

Bible Stories for American Children: Stifling the Power of Story

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The rich story and discourse of Hebrew Bible stories, their built-in gaps and ambiguities, their multivalent nature, and their examples of fallible people in the face of God's grace, make them excellent resources for religious education. It is troubling, therefore, to find that many Christian children's bible storybooks (or "children's bibles") available in the United States since the late nineteenth century retell these stories in ways that eliminate these very features, often reducing the stories to simplified morality tales with bible heroes serving as upstanding role models. In doing so, these children's bibles both reveal and reinforce the church's assumptions about the purpose of the religious education of children and the nature of the Bible and its role in religious instruction.

Over the past one hundred and twenty five years, children's bible storybooks have been among the most popular and influential types of Christian publications in the United States. They are some of the most widely purchased Christian education resources for children and often serve as a child's first impression of influential bible stories. This paper is based on a survey of hundreds of children's bible storybooks available in the United States from the late 1800's to the present. It will examine retellings of the story of Noah from Genesis and the ending of the book of Jonah in particular in order to illustrate some of the ways that many children's bible storybooks stifle the religious education potential of the original stories.

CHANGING THE STORY OF NOAH

Filling Gaps

A growing number of bible scholars and translators have bemoaned the tendency of most English translations of the Bible to sacrifice the biblical authors' rhetorical techniques and literary art for the sake of clarity (see Hammond 1987, 647; Fox 1995, ix-xi; Price 1996, 19; Alter 1996, xi-xii). This tendency to clarify and explain is even more prominent when the Bible is retold for children.

One such literary technique commonly employed in the Hebrew Bible is the use of built-in gaps within the stories themselves. These gaps are the parts of the story that are not filled in by the storyteller, but left to the imagination of the audience. These gaps have the advantage of being filled in different ways by different readers (Iser 1974, 280-282). By engaging these gaps, readers can participate in the story and can actively find and create meanings relative to their own context and experience. Experts on educating children in literature note that children are very adept at using the gaps in stories (Evans 1987, 33-35). Although children may not have as much life experience with which to connect the stories they hear, each new story they encounter can serve as an experience in itself and one to which they can connect the next story (Short 1993, 284-286). A number of religious educators have favored a similar approach to Bible study,

allowing children to encounter and react to the Bible for themselves (e.g. Furnish 1990; Gobbel and Gobbel 1986; Mitchell 1991).

While many authors of children's bible stories claim that they are merely trying to simplify the Bible's stories, they often expand them by filling in many of these gaps.¹ The story of Noah in Genesis chapters 6 - 10 is a complex tale of God's judgment and mercy. It is one of the most familiar of all Bible stories, but children may be surprised to discover that many aspects of the story that are familiar to them are not actually included in the book of Genesis itself. Like many Hebrew Bible narratives, the story of Noah in Genesis has many gaps. Genesis does not elaborate on the nature of the wickedness of the people, but simply reports that it was so. Likewise the book of Genesis does not say how long or how hard Noah worked building the ark, or whether or not other people mocked Noah or even noticed that he was building an ark. It simply reports that Noah "did all that God commanded him" (Genesis 6:22).² Genesis does not say that Noah preached to the people, told them to change their wicked ways or warned them about the flood in any way. There is no description of the animals entering the ark in a line two abreast. Genesis does not describe the drowning of the other people or animals, whether or not they climbed to higher ground, or cried out to be let into the ark. It simply reports that God "blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground" (Genesis 7:23) and that only Noah and those in the ark were left. Many children who have heard or read children's versions of the story of Noah (e.g. Comstock 1900, 4-6; White 1903, 24-28; Sangster 1905, 42-49; Hurlbut 1932, 8-11; *Bedtime Bible Stories* 1955, 14-15; Vos 1958, 14-17; Hodges 1963, 17-21; Martin 1964, 22-25; Horn and Cavanaugh 1980, 22-30), however, may be familiar with some or all of these plot points and assume them to be key parts of the Bible story. While some of these story points may be inferred by the text, the authors deny children of the educational benefit of filling these gaps for themselves and may stifle other imaginative readings of the story for the rest of their lifetimes.

From Sacred Story to Morality Tale

Cleanth Brooks and other New Critics of the 1940's and 1950's decried the practice of reducing the rich, multivalent nature of narratives or poetry into one theme or one lesson to be learned, calling it "The Heresy of Paraphrase" (Brooks 1947, 157-176). The Bible was not immune to this treatment. The forces of modernity had driven many to analyze and interpret texts rather than allow texts to speak for themselves as literature (see Frei 1974; Gold 2004). By the late 1800s the influential American Sunday School Union changed its bible-based curriculum from a focus on the content of the Bible story and on spiritual issues and instead began to a focus on specific moral virtues in order to continue to serve churches of a wide range of beliefs. As James C. Wilhoit explains, "The Union's focus on behaviorally defined character traits, as opposed to a well integrated Christian lifestyle, grows out of their conviction and desire to find a content that transcended denominational differences" (1987, 401). By the beginning of the 20th century many

¹ While it is true that in Jewish tradition there are stories that flesh out stories such as Noah's, there is no evidence that the authors of these Christian children's bible storybooks are drawing on them as authoritative sources.

² Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA.

Bible study lessons and children's bible story collections ended each Bible story with a short moral lesson. As early as 1920, religious educator Margaret W. Eggleston saw this trend and suggested the following:

When the story ends, STOP. A moral tacked to the end of a story is an outrage. If the story has been well told, it has taught its own moral much more effectively than a teacher can possibly tell it. And no teacher knows what lesson that story has taught to the child. Even the child does not know, but he has been taught the lesson and now needs time to make it a part of himself. (1920, 29)

The many potential meanings inherent in the complex story of Noah have coaxed children's bible story authors to retell it in ways that emphasized the particular lessons that they thought were most important for children to learn. These authors may have thought they were simply making the story's message clear to the children, but the variety of lessons they emphasize illustrates the problems inherent in "the heresy of paraphrase." Some retellings, such as *Noah and the Ark: A Story About Being Thankful* (2005), emphasize lessons of thankfulness and hope. Others emphasize the lesson of doing right not wrong, focusing on how it was those who did wicked things who drowned (e.g. Foster 1886, 16) or that Noah was chosen because "he tried to do the things that are right" (*Bedtime Bible Stories* 1955, 14). But the social agenda of training children to become productive citizens led many more authors to use the story of Noah to teach the lessons of hard work and obedience to those in authority.

In her book, *The Bible for Children*, Ruth B. Bottigheimer describes a two-tiered tradition of children's bibles from 1750 to 1850 in which children's bibles written for the poor included hard work as part of their religious agenda while those written for the affluent did not (1996, 94-100). Bottigheimer notes that in the years that followed 1850 there emerged "single-class" bible story collections that promoted work and industry as virtues for all readers (1996, 91-102). Noah's story is one that has long been retold in ways that subtly and not so subtly emphasize how long or how hard Noah worked to complete the ark (e.g. Comstock 1900, 4; Sangster 1905, 44; *Bedtime Bible Stories* 1955, 15; Martin 1964, 22). Indeed, Carolyn Nabors Baker's recent book, *The Beginners Bible Tales of Virtue: A Book of Right and Wrong*, puts Noah's story under the section titled "Work" (1995, 77-85). She writes:

Noah worked every day on the ark. He worked for many years. His sons helped him. Sometimes it was easy. Sometimes it was hard. Sometimes it was fun. Sometimes it was boring. But they knew they were doing God's special work. Noah did everything God told him to do. He was happy because his work made his family strong. (1995, 81)

Obedience to authority figures such as God, parents, and other adults, is another virtue often emphasized in children's bible storybooks.³ Many children's bible authors have added explanations that highlight Noah's work as an act of obedience to God. Annie White emphasized the virtue of obedience by explaining that even the animals obeyed God. "All these went into the ark; for God

³For example, when the story of Abraham and Isaac is retold for children it is often not Abraham's submission to God but rather Isaac's obedience to Abraham that is emphasized, as in *The Boy Who Obeyed: The Story of Isaac* (Willard 1905).

made them gentle and obedient." (1903, 24). She went on to describe the people of earth as disobedient, and when the flood came "How the wicked people must have wished they had minded Noah!" (1903, 24) More recently Gilbert V. Beers ended his retelling by having Noah pray. "Thank You, God," Noah said. He was glad that he obeyed God" (1992, 31). Carolyn Larsen titled her section on Noah in *My Favorite Bible Storybook for Early Readers* "Obeying Pays Off" (2005, 30-35). In an earlier book, *The Little Girls Bible Storybook for Mothers and Daughters*, Larsen used the story of "Mrs. Noah" to teach that lesson that "A Woman of God is Obedient" (1998, 29), in this case to her husband as well as to God. The section is titled "Whatever You Say, Dear" (1998, 24). When Noah tells his wife about God's command she responds,

"With us? We're going in the boat with those wild, smelly animals?" Mrs. Noah wondered.

"We'd better. Flood coming you know."

"Mrs. Noah looked at the lions, bears, and spiders (did there have to be spiders?) She smiled and took Noah's hand, "Whatever you say, dear." (1998, 28)

Later in the retelling we are told, "Mrs. Noah kept busy cleaning up after the animals and keeping her family fed and the clothes cleaned" (1998, 32).

Some of these lessons of thankfulness, doing what is right, obeying God, and working hard may be valid lessons children can learn from the story of Noah. Unfortunately, retelling the story in a way that distills it into a single lesson is problematic for religious education. A child who happens to be open to learning a lesson about being a righteous person, for example, may become closed to hearing that lesson from the Noah story if she or he first experiences the story retold in a way that implies that hard work is its one true lesson. This "one lesson" approach to the Bible's stories is distressingly common in Sunday School curricula today, but it is perhaps even more troubling when a lesson is integrated into a children's bible story, suggesting that the Bible story itself is a fable with just one built-in moral to the story.

Making Noah Age-Appropriate

Christian educators have long debated whether or not Bible study itself is age-appropriate for children. Some have debated whether or not the Bible is beyond a child's understanding and experience (see, for example Goldman 1965, 7; Gobbel and Gobbel 1986, 5-10; Berryman 1991, 136-144). But it was the sexual and violent content of some Bible stories that concerned many others (see Smither 1960).

One such concession to age-appropriateness is the omission from most current children's bibles of the story of a drunken naked Noah who is discovered by his sons in Genesis 9:20-27. Bottigheimer notes that this story was common in children's bibles of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, however, Bible stories such as this one that dealt with sex were slowly being removed as inappropriate content for children's bibles and replaced by stories that emphasized the virtue of work (1996, 103-115; see also Neidhart 1968, 118).

A shift in the sensibilities of what is appropriate for children is also evident in the way children's bible stories treat stories of God's judgment.⁴ A number of earlier children's bible versions of the Noah story contain graphic illustrations of naked children and adults trying to escape the flood and frightening descriptions of those outside of the ark clamoring for higher ground and crying out in horror for help before being swept away by the waves (Foster 1873, 1911, 19-21; Hadley 1890's, 14-15; Hodges and MacLean 1963, 20-21). Today, however, an increasing number of children's bibles focus on how God saves Noah to the exclusion of any mention that others drown or that it was God who caused the flood. The stories focus instead on God as the one who keeps us safe. Religious educators of children will differ in how they choose to handle the story of God's judgment on humankind in the story of Noah. In children's bible story versions, however, it seems that the implied lesson has shifted from a cautionary tale about how God punishes us if we are wicked to a story assuring us that God will keep us safe no matter what.

From Ancient Narrative to Illustrated Children's Book

One of the most dramatic developments in children's bible stories throughout the past one hundred and twenty five years is the number of children's bibles written for an increasingly younger readership. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, before the time of translations such as the *New International Version* or *New Century Version*, the majority of children's Bibles were written for young readers as alternatives to the *King James Version* of the Bible. These versions eliminated archaic and confusing language, set the type into one column, added the occasional illustration to keep the reader's interest, and eliminated passages that were deemed too boring, unimportant, or inappropriate for children. Around 1945 advancements in the technology necessary to reproduce color illustrations (see Townsend 1987, 304) provided the means, and the onset of the postwar baby boom provided the market, for a large increase in the number of picture books published for young children. Bible picture books became available for children of grade school age and even younger, leading today to popular versions such as *The Toddler's Bible* (Beers 1992), *The Beginners Bible for Toddlers* (Baker and Helms, 1995), *Baby Blessings Baby's Bible* (2004), *Baby's First Bible* (1996), and *The Baby Bible Storybook* (Currie 1994).

For some well-known children's book illustrators, the stories of the Bible serve as a pre-text to fuel their artistic imaginations (e.g. Pinkney 2002; dePaola 1990), but the majority of children's bibles claimed the goal of religious education by introducing children to the actual stories of the Bible.

Today most of these picture book bibles feature the ubiquitous image of Noah and his wife with a host of modern day zoo animals facing the reader with large grins on their faces while spilling over the edges of a small boat. This is the image commonly used as the cover of children's bible story collections. Often a few of the animals, almost always smiling, are doing something cute and anthropomorphic such as folding their hands in prayer along with Noah and

⁴ The story of Elisha and the She-bears, for example, is present in many late 19th century and early 20th century children's Bibles (Foster 1886, 95; Stirling 1920's, 220; Mutch 1922, 167; Egermeier 1923, 305; Brown 1926, 13) but only present in the most comprehensive of children's Bibles today.

his wife (Beers 1992, 31), helping to hang out the laundry (Beck 1993, cover), dancing for joy on two feet (Hollingsworth 1998, 39) or even playing a game of marbles with Noah (Thomas 1994, 34-35).⁵

The story of taking a fun boat ride with anthropomorphized animal friends is one that is age-appropriate, fun and exciting for young children. Religious educators, however, may wish to ask if it is appropriate to call that story “Noah’s ark.” Do such retellings still resemble the canonical stories enough to be presented as the Bible story itself?

One might expect that those bible storybooks marketed toward a more conservative readership would stay the closest to the Bible’s text and avoid portraying the biblical story as a cartoon with smiley animals for fear of trivializing the story or making it seem unrealistic, while those publishers with a more liberal or secular readership might feel free to take more liberties with the stories told in the Bible. The trend, however, seems to be the opposite direction. Publishers with a wider or more mainline readership tend to treat the stories as realistic ancient stories with realistic or impressionistic illustrations while some publishers with a more conservative readership tend towards cartoon animals. In these cases, perhaps the goal of having children engage in the Bible friendly and inviting ways takes precedence over conveying the ancient narrative’s sense of realism, awe and wonder.

CHANGING THE ENDING OF THE BOOK OF JONAH

The book of Jonah in the Hebrew Bible ends with an unanswered question. The story of how Jonah runs away from God, is thrown into the sea, swallowed by a great fish, spewed onto dry land, and goes on to prophesy to Nineveh is well known. Perhaps less well known to many children is the fourth chapter of Jonah in which a bitter Jonah is angry with God for sparing the repentant Ninevites. Jonah sits on a hill outside of Nineveh and tells God that he is angry enough to die. God responds by asking Jonah, “And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?” (Jonah 4:11b)

That is where the canonical book of Jonah ends, with a bitter prophet on a hillside and a question left unanswered. The question challenges Jonah’s (and the readers’) view of God’s mercy. As commentator Elizabeth Harper puts it, “The book is about God’s staggering compassion on all people everywhere, even those who seem furthest from love” (Harper 2002, 462). Like the Gospel of Mark in the New Testament, the book of Jonah ends with what literary critics call an ultimate gap. The ending does not resolve the plot of the book of Jonah, but on the level of discourse it has a brilliant effect on readers. As Phyllis Tribble writes:

Abruptly the story of Jonah stops, but it does not end. The divine question awaits an answer. In pondering the matter, the reader who journeyed with Jonah begins to get

⁵ In his introduction to *The True Story of Noah’s Ark*, Tom Dooley bemoans fanciful retellings and claims to go back to the Bible “to get an accurate account” (2003, 4), but even his book includes a realistic illustration by Bill Looney depicting one of Noah’s sons motioning to a woolly mammoth who is lifting lumber in his tusks to help build the ark (2003, 17).

the point. The reader is Jonah; Jonah is the reader. So the open-endedness of the last verse invites self-understanding and self-transcendence. The story subverts the reader. (1996, 525-526)

With this ending the book of Jonah provides some good examples of what literary critics call “defamiliarization” in which the familiar is made unfamiliar (Iser 1974, 282). Pagan sailors and even wicked Ninevites humbly submit to the call of Yahweh while the Hebrew prophet Jonah is disobedient and bitter. There is great religious education potential in this story. The story can serve to challenge children to explore ways in which they, as religious people, are sometimes not as merciful as God calls them to be. Religious educators can call children to respond to the story by exploring ways in which they might see faith in unfamiliar places.

The ultimate gap at the end of the book offers another excellent opportunity for religious education. Learners can be asked to use their imaginations to role-play what happened next. How might Jonah have responded to God’s question? Did he stay bitter? How might God respond to Jonah’s response? Learners could simply be asked to journal about what they think may have happened next and to imagine both a Jonah who repents and one who becomes further entrenched in his anger and resentment.

Unfortunately, while many children’s bibles follow the text of Jonah closely, many others close off these questions to the reader. Many bible storybook authors appear to feel compelled to achieve three goals: to simplify the story, to teach children a clear moral lesson, and to redeem biblical characters as positive role models. This compulsion finds an interesting expression in the way that many children’s bibles change the ending of Jonah.

One common strategy that children’s bible storybooks use to accomplish all three of these goals simultaneously is simply to leave out chapter four of the book of Jonah. First of all, by ending the story of Jonah at Jonah chapter 3 verse 3, with Jonah finally obeying God and going to Nineveh, or at the end of chapter 3 with the Ninevites also obeying God and repenting, the story is given a tidy satisfying conclusion with no open ended questions or gaps in the story (see, for example, Taylor 1992, Bruno and Reinsong 2006, 127; see also Roncace 2004, 7).

Secondly, by omitting chapter four these stories teach a clear and compelling lesson of obedience. While some retellings of Jonah highlight a lesson of God’s mercy and forgiveness (Sangster 1905; Vos 1934, 416; Hadley circa. 1890, 150; Maxwell 1955, 184; Allen et. al. 1973, 198), more are retold in ways that emphasize that Jonah learned the importance of obeying God. Children’s bibles created for younger readers make this lesson very clear by adding morals to the end of the story such as, “This time, Jonah obeyed God” (*Beginners Bible* 2005, 264), “Jonah did the right thing” (Baker and Helms 1995, 123), “Thank You, Lord, for helping Jonah decide to do what You told him” (Taylor 1956, 226), “The people listened to him, and they learned to do what God said. Just like Jonah” (Lloyd-Jones 1998, 13) or that after the fish spit Jonah up “NOW Jonah went where God said!” (Beers 1992, 219). Indeed *The Beginners Bible Tales of Virtue: A Book of Right and Wrong* uses Jonah as their example of “Obedience” (Baker 1995, 49-57).

Finally, by ending the story before chapter four, children are not left with the image of a bitter angry Jonah, but rather one who is happy and a good role model for children. While

chapter four of the book of Jonah suggests that Jonah is neither happy for the Ninevites, nor happy with God, *The Beginners Bible Tales of Virtue* includes a picture of Jonah and the king of Nineveh hugging while both are smiling (Baker 1995, 56) and ends with the image of a smiling Jonah with God's disembodied hand on his shoulder (Baker 1995, 57). Marcia Williams, in *Jonah and the Whale* writes, "When God saw this, he was happy to spare them. Jonah and everyone who lived in Nineveh rejoiced" and shows an illustration of Jonah smiling and dancing with the Ninevites (1989, last page). These images leave Jonah in a much better light than does the Hebrew Bible account.

Perhaps even more noteworthy are the surprising number of children's bible storybooks that include chapter four of Jonah but then fabricate an ending that redeems Jonah. There are more than a dozen examples of versions that end with God's question to Jonah, but then add variations of "now Jonah finally understood" or "Jonah then agreed that God was right" and often include final illustrations of a happy or reverent Jonah that do not leave Jonah in a negative or ambiguous light (e.g. Marshall 1921, 146; *Bedtime Bible Stories* 1955, 170; Hodges and MacLean 1963, 520; Martin 1964, 270; Horn and Cavanaugh 1980, 199; Davidson 1984); Kennedy 1991, 98; Alexander 1991, 160; Yenne and Jacobs 1993; Amery 1998, 71; Nodel 1993; Adams 1994, 63; Parker 2001, 237; *Read Together Treasury Bible Stories* 2003, 95). These authors are apparently so compelled to make Jonah into a role model for children that some add onto the text with no indication to the reader that they are veering from the account in the Hebrew Bible.⁶

If children read or hear these versions of the story, they are not challenged to answer God's question for themselves. Do they believe God should be merciful to everyone, even the enemies that have wronged us the most? They are not asked to reflect on a religious leader who was neither obedient nor merciful while those outside their faith were. By reading these versions a simple pat ending to the story can become set in their minds and the religious education potential of the story may be stifled.

SELECTING AND PUBLISHING CHILDREN'S BIBLE STORIES

The concerns raised above serve to call into question the value of retold bible story collections. With the availability of modern translations with lower reading levels such as the *International Children's Bible: New Century Version* and "America's Best Selling Kids Bible" *The NIV Adventure Bible* now available, are illustrated collections of retold children's bible stories helpful at all? This is an important question and one that is beyond the scope of this paper to answer adequately.

There are some children's bible story collections such as *The Children's Bible* (1962), *The Kingfisher Children's Bible* (Pilling 1993), and *The Children's Illustrated Bible* (Hastings 1994) and others that avoid many of the concerns raised in this paper. These editions share several

⁶ Again, while it is true that in Jewish tradition there are stories that flesh out the story of the ending of Jonah's life, there is no evidence that the authors of these Christian children's bible storybooks are drawing on them as authoritative sources.

commendable characteristics that may guide those selecting children's bibles for use and those preparing new ones for publication.

1. They respect the Bible storyteller's craft by staying close to the language of the Bible itself and avoid filling gaps and adding morals to the end of the stories.
2. In their text and illustrations they respect the art of the biblical storytellers by allowing bible characters to be imperfect instead of changing them into sanitized role models.
3. These versions tend to be for children at least eight years of age. Younger readers may need the guidance of an adult or older child to read the book, which may be a benefit in itself.
4. The illustrations convey a sense of awe and wonder rather than fanciful cartoon images and therefore better reflect the nature of most biblical narratives. This does not mean that the artists do not use creativity in their illustrations, but that they avoid trivializing the biblical stories with standard cartoon images.⁷
5. The people in the stories are depicted as of near eastern descent rather than the common practice of portraying them as white Nordic characters.⁸
6. Many of these versions engage an interfaith committee of Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish scholars as consultants who can point out concerns that authors and illustrators may not have recognized.

Children's bible storybooks are often brightly colored, fun, and child-friendly books created with the best of intentions, but it is important for religious educators to ask whether these retellings of the Bible's stories are helpful resources for religious education, or whether they stifle the power of the Bible stories themselves.

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⁷ For younger readers, illustrations such as those by Ulises Wensell in *The Reader's Digest Bible for Children* (Delval 1995) can be fun and engaging and at the same time can convey a sense of awe and wonder.

⁸ For alternatives approaches with African and African-American representations of biblical characters see McKissack 1998; Bach 1989; Gauch and Green 1994; and *The Children of Color Storybook Bible* 2001.

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