



Quaker Universalist Voice

An Example of Problematic Bible Translation

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The American Bible Society published a booklet of biblical translations for children. It is titled, *A Book About Jesus* (1986)

It is welcome that the American Bible Society is translating the Bible expressly for children. This is a step forward in recognition of children and the need for careful Bible translation rather than retelling of stories.

However, it is regrettable that the Society has not yet seen the need to translate using inclusive language. They continue to use male-imagined words when referring to God, and “Son” when referring to Jesus. The paralytic in Mark 2:1-12, as well as the people who carried the paralytic to Jesus, are all identified as male. The Greek says, “...a paralytic, carried by four.” Jesus says to the paralytic, “Child, your sins are forgiven”. In this booklet, it is translated as “My son...” In Mark 5:20 about the person with an evil spirit, although the Greek is *anthropos*, it is translated as “man”. The consistent use of male-imagined words to translate inclusive language from the Greek text is inaccurate and unnecessary. It is a failure to fully understand the changing English language and the importance of accuracy in language, especially for our children who are learning the language as it is used and understood today.

In this booklet, the American Bible Society has mixed together the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) by presenting portions of one gospel, followed by parts of another. Children will be confused by this presentation. Children will not see the different messages and perspectives of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The way the gospels are mixed in this booklet would not lead children to begin to distinguish between the various messages each of the Gospel writers presented. All translations should reflect the wisdom that kept all three of the synoptic gospels in the canon. Children need to learn, from the beginning, of that diversity and richness in the Bible. Material from each Gospel should be published in booklets separate from the other gospels.

In this booklet, passages are taken out of their context within each gospel and presented to children as separate little stories. Essential meaning is obscured. Children will read these stories in the same manner as they read to the separate Mother Goose, or fairytale, stories. They will be more likely to keep forever their infantile understanding of the Bible is a book of “stories”. Publication of longer passages should focus less heavily on the story which, out of context, takes on a different meaning than the author intended. Even though the new meaning may be good, it misses the author’s intentions, which, unfortunately, few adults ever go back to find.

The art work chosen for use in this Bible Society booklet does not meet modern standards. Biblical art for children should not be historical art. Although the Bible is an historical document, children do not have an historical understanding of life until quite late in childhood. The historical aspect of the Bible is not the one to be emphasized as children begin their use of the Bible. Because the children are at a very formative time in their lives, and do not understand history or other cultures, the Bible should be introduced to children as a faith document, not as a historical document. If that is accepted as a premise, then the art needs to be rendered in a timeless manner. It should be neither “modern” nor “historical”. That, needless to say is not easy, but it is possible

Biblical art for children should not continue the unfortunate tradition of depicting the historical people of the Bible as western and white. No matter what art form is chosen, the characters should not have a fair skin, rosy cheeks, light hair, and clean light pink and blue clothes. First, the biblical word needs to be equally available to all races of children. And second, this western rendering is historically false. As they grow older the children who read the booklet will learn about the peoples of the Middle East and the history and culture of the people of the Bible. Children should not be taught anything they will later see as false and will then need to unlearn.

The art in the Jesus booklet is shallow and decorative. Biblical art for children should not be sweet, decorative art. The faith should not be presented as an ornamental additive to life or as unconnected to the daily life as the children experience it. Decorative art, as it is seen in this booklet, can lead to the identification of religion as decorative. Because art expresses emotion and feeling as much as, if not more than, the factual message that the artist chooses to convey, the feeling of the art should be seriously considered. Today’s children, both boys and girls, are active, running around in blue jeans, T-shirts, and tennis shoes. Artwork should be attractive to these children and depict a message that relates to the everyday experiences of children. Decorative art does not do this.

The art in this booklet is historically and theologically inaccurate. Biblical art should not convey misinformation about events in Jesus’ life. In a book about Jesus, for example, one picture for the Luke birth story shows a clean barn with animals transfixed by the baby. Another illustration in the Matthew birth story incorrectly depicts three (not biblical) wise men (astrologers or magicians) on camels (not biblical). These pictures can lead children to think incorrectly about the historical event of the birth of Jesus and, in so doing, they are distracted from the theological messages of the two gospel writers.

This small booklet, the children will find manageable. The “Important Words to Know” and the “Notes” are very helpful sections of the booklet which give additional information as identified in the text for immediate reference. These two sections alone are worth the purchase price of the booklet.

Once again, let us all rejoice any time the needs of children are taken seriously! But, in our rejoicing, let us continue to recognize the distance yet needed to be traveled before major publishers will provide adequate Bible translations for children.