However, understanding what the Bible teaches is a complicated task that is rendered considerably more difficult when we attempt to help young children understand it.

### ***5.2.1. An analysis of key words in order to determine the original meaning of a text***

Dale identifies language as a major obstacle a child encounters in understanding the Bible. He illustrates this by quoting the comment of a learner: 'The Bible's full of hard words'. In his experience, words such as 'Sabbath', 'synagogue', 'Pharisees' and 'Sadducees', among others,

hinder understanding and comprehension. If the teacher habitually refers, without explanation, to remote and seemingly irrelevant biblical concepts, then the child is likely to respond, 'It's just a strange story that has nothing to do with me'. If, in addition, the teacher utilises an outdated Bible translation that uses antiquated language, then this is likely to strengthen the child's misconception about the relevance of the scriptures. If the Bible is to become a vital and inescapable source of wisdom and guidance for their lives, then children must hear it discussed in language they understand (Dale, in Walton 1977:32–33). In order to achieve this, it is imperative that the teacher of the Bible should research the meanings of key terms in the passage in the course of his or her preparation. If the teacher does not understand them, then it is unlikely that he/she will be able to master the overall meaning of the text in sufficient depth. Once the teacher understands the 'hard terms', s/he will be in a position to explain them to children. Dale suggests that to avoid interrupting the flow and sweep of the story by continually stopping to define these terms, the teacher could substitute the terms mentioned in the previous paragraph with words and phrases such as 'holy day of the Jews', 'meeting house', 'religious leaders' and 'rich political leaders'. Although it must be conceded that an accurate explanation of terms such as these cannot be deferred indefinitely if a child's religious education is to be complete, yet, in the interests of achieving the lesson aim, it is probably inadvisable to devote too much time to their exposition, unless a specific issue concerning one or more of them arises in the course of the lesson (Dale, in Walton 1977:32–33).

Elementary exegesis, therefore, requires the Bible teacher to consider which words in the verse or passage can be classified as 'hard words'. Mark 14:3 (NIV) provides a convenient illustration of such words:

'While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.'

During the teacher's preparation, he/she would research issues such as the following (Doveton 1986:15–16):

1. Where and what is Bethany?
2. What do we know about Simon the Leper? If he was a leper, why was Jesus in his house?
3. What does 'reclining' at table mean?
4. Who was the woman?
5. What is an alabaster jar?
6. What is pure nard? What was it used for?
7. Why did the woman break the jar?
8. Why was the perfume poured on Jesus' head?

In researching questions such as the above, the teacher would be anticipating questions the children themselves might ask.

In order successfully to conduct sound research, the teacher should ideally have access to reference books, such as up-to-date expository commentaries, Bible dictionaries, Bible reference books, and at least one modern scholarly Bible translation. In determining the meaning of a key term within a passage, care should be taken to exegete it within its scriptural, historical, and cultural contexts, rather than in isolation. While the circumstances applicable to many Sunday school teachers and youth group leaders ministering in Southern Africa might make it difficult for them to meet this requirement, it is nevertheless essential for them to access whatever sound biblical resources they can in the interests of satisfactory lesson preparation.

### *5.2.2. The appropriate application of the original meaning to modern circumstances and to the children's life-world and developmental stage*

The object of analysing the meanings of key terms in context is not an end in itself—the primary objective is to determine the original meaning of the passage or story being analysed. The original meaning of the text to the original readers must be differentiated from the application of the original message to us today—this is the secondary objective. While the original meaning remains constant, its application does not, because it will be influenced by changes in the post-biblical and post-modern world. If expositors—including Sunday school teachers, youth group leaders and home cell facilitators—succeed in establishing through a basic, but sound exegetical analysis what the original meaning of the text they are expounding is, then there is a high possibility that their application of that meaning to the circumstances and development level of modern children will be valid and relevant. Conversely, if their interpretation of the original meaning is based on speculation and/or a questionable exegetical technique, then, it is likely that their application to the modern situation will not be true to the essence of the biblical truth contained within the passage (Doveton 1986:31).

## **Conclusion**

This paper utilised the broad principles of stage development theory to evaluate a Bible story compiled from the presentations by several South African students to pre-adolescents. Several deficiencies in the presentation were identified. It was concluded that much could be done to improve the effectiveness of such presentations. It was suggested that the teaching of the Bible to children must take as its point of departure

the child's cognitive development stage and the child's experience of reality. In effect, the child must be placed in the centre of attention, as Jesus demonstrated in Matthew 18. Secondly, it was proposed that Bible teachers should teach only the material that is essential to the aim of their lesson. Thirdly, it was recommended that untrained educators should utilise a simple exegetical technique, based on whatever sound biblical resources they can access, to analyse the key words in a passage, and so, expose the original meaning of the text. The final requirement is that they should apply the original meaning in a manner that is relevant and understandable to the children they are teaching. The pedagogical approach advocated was termed 'child-focused' and 'Bible-orientated' in order to distance it from purely humanistic and anthropocentric pedagogies.

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