

GESTALT SIMPLIFICATION: BIBLE STORY ANIMATION 'THE PRODIGAL SON'

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ABSTRACT

Bible story animation 'The Prodigal Son' only presents the storyline without touching the theological meaning. Church youth experience boredom in understanding parable story of 'Prodigal Son'. The problem urgency is the lack of teaching media that convey repentance, forgiveness, and gratitude meaning in an interesting and contextual way. This study used descriptive qualitative method through literature, discussions, and FGD. The creation process involved application of Edgar Rubin's visual simplification theory and Max Wertheimer's, Wolfgang Köhler, Kurt Koffka Gestalt theory; combined with philosophy, hermeneutics, semiotics; to create new interesting and meaningful animation. The animation successfully visualizes the theological essence of repentance, forgiveness, and gratitude through simplified forms and meaningful gestalt compositions, offering a fresh visual narrative that resonates and supports deeper spiritual reflection for adolescent.

Keywords: Bible animation; gestalt visual style; storyline simplification.

ABSTRAK

Animasi cerita Alkitab 'Anak yang Hilang' seringkali hanya menyajikan alur cerita tanpa menyentuh kedalaman makna teologisnya. Remaja gereja mengalami kejenuhan memahami cerita perumpamaan 'Anak yang Hilang'. Urgensi permasalahan karena minimnya media pengajaran yang menyampaikan makna pertobatan, pengampunan, dan rasa syukur secara menarik dan kontekstual. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif melalui studi pustaka, diskusi, dan FGD. Proses kreasi melibatkan penerapan teori penyederhanaan visual Edgar Rubin dan teori Gestalt Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, Kurt Koffka; dipadukan filsafat, hermeneutika, semiotika; untuk menciptakan sebuah animasi baru yang menarik, namun tetap bermakna. Karya animasi ini berhasil memvisualisasikan hakikat teologis pertobatan, pengampunan, dan rasa syukur melalui bentuk-bentuk yang disederhanakan dan komposisi gestalt yang bermakna, menawarkan narasi visual segar yang beresonansi dan mendukung refleksi spiritual mendalam bagi remaja.

Kata kunci: Animasi Alkitab; gaya visual gestalt; penyederhanaan alur cerita.

1. Introduction

The teachings of Jesus Christ were often conveyed in the form of parables, this was done so that the mission of the crucifixion could still be carried out. If Jesus' teachings were clear, the Israelites would have realized it and accepted him as the Messiah, so that the crucifixion could not have happened. One of the famous parables is the story of the 'Prodigal Son' found in the Book of Luke. Theological interpretation of this story reveals that the use of metaphors and allegories is a strategy to convey teachings implicitly, without stating theological truth directly, as theorized in the study of biblical interpretation. According to the theory of historical-grammatical interpretation, each narrative element in the parable must be analysed based on the cultural and social context of the time (Stein, 1994). In this context, the parable is used to illustrate the concept of repentance and grace that were often missed by the scribes and Pharisees at that time. The sustainability of religious propagation media means the life of teachings for a sustainable period (Kusumawati, 2024), along with this statement, authors' efforts are also to provide the sustainability of religious education media in a Christian context.

In addition, the choice of the parable of the 'Prodigal Son' is interesting because it is only found in the Gospel of Luke. This is in accordance with Luke's concern as a doctor who has empathy for people with low social status, as explained in the socio-cultural study of the Gospel of Luke (Green, 1997). Etymologically, the translation of the Lembaga Alkitab Indonesia (LAI) which changed the original title 'Prodigal Son' to '*Anak yang Hilang*' or 'the Lost Child', which has its own meaning. This transformation aims to eliminate negative stereotypes about the use of money and focus more on the meaning of repentance and forgiveness which are the core of this parable (Keller, 2008). Through discussions with several pastors, it was understood that the use of the term 'Prodigal Son' emphasizes the spiritual element more than just consumer behaviour, which is often misinterpreted in popular interpretations. In terms of visualization, the parable of the 'Prodigal Son' has often been visualized in various animated media, but generally only recites the storyline

without raising deeper theological aspects. This is because many animations are aimed at children, where the visual approach is simpler and focuses on the storyline rather than deep theological meaning. Religious practices have a positive impact on the mental well-being of their listeners (Kristianto, 2024), authors believes that by using animation, changes in the paradigm and mindset of church youth for the implementation of a better life.

This visual approach can be analysed using the theory of visual semiotics, where each visual element (such as colour, movement, and symbol) functions as a sign that conveys a certain message (Chandler, 2007). For example, bright colours and dynamic movements are often used to attract children's attention, but are less able to convey the complexity of emotions and meanings contained in this parable.

In this context, Gestalt theory is also relevant, especially the concept of closure and continuity which emphasizes that the arrangement of visual elements must create a complete impression and make it easier for the audience to understand a more complex narrative (Wertheimer, 1938). The use of structured visual techniques such as radial transitions and layout arrangements based on the principle of visual balance can help facilitate the understanding of a more mature adolescent audience, so that this story can be conveyed with a deeper theological meaning.

In addition, the application of the theory of visual simplification (McCloud, 1994) in this animation is also important. Visual simplification emphasizes that simplifying visual elements does not mean losing the depth of the message, but rather allows for a clearer focus on the key elements of the story. In the animation planned by the writing team, the use of minimalist lines and colours will be combined with strong visual symbols to emphasize the differences in the characters of the youngest son, the father, and the eldest son, who each represent aspects of repentance, forgiveness, and gratitude.

From the animation side, the use of basic animation principles such as Squash also Stretch and Anticipation (Thomas & Johnston, 1981) are applied to create dynamic and lively movements. This will help provide a clear contrast between the

scenes of the youngest son's free life (with bouncing and cheerful movements) and repentance scenes which are full of stiffer and more reflective movements. This approach allows audience to capture the emotional changes of the characters through body language and visual expressions without relying too much on verbal narration.

In the context of transitions between scenes, Williams' (2001) Staging and Timing principles are used to ensure that each visual change not only technically connects two scenes, but also has a narrative function to guide the audience through the emotional journey of the main character. For example, a linear transition will be used at the beginning of the story to show the younger son's constant movement away from home, while a radial transition will be applied during the repentance scene to reflect a moment of reflection and reunion with the Father. The visual and animation approach planned for the parable of 'The Prodigal Son' focuses not only on conveying the storyline, but also on revealing deeper theological and philosophical meanings. By combining theories of biblical interpretation, visual semiotics, Gestalt principles, and animation theory, this animation is expected to provide a richer and more relevant experience for older audiences, especially teenagers who have grown tired of shallow story repetitions. This meaning-oriented visualization is expected to bridge the gap between the aesthetic beauty and spiritual depth contained in the parable of 'The Prodigal Son.'

2. Literature Review

The team of authors used various theories in the field of visual and theology to develop the basis for creating animations that aim to convey the deep meaning of the parable of the 'Prodigal Son'. One of the main theories used is the theory of visual simplification developed by Edgar Rubin. This theory emphasizes the importance of simplifying visual elements without eliminating the essential meaning contained therein. Rubin's concept of simplification is often illustrated through the Rubin vase, which presents the illusion of visual ambiguity between two facing faces and the shape of the vase in between. This ambiguity not only provides the option for the

audience to choose a visual focus, but also invites them to reflect on the meanings hidden behind the choice (Rubin, 1921). In the context of the animation created, this theory is applied to provide visual elements that trigger further thinking and interpretation from the teenage audience, so that they can capture a more complex of moral messages.

In addition to Rubin's simplification theory, the team of authors also adopted the Gestalt theory of Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Koffka. This theory emphasizes the natural human tendency to organize and understand visual information based on five main principles: similarity, proximity, continuity, closure, and figure-ground (Wertheimer, 1938). These principles explain how humans complete partial images, follow certain visual patterns, and arrange separate elements into a meaningful whole. Therefore, the author team applies the Gestalt approach to create interactive visual compositions, where the audience is required to complete and find meaning from unfinished visuals, follow the inserted imaginary lines, and recognize hidden patterns in each animated scene. With this approach, each image presented not only functions as an illustration of the story, but also invites the audience to actively participate in the meaning-making process.

As a philosophical basis, the writing team uses the concept of the existence of God from Thomas Aquinas and the theory of God as an artist from Robert Barron. Thomas Aquinas argued that the existence of God is the basis of every existence and goodness in the world (Aquinas, 1981). This idea is applied in the visual creation through the concept of paradox between repentance, forgiveness, and gratitude in the parable story, where every action of the character depicts the divine presence that guides them. Meanwhile, Barron's theory views God as an artist who creates the world with a touch of high aesthetics and creativity (Barron, 2015). This idea becomes a transcendent reference in depicting the figure of God in the character of the father in the story, where the use of colour, posture, and expression are designed in such a way as to reflect the greatness and beauty of divine love. The hermeneutic approach is also at the heart of the writing team's visual interpretation process.

Referring to Friedrich Schleiermacher's romantic hermeneutics and Richard E. Palmer's interpretive hermeneutics, the writing team took an interpretive approach that combined historical and cultural values with the existing visual context (Palmer, 1969; Schleiermacher, 1998). Schleiermacher's romantic hermeneutics focuses on efforts to understand the original intent of a text by considering the cultural and psychological context of the author and reader. This theory is applied in the development of visual sketches that attempt to express the depth of meaning of each character's actions and dialogues (Darmawan, 2023).

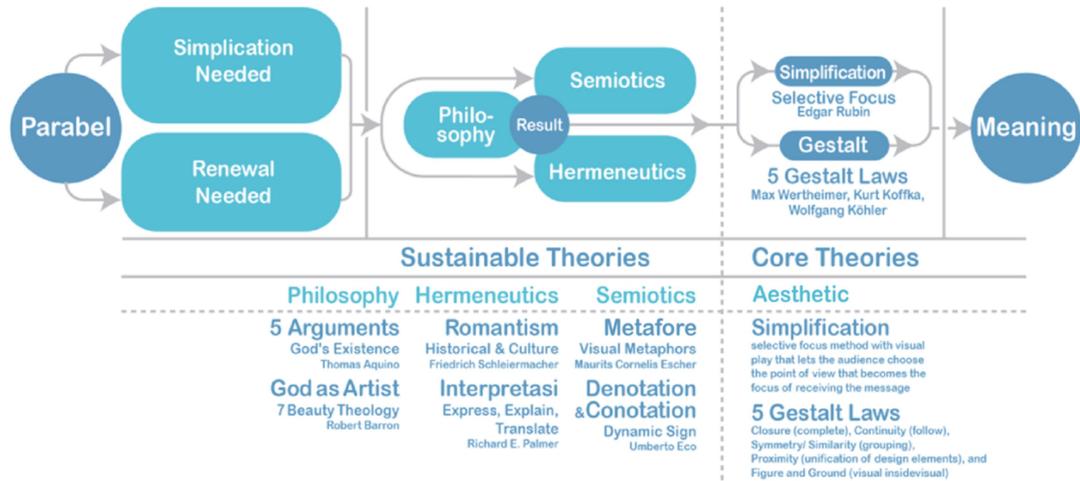


Figure 1. Creation theory
 (Design: Darmawan, 2024)

Meanwhile, Palmer's hermeneutic theory emphasizes the interpretation process as an act of expressing, explaining, and translating the meaning of the text into a visual form that can be understood by the audience. On this basis, the writing team developed an initial sketch which was then refined into a concrete visual that reflects both theological and artistic messages. In the final stage of creation, the writing team used a visual semiotic approach to blend the results of the interpretation into a concrete form that is communicative and aesthetic. The two main theories used are Maurits Cornelis Escher's theory of visual metaphor and Umberto Eco's theory of semiotic meaning. Escher is known for his work exploring visual ambiguity and

dynamic transformation of form, where an image can change into another form depending on the audience's point of view (Schattschneider, 1990).

The writing team applied this approach to provide flexible and transitional visual elements, where one image can represent several different meanings depending on the context of the scene. For example, the image of a winding road that at the beginning depicts a difficult life, in another scene can change meaning to become a path to redemption. Meanwhile, Umberto Eco's theory of semiotics elaborates visual meaning based on two categories: denotative meaning (the literal meaning of a sign) and connotative meaning (additional meaning that is emotional and contextual) (Eco, 1979). Based on this theory, the writing team inserted visual elements that have layered meanings, such as the use of the colour red to symbolize anger and conflict in the eldest son, and the color change to blue at the end of the story to express acceptance and gratitude. Each visual element not only serves as a narrative illustration, but also becomes a symbol of the process of repentance, forgiveness, and acceptance experienced by the characters. By integrating these visual and theological theories, the writing team created an animation that is not only aesthetically appealing, but also has a depth of meaning that is able to convey the message of the parable deeply to the teenage audience.

3. Creation Methodology

The process of creating this animation used a descriptive qualitative approach that combined various data collection techniques, such as purposive sampling. This method was chosen because it allowed the writing team to target a sample group that matched the expected audience profile, namely church youth aged 12 to 17 years. Data were collected through in-depth literature studies, discussions with theology and animation experts, and the implementation of Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with groups that had similar audience characteristics. This purposive sampling approach is based on the principle of target representation based on specific criteria, so that the results of the study can provide a deeper understanding of the needs and

preferences of church youth for visual content (Merriam, 2009). One key insight from the FGD revealed, “*Visuals that are too literal make us feel like we're just being told again—what we need is something that lets us feel the meaning, not just watch it,*” emphasizing the importance of symbolic and emotionally resonant storytelling for deeper engagement.

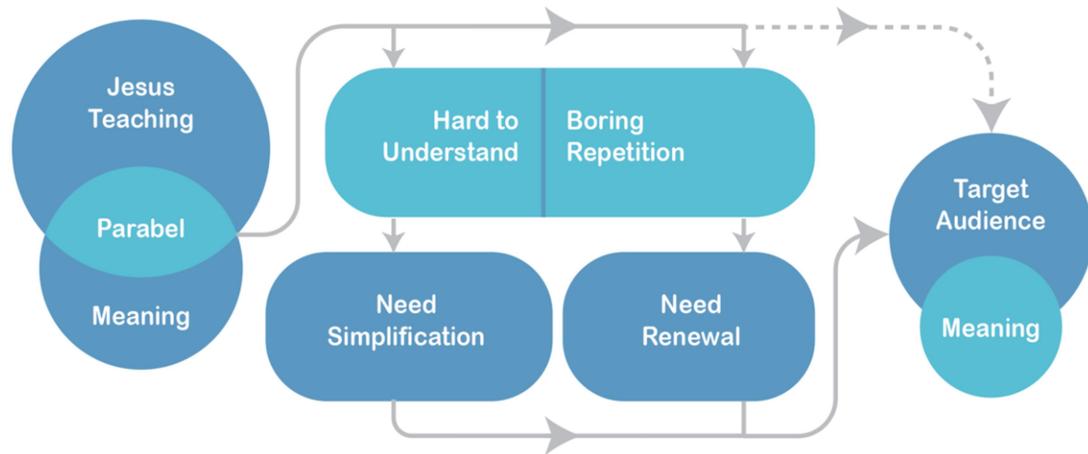


Figure 2. Creation method
(Design: Darmawan, 2024)

Through the analysis of the problematic dichotomy resulting from this process, it was found that there are two main challenges in teaching parables to church youth. First, the meaning contained in the parables is often too abstract and difficult for the youth audience to understand. Second, the church's teaching method that uses a repetitive approach tends to cause boredom, which ultimately reduces the interest of teenagers to engage in religious activities. To overcome these two challenges, the writing team decided to simplify the narrative without eliminating the depth of meaning, and adopt a fresher and more innovative visual style. This approach is in line with the visual simplification theory proposed by McCloud (1994), where simplification aims to emphasize important elements in the narrative without reducing the richness of the message.

The results of observations and literature studies indicate a gap between the teaching media available in the church and the needs of teenagers for more dynamic

visual content. Teenagers tend to ignore church animations that are too simple and only tell the story of the parable without delving into more complex theological meanings. On the other hand, church sermons are often considered too heavy and abstract, causing boredom and a lack of interest in engaging in religious discussions. This phenomenon can be analysed using visual communication theory, where content that is too repetitive and monotonous is unable to attract the attention of teenage audiences who have high expectations for visual variation (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Based on these findings, the author team determined teenagers aged 12 to 17 years as the main audience for this creation project. This audience determination is based on Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory, which states that teenagers in this age range are in the formal operational phase. At this stage of development, teenagers begin to develop abstract, logical, and hypothetical thinking skills (Piaget, 1972). They begin to process more complex ideas and enjoy new abstract cognitive challenges, including stories with deeper theological content. Therefore, animated content aimed at teenagers in this phase must be able to combine meaningful narrative elements with visuals that stimulate imagination and reflection to audiences.



Figure 3. Target audience teaching media gap
(Design: Darmawan, 2024)

Taking into account the cognitive characteristics of teenagers, the writing team created an animation that not only conveys a parable story in a linear manner, but also explores the implicit meanings contained in the story of 'The Prodigal Son'. This approach is in line with the principles of Gestalt theory, where visual elements must be organized in such a way as to create a broader and deeper understanding for the audience (Wertheimer, 1938). The use of visual techniques such as grouping

elements, colour contrast, and smooth transitions serve to guide the audience's attention to key aspects of the story, so that they can understand the complexity of emotions and moral messages contained in the story.

To bridge the gap between church teaching media and the cognitive needs of teenagers, the writing team designed a new visual style that focuses on conveying emotions and interactions between characters through strong visual symbols. This approach is in line with the visual semiotic theory proposed by Barthes (1977), where each visual symbol has a meaning that can be understood connotatively by the audience. For example, the use of certain colours to represent mood or the use of movement to emphasize the psychological changes of the character. This is also applied in character design, where changes in body posture and facial expressions are used to depict the emotional journey of the youngest child who is lost until he finally returns to his father. In the implementation of this visual style, the theory of visual simplification (McCloud, 1994) is applied to filter out unnecessary visual elements, so that the audience can focus more on the main message of each scene. Ultimately, this approach aims to create a more engaging and meaningful visual experience for teenagers, so that they can feel a strong emotional sensation when watching animation, while understanding the theological values contained in the parable story.

4. Result and Discussion

The initial step taken by the writing team in creating this animation was a correlation study between the target audience and the in-depth story of the parable of the 'Prodigal Son'. This process was carried out through data collection that included a study of biblical literature, discussions with experts (pastors, animators, child psychologists, and media experts), and the implementation of focus group discussions. The results of this discussion were then analyzed to determine the right creative approach for the church's teenage audience.

From discussions with pastors, the writing team gained the view that the story of the 'Prodigal Son' not only conveys a message about the Father's infinite love, but also contains a complex paradox of salvation. This shows that while the story is easy

for children to digest, its understanding becomes deeper when discussed from a more mature theological perspective. In addition, the pastors also emphasized that church teachings aimed at teenagers do not have to follow formal sermons, but need to be presented in a way that is more attractive and relevant to their world.

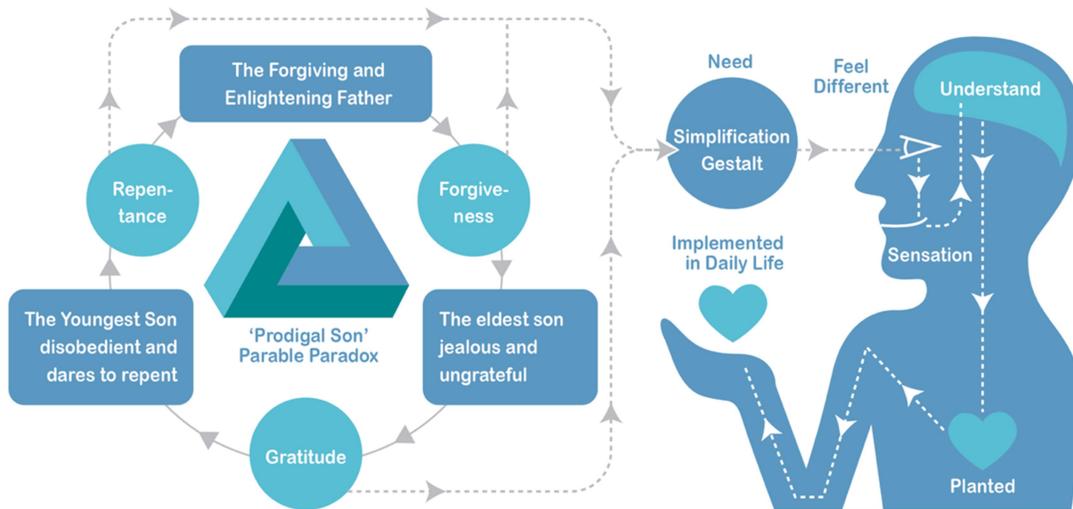


Figure 4. Journey of creation
(Design: Darmawan, 2024)

On the other hand, input from animators highlighted the importance of visual novelty in conveying a message. Even though an animated work carries a classic theme, fresh visual elements can create a new experience for the audience. To achieve this, a narrative descriptive visual approach is highly recommended, where the use of movement, characterization, and scene continuity are designed in such a way as to strengthen the storyline. Animators also emphasized the importance of considering the hierarchy of movement and technical continuity in animation to facilitate audience comprehension without reducing its visual appeal.

Input from psychologists and media experts highlighted the unique characteristics of the teenage audience, who are highly curious and inclined to explore new ideas. Teenagers tend to be more receptive to innovation and more critical in evaluating the content presented. Therefore, a presentation that is too familiar can reduce the appeal and effectiveness of the message. In this context, a

bold, different, and critical-thinking visual approach is considered important to maintain audience engagement. The experts also reminded that there is no need to compete in presenting spectacular visuals, because the essence of the Gospel itself is strong enough to be the centre of attention. Based on the results of this discussion, the writing team formulated three main hypotheses that include philosophical, hermeneutic, and semiotic perspectives.

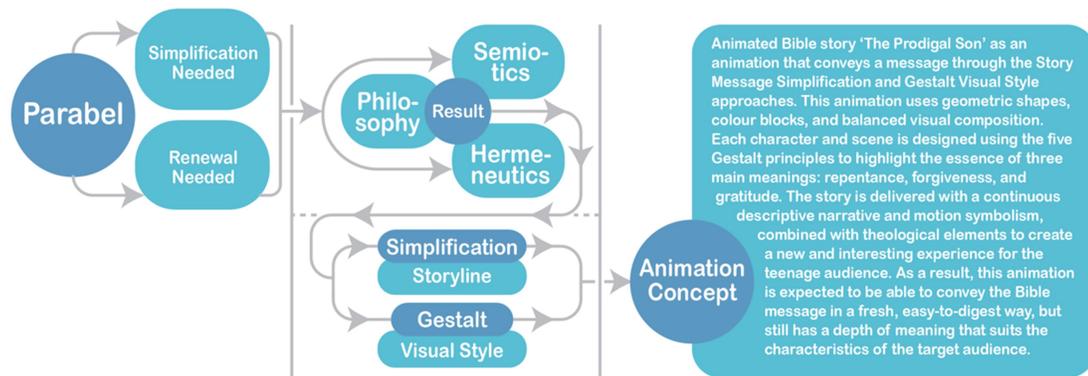


Figure 5. Concept of creation
(Design: Darmawan, 2024)

In philosophical scope, the process of repentance involves the active role of humans in understanding the paradox between obedience and freedom, and accepting the abundance of God's love as an authentic act of acceptance. In a visual context, this is translated through characterization and movement that reflects the inner dynamics of the youngest son and father. In Hermeneutic scope, the delivery of spiritual messages can be strengthened by the use of prominent semiotic elements, such as consistent colours and shapes, and symbolic gestures that describe the inner journey of each character. This means that every movement and expression of the character must have a symbolic meaning that describes the process of repentance, acceptance, and gratitude. In semiotic scope; interpretation of the story of the 'Prodigal Son' in animation can clarify the meaning of repentance and God's love through symbolic interpretation and deep visual interaction between characters. This approach will emphasize the use of visual signs and symbols that can be interpreted in various ways, according to the context of the scene.

From these three hypotheses, the writing team developed two main conceptual approaches. In Story message simplification scope, the writing team emphasized the importance of using minimalist and symbolic visual narratives to simplify the three main message essences: repentance, forgiveness, and gratitude. This simplification is applied to the visual design that uses motion symbols, smooth transitions, and the use of colour blocks to highlight the emotional changes of each character. Thus, the teenage audience can grasp the deep spiritual message without having to rely on complex verbal explanations. In Gestalt visual style scope, the use of Gestalt principles in the arrangement of visual compositions is the main approach to maintaining visual harmony. The five main principles of Gestalt — the tendency to complete, follow, group, unite, and find — are applied to the use of colour, shape, pattern, and movement in each scene. These principles serve to direct the audience's attention to the main message, as well as create a cohesive and meaningful visual experience watching animation.

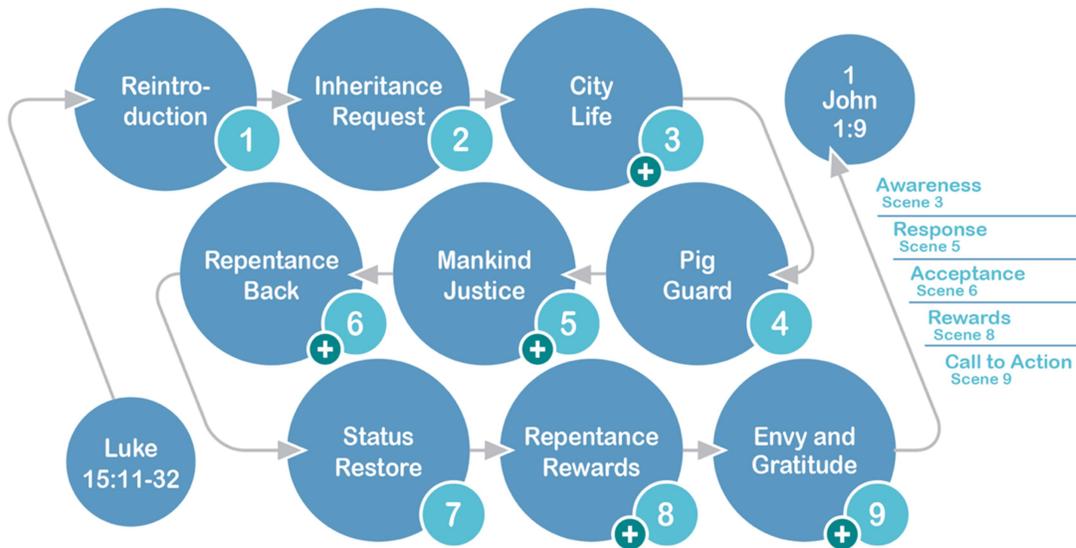


Figure 6. Story segmentation
(Design: Darmawan, 2024)

Thus, the writing team formulated the concept of creating the animated Bible story ‘The Prodigal Son’ as an animation that conveys a message through the Story Message Simplification and Gestalt Visual Style approaches. This animation uses

geometric shapes, colour blocks, and balanced visual composition. Each character and scene is designed using the five Gestalt principles to highlight the essence of three main meanings: repentance, forgiveness, and gratitude. The story is delivered with a continuous descriptive narrative and motion symbolism, combined with theological elements to create a new and interesting experience for the teenage audience. As a result, this animation is expected to be able to convey the Bible message in a fresh, easy-to-digest way, but still has a depth of meaning that suits the characteristics of the target audience.

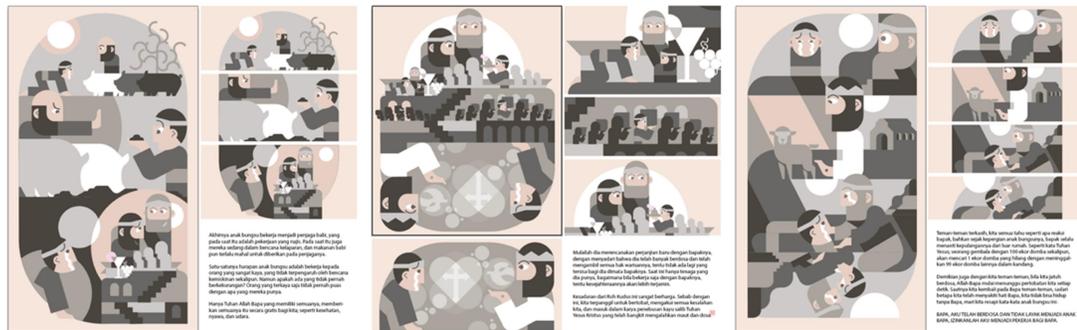


Figure 7. Storyboard
(Design: Darmawan, 2024)

The first stage in the production of this animation involves creating a storyboard divided into 9 narrative segments, in accordance with the story structure in Luke 15:11-32. The structure includes several important scenes, namely the re-introduction and invitation, the request for inheritance by the youngest son, the life of the youngest son in the city, the poverty of the youngest son and his job as a swineherd, the difference between human justice and the invitation to repentance from God the Holy Spirit, the repentance of the youngest son, the forgiveness and return of the status of a son from the father, the giving of gifts of repentance, and the envy of the eldest son followed by an invitation to be grateful. Each segment is designed to build a continuous storyline, which ultimately emphasizes the moral message of repentance and grace. In designing the storyboard, each scene is detailed with clear visual clues, both in terms of camera angle and transition sequence (timing). This approach is in line with the concept of Visual Storytelling which

emphasizes that every element in the story must function as a visual narrative medium to convey the message effectively (McCloud, 1994).

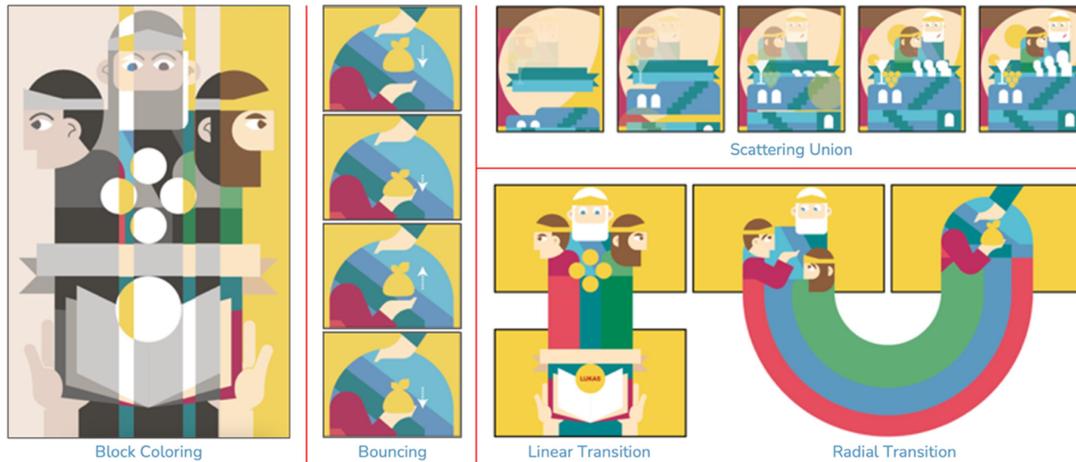


Figure 8. Animation production phase
(Design: Darmawan, 2024)

After the storyboard is complete, the next step is to enter the animation production phase which includes colouring and adding dynamic movements to each character and background elements. Bouncing motion is applied to give the impression of a lively and interactive character, in accordance with the Squash and Stretch principle in classical animation theory proposed by Thomas and Johnston (1981), which emphasizes the importance of elastic movement in creating the illusion of life in animation. In addition, the animation process also pays attention to the selection of transitions, both linear and radial, to ensure that each scene change remains smooth and supports the main narrative. The use of this transition not only functions as a connector between scenes, but also to create a coherent and aesthetic visual rhythm, in line with the Staging theory which emphasizes that each visual element must be directed to direct the audience's attention to key moments in the story (Williams, 2001). This emphasizes that making animation does not only involve static visual elements, but also the dynamic integration of various animation principles that aim to create a complete and meaningful cinematic experience.



Figure 9. Animation result bit.ly/VideoSeminar2James
(Design: Darmawan, 2024)

The entire process of creating the 'Prodigal Son' animation aims to bridge the gap between the Bible teachings that have been repeatedly delivered in church environments and the needs of teenage audiences for more relevant and in-depth learning media. Based on the results of theoretical studies and discussions with experts, it can be concluded that teenagers' understanding of this parable story is often hampered by an overly formal teaching approach and less dynamic visualizations. Therefore, the approach taken integrates various theories, such as Edgar Rubin's visual simplification theory, Max Wertheimer's Gestalt theory, Wolfgang Köhler's, and Kurt Koffka's, as well as philosophical, hermeneutic, and semiotic perspectives to construct a more meaningful visual narrative.

5. Conclusion

In the creative process, the use of Story Message Simplification and Gestalt Visual Style became the main strategy to present the essence of the message of repentance, forgiveness, and gratitude in a simple way. The simplification of the narrative was done through the use of geometric shapes and visual symbolism, while

Gestalt principles were applied to construct a harmonious and cohesive composition. This is intended so that every movement and visual transition can describe the spiritual meaning contained in the story without having to rely on excessive verbal explanations. With this approach, animation is expected to be able to present a more reflective and engaging experience for teenage audiences, who are in the formal-operational cognitive development phase according to Jean Piaget's theory.

The animation of the 'Prodigal Son' that was developed is not only a medium for conveying the storyline of the parable in a narrative manner, but also becomes a visual communication tool that prioritizes philosophical, hermeneutic, and semiotic understanding. This is expected to build a more meaningful and relevant interpretation for teenage church audience, as well as becoming a new contribution in conveying theological messages through innovative and contextual media.

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