Let's Talk Children's Bibles

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Center for Excellence in Christian Education
A NEXUS OF CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION in Educational Leadership, Research, and Practice

Teaching Kids So They Don't Have to Unlearn it Later

How will our children know God? Not via a standardized curriculum that prepares them for a confirmation class test or a set of church school lessons that reflect the general education epistemologies of manageable bits of knowledge rationally transmitted and received, but by participation in communities and households of faith open to the revelation of God that illuminates heart, mind, soul, and strength. The compelling task for twenty-first century religious educators is to help congregations and families resist cultural epistemologies that hinder spiritual wisdom and cultivate religious intuition as an alternative way of knowing the One who gifted humanity with intelligence and inner light.

Karen-Marie Yust, "How Will Our Children Know God? Resisting Cultural Epistemologies that Hinder Spiritual Wisdom," *Journal of Childhood and Religion*, Volume 2, Issue 4 (May 2011).

How do we get it right the first time?
How do we teach our children so that the Bible grows with them?

In his chapter, "Conflating Creation, Combining Christmas, and Ostracizing the Other" in *Text, Image, Otherness in Children's Bibles, What is the Picture?*, Caroline Vader Stichele and Hugh S. Pyper, eds, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012, Mark Roncace comments on the practice in many children's Bibles and Bible story books of harmonizing the text. He contrasts monologic and polyphonic texts. When an author harmonizes stories such as the two stories of creation or stories from the four gospels, "children's Bibles reduce a polyphonic text to a monologic one. There is no longer a conversation." By conversation Roncace is referring to the variety of perspectives present in biblical stories. When biblical stories are valued and engaged, "the dialogic exchange of the various perspectives invites the reader to participate in the conversation." (204)

How do we live and tell the "God-story" in ways that don't tame the text but do connect the dots? How and when do we make good scholarship (translation, interpretation, biblical tools) accessible to children and youth?

In her chapter, "The Word Became Visual Text: The Boy Jesus in Children's Bibles" in T*ext, Image, Otherness in Children's Bibles, What is the Picture?*, Melody Briggs contrasts two ways that biblical stories can be told in children's Bibles. When the text is tamed so as to get a "certain outcome in the reader" then "The text becomes a didactic tool, and narrative takes second place to function…When children's Bibles present the biblical text as a source of information or training, readers may be led to think, "I know that information or moral. I don't need to read it again." For readers to experience the text in such a way that they want to return to it, children's Bibles need to draw readers into the biblical world and leave them wanting to visit there again." (166)

1. We need adults who are comfortable with biblical text, who are immersed in the biblical story, seeing it not only as a source of information, but a living story, a narrative that engages their lives and so the lives of children and youth.

2. How do we support them in their continuing growth in engaging biblical text – with their questions, affirmations, and places of struggle?

3. What biblical resources do we make available to them – study Bibles, web resources?

How do we wrestle with difficult issues in the Bible?

In her chapter, "What Does a Child Want? Reflections on Children's Bible Stories" in T*ext, Image, Otherness in Children's Bibles, What is the Picture?*, Cheryl Exum notes the ways that children's Bibles story books often have little cultural diversity, and fail to "represent difference (gender, race, ethnicity, class, levels of disability)." (Exum, 2012, 333) She names the problem clearly when she writes: "The problem with most children's Bible stories is what one would expect without even reading them: they are patronizing, overly protective (especially where sex and violence are concerned), moralistic, and vastly oversimplified; their preferred techniques for achieving their goals are omission, glossing over, and adjusting their source text. " (Exum, 2012, 337)



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Reviewing Children's Bible Storybooks and Bibles

This is a beginning list of what's available. The newest additions are described in the section for children ages 6-8 and offer many creative options for reading the Bible with children. For more detailed help for parents see *Wondering About the Bible with Children* (Abingdon Press, 2020) by Elizabeth F. Caldwell.

Easing Children into the Bible - Beginning with young children

Criteria that are important in selecting a story book Bible to read to and with preschool children ages 2-5 include these:

- Content and length of story – How much of the story is told? In its simplification or rewriting of the story, is the main point of the story still there?
- The story needs to be no more than 2-3 paragraphs.
- Illustrations – What kind of illustrations are they (characters, drawings)? Do they invite the child into the story?
- Helps for parents – Are any suggestions available to parents?

1. **The Children's Everyday Bible** (NY: DK Publishing, 2001) includes one story for every day of the year, 193 from the Old Testament and 172 from the New Testament.
2. **Children of God, Storybook Bible** by Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Grand Rapids: Zonderkidz, 2010). Fifty-six stories are chosen to show the ways that God works through history and how God wants all people to love each other.
3. **The International Children's Story Bible** by Mary Hollingsworth (Thomas Nelson, 1993) has selected 105 stories that represent diversity in the kinds of writing found in the Bible: history, wisdom literature, Gospels, and letters.
4. **Candle Read and Share Bible** (UK: Thomas Nelson, 2007) has included 208 "bite-size Stories".
5. **Bible Animal Stories for Bedtime** (Barbour Publishing, 2011), includes 39 stories from the Old Testament and 22 from the New Testament. Each story includes a simple prayer.
6. **Deep Blue Children's Bible Storybook** (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing, 2016). Stories and illustrations from Deep Blue children's curriculum.

Younger Elementary Age Children – 6-8 years old

Criteria:

- Content and choice of stories – Which stories are selected? Are there stories of women and men?
- Additional resources for young readers – what additional content is available to the child to help her or him grow in their understanding of the cultural worlds of the Old and New Testaments.
- Illustrations - What kind of illustrations are used? Are the illustrations accurate representations of what the people would have looked like?

1. **The Lion Read and Know Bible** (UK: Lion Children's Books, 2008) includes 25 stories from the Old Testament and 24 from the New Testament.
2. **JPS Illustrated Children's Bible** (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 2009) has 53 stories retold by Ellen Frankel.
3. **The Bible for Children** (Pa: Good Books, 2002) provides over 200 stories retold for children. The introduction reminds the reader that the Bible is a collection of different kinds of writings.
4. **The Read and Learn Bible**, (American Bible Society, Scholastic, 2005) includes stories from the Old Testament and from the New Testament, some with a brief textbox with more information.
5. Elizabeth F. Caldwell and Carol Wehrheim, eds, **Growing in God's Love, a Story Bible**, Westminster John Knox, 2017 has 150 stories organized by theme with attention to contemporary Biblical scholarship, inclusion and art.
6. **God's Stories as told by God's Children**, An Illustrated Storybook Bible, The Bible for Normal People, 2025 has 58 stories written by many authors. Children are invited to learn about the Bible as a collection of many stories and how they can enter the conversation.

7. Jacqui Lewis and Shannon Daley-Harris and Cheryl "Ras" Thuesday, Illustrator, **The Just Love Story Bible**, Beaming Books, 2025 has 53 stories telling about what the God of justice and love looks like.
8. Mariko Clark (Words) and Rachel Eleanor Pictures), **The Book of Belonging, Bible Stories for Kind and Contemplative Kids,** Convergent Books, 2024 has 42 stories emphasizing how the Bible teaches us about who we are: belonging, beloved and delightful.
9. Teresa Kim Pecinovsky and Chrissie Muecke, **The Peace Table**, **A Storybook Bible**, Brethren Press, 2023 has 141 stories emphasizing our role as peacemakers. Many extras for parents to use with children are included.

Elementary Age Children – 9-11 years old

Criteria:

- Additional resources – what helps are there for the reader either for content or interpretation?
- Illustrations or visuals – in what ways do they support the reading and understanding of the text?

1. **Deep Blue Kid's Bible** (Common English Bible, 2012) is a children's version of the newest Bible to be translated, The Common English Bible. In-text notes help children understand and begin to connect with difficult and challenging biblical texts.
2. **The Children's Illustrated Bible** (DK Publishing, 2005) Great resource to have in church school rooms.
3. **The CEB Student Bible** (Common English Bible, 2015) is appropriate for middle school and older youth. It includes introductions to each book written in the language of teenagers with articles, questions and prayers written by youth.