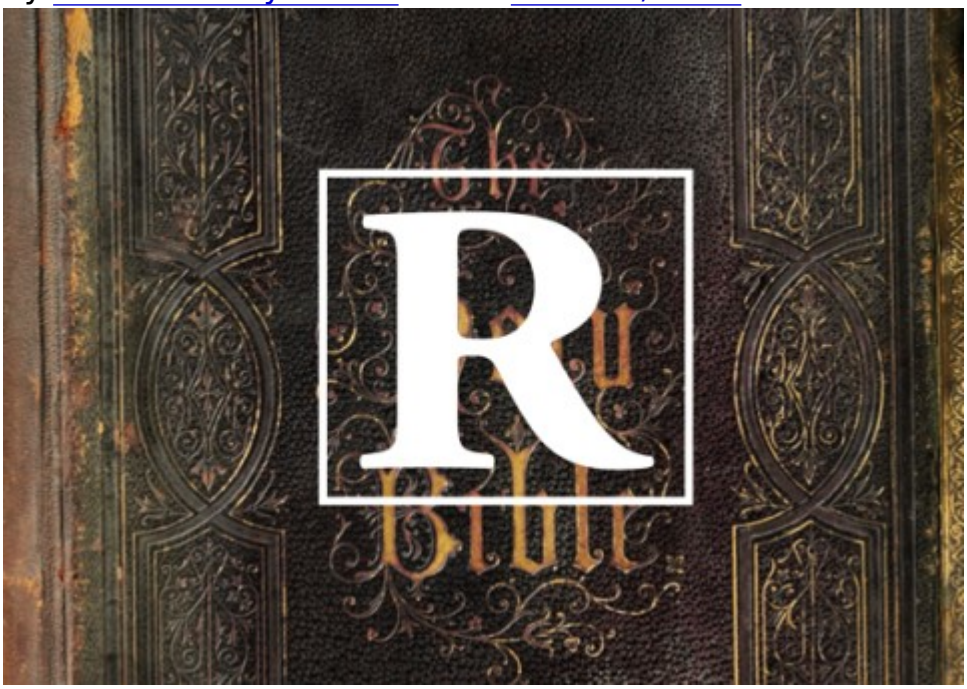
R-rated: How to read the Bible with children

by Sarah Hinlicky Wilson in the March 6, 2013 issue



When my son was very small, his favorite story in *The Beginner's Bible* was the one about Rahab from the book of Joshua. It must have been because of the pictures: Rahab shrugging her shoulders innocently at the city soldiers while the Israelites' bulbous eyes peer down from under a thatched roof; then the Israelites clambering down a rope while Rahab leans precariously out a window. The heroine is cute, blonde and dressed in a pink robe. She rushes to her eventual husband at the end of the story in cheerful exuberance. It's a nice story about rescuing the good guys from the bad guys.

Of course, this retelling omits a few details. Like the fact that Rahab was a traitor. That she gave over the entire town's population to slaughter in exchange for the immunity of her own kin. Or that the reason she met the Israelites in the first place was her line of business, namely prostitution. It's odd to include this of all stories in a children's Bible, given the amount of bowdlerization necessary to make it palatable. But then who am I to criticize Jesus' great (times 29) grandmother?

The simple fact is that the Bible is not a book fit for children, neither in its unsavory parts—murders, rapes, genocides, betrayals, mauling by wild animals, curses, divine retribution and apocalyptic horrors—nor in many of its neutral or even uplifting parts, including statutes and ordinances, proverbs, genealogies, geographies, prophecies, censuses and pretty much all of the epistles. It's no surprise that most of these sections get dropped from children's versions altogether, though at some point we may begin to wonder with what justification they still call themselves Bibles. Scripture is definitely something to ease the little ones into, not drop them in cold. So what's the best way to go about it?

The Beginner's Bible: Timeless Children's Stories (Zonderkidz) is not a bad place to start, whatever issues may surround Rahab. And it's certainly a popular choice, with over 6 million copies in print. Geared to a preschool audience, it sticks to stories, except for Psalm 23 and the Lord's Prayer. Of the Old Testament prophets, only Jonah makes an appearance, undoubtedly because the book is more a narrative than a prophetic poem or diatribe. There's nothing from the epistles, either; the New Testament ends by jumping from Paul's journeys all the way to the New Jerusalem at the end of Revelation.

Of the stories told, inconvenient realities are simply deleted or hidden. We are told that Jacob "fell in love and got married"; that Deborah led the Israelites to victory, but not that Jael helped with her handy tent peg and mallet; that Samson knocked over the pillars of the Philistines' temple, but not that he committed suicide in the process. Other disturbing parts are allowed in, though: Esau's anger at Jacob's treachery, the river of blood during the ten plagues, the swallowing up of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea, Saul's jealousy of David, and Judas's bad character, depicted by seedy, half-shut eyes. The passion of Christ is always a fascinating test case in children's Bibles; here we have an abbreviated account of the ordeal, and the scene of the crucifixion shows Jesus only from the knees down, with Mary hugging his feet so the nails are conveniently concealed.

If the goal is to make little children feel affection for scripture's characters, *The Beginner's Bible* will do the trick. Its overall tone is upbeat and cheerful, so much so that even a grinning Goliath appears on the cover next to little David, slingshot in hand. The last few pages offer a dictionary of key Bible terms. Also worth noting is that *The Beginner's Bible* has some variety in skin color, though Jesus and all the other main characters are just a shade darker than the whitest ones.

An alternative to *The Beginner's Bible* could be the *Spark Story Bible* (Augsburg Fortress), intended for children from age two to grade two and refreshingly depicting all its squat and lively characters in varying shades of brown. It covers an impressively wide range of Bible content, with 150 stories in all. The first sin is faithfully depicted, and we actually get some vision of God's wrathful side in the promise to Abraham: "I will be kind to those who are kind to you. To the ones who are unkind, I will be unkind." Jacob's trick on Esau, the betrayal of Joseph by his brothers, the threat to Hebrew boys in Egypt and the drowning of the Egyptians are all given due attention despite their ugliness.

The gospel sections contain an unusually rich swath of Jesus' teaching, the Lord's Prayer has a helpful phrase-by-phrase explanation appended, and less common stories like Lazarus and the rich man find a place. The crucifixion is depicted by a long view of three crosses on a hillside. In addition to a better array of prophets, *Spark* spends some time with the epistles, offering a short summary of Romans (with a strong statement of Jesus' full humanity and full divinity) along with two selections from 1 Corinthians and one each from Galatians and Philippians. But that's where it stops—no happy ending in Revelation this time around.

Spark hammers home the theology of the promise—in principle a good thing, though after about 35 reassurances that "God kept God's promise" it begins to sound more like ideology than theology. The monotone presentation of the gospel is matched with a rather pale presentation of the law in the Ten Commandments: "I have important rules for you and the people to live by. You can turn to this list to know how to love God and each other. Do your best to follow this list. It won't be easy, but I am with you and I love you." The same softening of biblical content occurs in the prophets (though *Spark* deserves high praise for including any of the prophetic writings at all). For example, the instructions to "go tell everybody about my love" are hardly the words I'd use to describe Jeremiah's painful ministry.

Occasionally, doubtful explanations are interpolated in the stories. In response to the question about paying taxes, Jesus replies: "But remember—everything God made is stamped with the image of God. So be sure to give to God the things that are God's." Meanwhile, the moral of the mustard seed of faith is that "God gives you all the faith you need. All you can do is say 'yes' to the faith God writes on your heart"—as if centuries of debate hadn't raged over just such formulations. The response to James and John's question about sitting with Jesus in heaven is: "You are good friends, but every person has a special place in heaven! No one gets a place

that's more special than anyone else's"—a bit of a stretch from the original and not a word about Jesus' baptism. The worst of the lot is the story called "The Holy Spirit Comes Down." Cornelius doesn't even appear in this retelling of Acts 10:44–48, and the Jew-gentile issue is summarized in wildly misleading fashion: "Did the Holy Spirit come into the hearts of the people who followed God's rules? Yes! God loved them. Did the Holy Spirit come into the hearts of the people who did not follow God's rules? Yes! God loved them too."

Once these two Bibles have been outgrown, the next one to try might be *The Read and Learn Bible*, from the American Bible Society (Scholastic), which gives thanks on its publication page to a biblical scholar who helped "ensure the accuracy of these adaptations of the biblical text"—and indeed it is impressively faithful to the original in its prose, even while being intended for four- to seven-year-olds. Yet here again choices are made in the presentation of the material that carry their own commitments. For instance, in the creation story, we read: "And then He said, 'Let Us make people in Our likeness, and let them rule over the fish and the birds and all other living creatures.' So He made man." Given the explicit words of Genesis that God created human beings "male and female," both fully in his image, this use of archaic language is as far off as *Spark*'s omission of Adam and Eve's creation in favor of just "people."

In the theophany to Abraham and Sarah, *Read and Learn* takes the liberty of saying that "one of the visitors was God and the other two were His angels" (no Trinity here, thanks), and when Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the statue of many metals, an explanatory notes tell us exactly which kingdom each layer refers to, right down to the Romans—a little burst of dispensationalism well beyond the parameters of the biblical text.

Usually the explanatory notes are much better: introducing common biblical words like *ark* or *clan*, or offering sound theological interpretations, as here: "Mercy means 'kindness, undeserved or unexpected.' It is also used to mean 'forgiveness.' Mercy is a very important word in the Bible because it describes the way God treats all people." Strikingly, Islam is mentioned twice: that Muslims consider themselves descendants of Abraham, along with Jews; and that the Ten Commandments are important "in the ethical systems of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam."

And, as usual, there is a mysterious selectivity in the choice of stories. We get the renaming of Jacob but not the wrestling with God that preceded it; Joseph's success

in Egypt but not his many years of suffering beforehand; the succession problem after Solomon but not the fact that it was caused by his apostasy. But we do get four psalms, summarized, and a handful of proverbs; Solomon's wisdom established through his recommendation of splitting a baby; exile in Babylon, though not the destruction of the northern kingdom; and even the hanging of Haman (not illustrated). Besides Daniel and Jonah, the only prophet to get any coverage is Micah, who leads the way into the New Testament.

The New Testament section contains, most unusually, a chapter on women helpers based on Luke 8. We get the healing of man born blind but not the controversy it provokes among the Jews. The Last Supper is regrettably weak: "This bread and wine are part of me. Take them as a way of remembering me." (There is a general inclination to shield the reality of this sacrament from children. Even advocates of infant communion are often reluctant to tell them what Jesus says it is: his body and his blood.) As in *Spark*, the crucifixion is shown with a long view to the hilltop. We hear a couple of stories about Paul but no extracts from the epistles, and like in *Beginner's* we then jump abruptly to Revelation, where we are informed: "God will bless all who have done right. For them there will be no more death, suffering, crying, or pain. But those who have done evil will be thrown into a lake of burning fire." The last part of the book contains "parent pages" written by a youth educator, suggesting ways to use Bible stories to engage children in their faith. Jesus and his disciples are browner than in *The Beginner's Bible*, though you probably wouldn't notice unless you were really looking for it, and most of them have brown hair.

By the time children have outgrown *Read and Learn*, they're probably ready for some significant reading on their own. It might be best to bridge from children's Bibles to the "real" Bible via the old classic *Picture Bible*, by Iva Hoth and Andre Le Blanc (David C. Cook): it is scripture in comic book format and Superman style. *Picture Bible* is a different aesthetic from either children's books or the usual church art: the men are all muscled with chins that could poke your eye out, the women are alluring, and nearly everyone is white (I counted exactly three nonwhite figures in 750 pages; even the Queen of Sheba is white, and all the angels are blonde). But you can hardly do better in presenting young readers with a gripping narrative. This Bible is more of a huge continuous story, one episode leading into another, than any other children's Bible, in fact more so than the Revised Common Lectionary. The storytellers can finally cash in on the treachery, war and seductions instead of hiding them. (The first time my son looked through the *Picture Bible* he immediately zeroed

in on Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah. His comment: “You never told me *that* story before!”)

While the comic format doesn’t lend itself naturally to wisdom literature or epistles as such, their words are often found on the lips of the characters. King David sings familiar lines from the psalms, and when the ark is brought to the newly constructed temple in Jerusalem, the assembled crowd exchanges the words of Psalm 24. The narrative portions of Isaiah, Jeremiah and other prophets are presented a little out of historical order, since the *Picture Bible* chooses to follow the order of the biblical books rather than the order of history. Paul’s journeys are the framework for mentioning his various letters, often summarized in curly handwriting on the side. Particularly unusual features here are the short summaries of both the 12 minor prophets and the New Testament books from Hebrews to Revelation, and a few pages called “The Years of Waiting” review the Maccabees and Roman invasion. More than any religious matter, the political expectations for Jesus to take down the Romans are the central cause of the conflicts leading to his crucifixion. The Jew-gentile struggle in Acts is dealt with at substantial length.

Theologically, the *Picture Bible* is most interested in prayer and trust in God. I’ve never seen a more consistent—or comical—depiction of the Israelites’ recurring failure to learn the lesson of God’s providence and their constant resolution to do better. “God has saved us again. Now I *know* that God is guiding Moses!” is a typical line preceding another massive crisis of faith. Failure always accompanies the lack of prayer and trust, which is shown to be the usual modus operandi for Israel. On the other hand, I suspect that this is why Job was left out, since that book undermines the simplistic formula. But quite a lot of characters, including the heroes, express their uncertainty, legitimating doubt as part of the process leading to faith.

At last, when children are ready for the “real thing”—which is probably sooner than you expect (my husband and I once taught Sunday school to third- and fourth-graders who sat riveted through 20 minutes of Genesis and Exodus week after week)—the question is what translation to start them on. The New International Reader’s Version is a good one; based on the NIV, it uses shorter, plainer words and simplifies some irregularities (like always referring to the Sea of Galilee when technically it is the Sea of Gennesaret). The *Adventure Bible for Young Readers*, by Lawrence O. Richards (Zonderkidz), supplements the NIRV translation with bonus features: highlighting verses worth memorizing, facts about biblical times and people, tips for living out God’s word—plus dictionaries, charts and maps. Another

option, translated afresh by the American Bible Society for “grade schoolers, second language readers and those who prefer the more contemporized form,” is the Contemporary English Version. I actually used it with adults when I was a parish pastor some years ago, finding the NRSV obtuse, unmusical and occasionally ideological. My parishioners were so thrilled with it that they started taking the CEVs home to replace their even more inaccessible “Saint James Versions”—every pastor’s dream come true!

These “Bibles” are helpful but only provisional tools; the sooner children are prepared by some warm-water wading to jump into the deep end, the better. But there is a deeper question surrounding children’s Bibles than the selectivity of any particular version. Bowdlerization starts at home. To witness, here is a true story. A pair of women stood at a book giveaway table. One picked up a cute storybook about Noah’s ark. The second said, “I donated that book. I thought it looked nice too, until I read the first line. Go ahead and read it!” The first woman obliged: “‘God was angry at the world and decided to destroy it.’” “Can you believe it?” said the second woman. “I’m not reading that to my child!” The first heartily agreed.

I have since wondered what exactly was the point of the objection: that it was too soon to let one’s young children in on such a terrifying story, or that anyone would make that claim about God at all? The former is understandable; the latter may be pious but runs aground on Genesis 6:13: “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth” (ESV). Noah’s ark is the apex of the conflict of interests in biblical pedagogy: shall we emphasize the divinely willed, near extinction of the human race or the irresistible cuteness of paired-off animals, a rainbow and a dove bearing an olive branch? It’s no surprise which option parents usually go for. But this is not a matter of the children’s own preferences. It’s about what grown-ups are willing to share with them, and even more so what grown-ups are capable of stomaching themselves.

There’s no way around it: the Bible is a problematic book. It does not sit neatly within anyone’s worldview or religious preferences, no matter where on the many theological spectrums one falls. It is managed by more and less persuasive hermeneutical theories, various canons-within-a-canon and selective ignorance, whether of the contents of the texts or of the problems that the texts raise.

What then shall missionary parents and educators do in the process of evangelizing the heathen children of Christendom? We can try to present them an unproblematic Bible, excised and trimmed and amplified to fit our own adult needs. We can effectively bore them right out of any salutary struggles with the scripture. We can bowdlerize, sanitize and pretend all is well and right and easy with a canon that is assuredly not all well and right and easy. We can do the same with ourselves.

Or we can embrace the problematic Bible and abandon our efforts to control it. We can recognize that faith comes only as a gift of the Holy Spirit, not through the problem solving of anxious adherents to the Christian religion. We can hand over to our children, out of our own hands and our own control, the messy, shocking, astonishing, inspiring and multifarious holy scripture and let the Spirit use it to awaken their spirits, hearts and minds—including all the problems that come with such inspiration. Certainly we will want to pace them, as we do in introducing them to any of the great challenges of life (sex, driving and politics come to mind). But we should do so with the expectation that they will someday come to full acquaintance with the Bible, that in fact our preparations will make them long for that full acquaintance. And then—who knows? We may enjoy the great privilege of becoming the students of our own children.