

Children's Bibles

Comments on resources available from QuakerBooks of FGC

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QuakerBooks of Friends General Conference carries a number of children's story Bibles. None of them pretend to be Bibles, per se. Rather, they are severely edited retellings in language appropriate for children. They are quite different, and appropriate for different age levels. In this article I will comment on seven children's Bibles and provide selections from each so that you can gain a sense of their style, age appropriateness, and approach.

We will look at how the different authors treat some of the same passages, such as the creation story in Genesis. No matter what children's Bible is used, when you explore the creation story with children please take care not to equate darkness with negativity or evil. After all, according to the story God, who is good, dwelt in darkness (the fullness of darkness?) before creation. Whether you are a parent or a teacher, you might help the children under your care name some of the many benefits of both darkness and light, each equally a gift of God.

1. The children's Bible I most often recommend for preschool age children is ***My Very First Bible*, words by Lois Rock and pictures by Alex Ayliffe**, Good Books, 2003. The illustrations are interesting, attractive, engaging and appropriate for young children. On each page, the ratio of text to illustration is about 1:1. Sentences are short without losing rhythm and flow. When there is violence in the Bible, this book treats it in ways appropriate for very young children.

In *My Very First Bible*, the creation story begins: "Think of the dark. Make it darker. Think of the darkest dark. In the beginning, there was nothing but dark. Then God spoke: 'Let there be light.' And the very first light shone brightly. God spread the sky wide above the ocean, and folded the land to make hills and valleys. . ."

In the story of David and Goliath, the text reads, in part, "One day, David went to visit his big brothers. They were soldiers. They were fighting fierce enemies. One was a giant. He wore shiny battle clothes and had a big spear. 'I am Goliath,' roared the giant. 'If anyone can beat me, then my army will go away! Who dares to try?' 'I dare,' said David. For David believed that God was always with him and would help him win. 'You're too little,' said his brothers. 'You're too little,' said his king."

The 23rd Psalm reads:

"Dear God, you are my shepherd,
You give me all I need —
My food, my drink, a place to rest,
Yes, you are good indeed.
When all the world seems gloomy
And scary things are near,
You always take good care of me
And so I need not fear.
You've given me so many things,
And everyone can see
The special loving kindness
You always show to me."

The Jesus presented in this story Bible is very friendly and warm. I love the illustrations—color, line, balance, and facial expressions. The way the Lord's Prayer is presented is delightful. Children chime in after each few phrases with comments like "I know what that means. God is our kind father. We want people to obey God so the whole world is as good as heaven." And then later, after the petition for daily bread, a child says, "Oh good, I don't like being hungry." Another child says, "Food makes the body strong, but we also need God to encourage us, to make us strong inside."

In general, I think this book adapts the Bible well to the attention span of young children, has content that is age appropriate, and is beautifully illustrated.

2. Another story Bible designed for the same age, but which I think is less successful, is ***The Beginners Bible: Timeless Children's Stories, as told by Karyn Henley, illustrated by Dennas Davis***, Gold 'n' Honey Books, 1989. This book has illustrations, but they are less attractive, less engaging, and slightly more cartoonish than those in the story Bible above. The ratio of text to illustration is about the same. The text, however, is closer to the actual biblical text in content and rhythm. This is sometimes good, but sometimes less than helpful for small children. In the author's attempt to remain faithful to the biblical text, smoothness and naturalness have been sacrificed. The result is reminiscent of the Bible, but not necessarily attractive as story for young children. If one's priority in selecting a children's story Bible is closeness to the Bible in rhythm and flow, then this might be the best for preschool children. There is less radical paraphrasing of the biblical text, but there is also less of an attempt to accommodate the world of children. I prefer #1 above, but I can understand why some people might prefer this book. It depends on one's priorities.

The creation story begins, "In the beginning, the earth was empty. Darkness covered everything. But God was there, and He had a plan. 'Let there be light,' He said. And suddenly, golden light shone all around. God called it 'day.' He called the darkness 'night.' With the light and the darkness, the first day passed. On the second day, God said, 'Let there be a great space.' So the space was formed, deep and high. God called the space 'sky.'"

In the story of David and Goliath, the text reads, in part, "[Goliath] called to the army of Saul, 'Choose a man to come and fight me. If he wins, we will be your servants. But if I win, you will be our servants!' The men in Saul's army were afraid. They knew Goliath was stronger than they were. No one wanted to fight him. Now David's brothers were in Saul's army. But David was at home keeping the sheep. One day, David's father called him. 'Take this bread to your brothers,' he said. So David got to go to his brothers. He got to see the army. He also got to see Goliath. And he saw how everyone was afraid of him. 'I will fight Goliath,' said David. But Saul said, 'You are only a boy. How can you fight Goliath?'"

The 23rd Psalm is reduced to the following:

"The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters."

Jesus, like everyone else in the book, is bug eyed. Beard covers half of his face and, like the other characters in the book, he looks more to me like a cartoon figure than a person.

3. More mature young children would probably relate well to ***My First Bible: Wonderful Stories for Young Children, by Pat Alexander, with illustrations by Leon Baxter***, Good Books, 2002. The ratio of text to illustrations is probably 1:1, but I believe the illustrations are more suited to 6 to 9 year old children than to those 3 to 6. If the preschooler is precocious, this is a story Bible the child will be able to grow into fairly quickly, but it is not designed for preschoolers, and there is more violence in it than *My Very First Bible*. *My First Bible* (3#) and *My Very First Bible* (#1 above) are published by the same people.

The creation story begins:

"Close your eyes tight. Now it's all dark. Cover your ears. Now it's all quiet. Long long ago, before the world began, everything was dark, everything was quiet. No people. No birds. No animals. Then God spoke: 'Let there be light! Let there be day. Let there be a sun to shine.' And the light came. How good the light was. God kept the dark for night-time; he made the moon and stars to shine in the dark. That was good too. God said: 'Let there be sky and land and sea.' And so it was."

In the story of David and Goliath, the text reads, in part, "'Go and see how [your big brothers] are,' David's father said to him, one day. 'They may be hungry. Here are ten loaves of bread and ten cream-cheeses. And take them some roasted corn—all you can carry.' David got there just in time to hear Goliath shouting, 'I dare you, I dare you to fight me. I dare anyone to fight me!' When no one moved, David talked to the soldiers. 'That giant's too big for his boots! We shouldn't let him get away with it. This is God's army!' 'You're the one who's too big for his boots,' his brother's said crossly. King Saul sent for David. 'I'm not scared,' David said. 'I'll fight him!' 'But you're only a boy,' said the king."

The 23rd Psalm reads:

“God is my shepherd, so I have everything I need.
He finds me fields of juicy green grass.
He leads me to clear fresh water.
He guides me on the right paths.
Even when it’s dark, I need not be afraid.
because God is with me,
keeping me safe.
God is my good shepherd.”

The Lord’s Prayer reads:

“Our Father God. . . Come, and be our King for ever: then everyone will do as you want. Give us each day the things we really need. Forgive us for the bad things that we do, as we forgive everyone who hurts us. And keep us from all harm.”

The illustrations of Jesus in this book do not strike me as warm, inviting, or attractive. And the facial expressions, in general, are not all that interesting or effective.

4. *The Family Story Bible*, by Ralph Milton, illustrations by Margaret Kyle, Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, is far beyond the reading level of young children, and the ratio of text to illustrations is something like 3:1. If the book will be read only to preschool children, this is probably not the best choice. But if the book will be read aloud to the whole family, with children of different ages, I believe this book would work well. I do not find the illustrations all that captivating. They seem to be most appropriate for a 9 or 10 year old. The colors and mood are pastel and soft, rather than bright and cheerful. Sentences are slightly longer than in the other books, but they read like conversation-in other words, like a storyteller.

The creation story begins:

“Long, long, long ago, before there was anything, before there was a world, before there was light, before there was darkness, there was God. Just God. All alone. So God decided to make the world. The God said, ‘Let there be light.’ So there was. Beautiful light shining everywhere. And God said, ‘That’s good.’ Then God said, ‘Let there be a sky above, and water below.’ So there was. Then God said, ‘Let the water come together in the hollow places, so there can be dry ground.’ So there was.”

In the story of David and Goliath, the text reads, in part, “One day David’s father, Jesse, came to David, ‘Your older brothers are helping King Saul fight in a war,’ he said. ‘I want you to take some food to them.’ So David took the food and walked to where his brothers were. He found that his brothers and all the other soldiers were very afraid. ‘We are fighting against the Philistines,’ they said. They pointed to the other side of the valley where the Philistine army was waiting to fight. ‘One of the Philistines is a very big man named Goliath. Every morning he comes out and yells at us, ‘Choose one of your men who is brave enough to fight me. If your man wins the fight, then you will win the war. If I win the fight, then the Philistines will win the war.’ The next morning, David saw Goliath come out and yell at the Hebrew army. Goliath had a big spear in his hand and he looked very fierce. So David said to King Saul, ‘Let me go and fight Goliath.’ ‘But you’re just a boy,’ said King Saul. ‘How can you fight such a big man?’”

The 23rd Psalm reads:

“I think of God as my shepherd
Who gives me all that I need;
Who lets me lie down,
On soft green grass,
Beside a quiet stream.
I think of God as my shepherd,
Who helps me do what is right.
God helps me feel strong

When I'm weak and afraid;
When I'm crying
For someone who's sad.
My shepherd is glad when I'm happy,
And gives me good things to eat.
I know I'm invited
To live in God's house
For all the days of my life."

The Lord's Prayer reads:

"Our Father in heaven,
Your name is holy.
May your peace come.
May we live on earth,
As you live in heaven.
Give us enough to eat each day.
Forgive us the bad things we have done,
As we forgive those who have done bad things to us.
Don't test us with things too hard for us,
And save us from evil."

Jesus is portrayed playing with a child in one illustration, and the text reads, "[Jesus said,] 'In God's Shalom, the first shall be last and the last shall be first.' Then Jesus looked at the child. 'I'd like it if you could play with me. What do you like to play best of all?'" This last part is not, of course, in the Bible, but the idea that Jesus appreciated children and lifted them up as examples is certainly biblical.

5. A substantial children's Bible is *The Children's Illustrated Bible*, stories retold by Selina Hastings, illustrated by Eric Thomas, New Leaf Press, 1996. This book would be a good study Bible storybook for children between the ages of 8 and 12. In addition to color illustrations, there are photographs, maps, and side bars with helpful information. It reads closer to the biblical text than the other children's story Bibles and can therefore help children get used to Biblical language. It might make a good gift Bible for eight or nine year old children, a gift that they could quickly grow into.

The creation story begins:

"In the beginning God created heaven and earth. Water lay deep over the surface of the earth and the darkness was absolute. God said, 'Let there be light.' And suddenly there was light. And God saw that it was good. God divided the light, which was day, from the darkness, which was night. And so ended the first day and night of creation. Next God said, 'Let there be sky over the waters,' and called the sky heaven; and this was on the second day."

In the story of David and Goliath, the text reads, in part, "'I challenge you, Saul,' bellowed Goliath. 'I challenge you to send one of your men to fight me! Let the two of us decide the outcome of the war!' At these words, Saul trembled, and the Israelites were filled with fear. Three of Jesse's sons were among Saul's soldiers, and their brother David had left his sheep to bring them food. As he reached the camp, he heard Goliath's boastful challenge, and saw that no one dared answer it. 'I will fight the giant,' he said to Saul. 'But you are only a boy. Goliath is a famous man of war.' Eventually, however, Saul was persuaded. . ."

The 23rd Psalm reads:

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures,
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul.
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for thou art with me;
Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies,
Thou anointest my head with oil;
My cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

The Lord’s Prayer reads:

“Our Lord who is in Heaven, holy is your name.
Your kingdom is coming. We will obey you on Earth
as you are obeyed in Heaven. Give us our daily food.
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive the sins of others.
Do not lead us into temptation, but save us from evil.”

6. *My Very First Bible*, by James Harrison, and illustrated by Diana Mayo, DK Publishing, 2005, presents 25 narratives from the Bible. This is different from the book of the same title described above. The only thing in the book that is not a narrative is The Lord’s Prayer, presented in the language of the King James Version of the Bible (early 17th century). Psalm 23 does not appear. The ratio of text to illustrations is about 1:1. The general mood of the illustrations seems designed for children between the ages of 5 and 9, at least in style and color. Some pages include extraneous activity questions, however, that would be appropriate for 3 and 4 year old children. Some of these activities include counting how many colors are on a page, counting the number of striped fish, identifying shapes on a page, naming animal sounds, finding groups of three in a picture, etc. The subject matter of the illustrations and narratives, however, are appropriate for a significantly older audience. There are illustrations of bloody bodies and bodies covered with “blistering boils that burst out” on the skin, and the illustration for the David and Goliath story depicts a large stone hitting the Philistine between the eyes, knocking him down. Children in 2nd or 3rd grade could read most of the book on their own, but the rhythm of some of the story texts suggest they were meant for reading out loud.

The creation story begins:

“In the very beginning there was nothing at all—nothing to see, nothing to hear, nothing to touch. It was black, and cold, and empty. And God said, ‘Let there be Light.’ And a dazzling light filled the darkness. Then God created the land, and the seas, and the sky above. And the earth burst into life with seed-popping plants and sweet-smelling flowers—all budding and blooming and springing and sprouting. . .”

The story of David and Goliath reads:

“Saul, the first king of Israel, was in trouble. The Philistines had a new champion—a fearsome giant named Goliath. There was no one brave enough to fight him. Then David, a young shepherd boy, spoke up. ‘Why are you all so afraid, when we have God on our side?’ he asked. ‘I will fight the giant.’ He picked up some stones and took out his shepherd’s sling. When Goliath saw his opponent, he roared with laughter. David spun the sling above his head and sent a stone whizzing toward the giant. Smack! It hit Goliath right between the eyes. And he fell down dead. The little shepherd boy became the next king of Israel.”

The Lord’s Prayer reads:

“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.”

In some of the biblical narratives in this book, the author includes an unnecessary amount of violence. We have already looked at the story of David and Goliath. The story of Daniel in the lions’ den concludes: “Then he [the king]

ordered the jealous ministers to be thrown into the den. And the lions tore them to pieces.” The story of the Exodus concludes: “The waters parted and the Hebrews hurried across. Then the walls of water came tumbling down on the trapped army, crashing and smashing it to pieces.” And, for some reason, the author decided to include in the book Joseph’s interpretation of the baker’s dream: “In three days the king will have you put to death.”

The stories of Jesus include language that unambiguously portrays him as divine. This is not a judgment, but an observation. The parent or First Day School teacher making the purchase can decide whether this is a boon or a deterrent. The angel Gabriel tells Mary, “God has chosen you to be the mother of his child.” In the story of Jesus’ crucifixion, a Roman soldier says, “He really is the Son of God.” (It should be noted that in the Greek text of the New Testament there is no definite article in this sentence, leaving an element of ambiguity. The proclamation could equally be translated “Truly this man was a son of God.”)

This children’s Bible, while not necessarily bad, would not be my first choice for any one age level.

7. *The Bible for Children from Good Books, retold by Murray Watts and illustrated by Helen Cann*, Good Books, 2002, presents 250 illustrated stories (352 pages!). The ratio of text to illustrations is roughly 3 to 1, and the illustrations are attractive and fairly realistic, employing many earth tones. The vocabulary, sentence structure and grammar seem to be on about a 4th grade level. The concepts and the content of the narratives, however, are more appropriate for mature middle school age children. For example, in the story of Joseph in Egypt, the text reads: “As for Judah and the other brothers, they kept silent because of their terrible guilt. They had sold their brother into slavery, without caring if he lived or died. The brothers were in a different kind of prison, a cage of regret and sorrow which they had built for themselves. There was no escape from their crime, which haunted them every day.”

Some of the content and the way it is related are quite adult. Consider the treatment of the story of David and Bathsheba. The text states that David “caught sight of a woman alone. . . stepping into a bath.” The text states that he “knew he should turn away, but he didn’t. He found himself gazing at her because she was beautiful.” David ordered his servant to “Fetch her!” Bathsheba came to his room and, because “no one dared to refuse the wishes of a great king,” she “gave herself to David” and “they made love together.” Bathsheba later confided in David that she was pregnant. David brought her husband back from battle so that “he will sleep with her [and] believe that the baby is his, and no one will ever know what I have done.” But, being a dutiful military man, the husband refused to take pleasure in his wife while his soldiers were in danger. David then sent him to the front line and instructed that he be left there to be killed. All the details of the biblical story are present, just as vividly as in the Bible that adults read, only in simpler English. In the story of Samson and Delilah, Delilah is the consummate temptress. The text reads, in part: “That night, she lay beside him, laughing softly, teasing him. ‘You’re so handsome,’ she said, ‘so incredibly strong, you must have a secret. You must have some hidden power.’ ‘What is that to you?’ said Sampson. ‘You’re everything to me,’ murmured Delilah. ‘All I want to know is your little secret.’” When Sampson then lies to her, and Delilah discovers the lie, she says: “You’re making fun of me. . . You’re lying to me because you don’t love me.” And the seduction continues, rather like afternoon television. One final example is the story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife. The text reads: “Now Joseph was very handsome. He was tall and strong, and Potiphar’s wife had been eyeing him for some time. She would stare at him or deliberately brush past him in the hallway.” This is definitely not content for young children!

Middle schoolers who don’t consider the illustrations too juvenile for them may very much enjoy the novel-like tone of the text, and the occasional bits of juicy adult content. Some portions of the text are appropriate for young children (lower elementary), and a teacher in a mixed-age classroom who exercises judicious care can share what is appropriate for the classroom setting. That said, however, I would not put this book in the hands of any child younger than eleven or twelve.