



Quaker Universalist Voice
**Children's Bibles:
A Consumer's Guide**
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Each year during the Christmas season, bookstores promote Bibles for children. There are so many choices that unless the consumer goes to the bookstore with a set of criteria well in mind or in hand, it will be easy to either buy the slickest one, the fattest one, prettiest one, or to walk out in a state of confusion.

There are six criteria that we have used to evaluate children's Bibles:

1. Is the text accurate?
2. Can children read and understand the text?
3. Is the integrity of each book of the Bible retained?
4. Is the language and imagery sex-inclusive? Does it sex-stereotype or exclude women?
5. Are the illustrations appropriate and do they teach what you want them to teach?
6. Does the children's Bible present the theology you want for your child?

There is no Bible presently available that meets all these criteria. Before going to a bookstore to choose a child's Bible, you need to know that you will be making compromises. You need to decide, before going to the store, what you're willing to compromise and what you are unwilling to compromise.

After seeing all the children's Bibles available, you can decide to wait to give Bibles to your children until they are old enough to read and understand an adult translation. If you're determined to purchase a Bible for a child, these criteria may be useful in your search.

Accuracy: Books entitled "The Bible" and sold for children are often sold under false pretenses. Too often, the "Biblical" word is used as a cover for writing fiction, which is then presented to be children as "The Bible." Truth in advertising is a casualty.

For example, read the following few lines of fiction, which is three times removed from the original Greek and yet is sold as the Bible for children. "One morning Jesus rose early; it was still dark outside. He blew out the oil lamp, open the door and went down the street. The town was still quiet, but voices could be heard by the Harbor.... Matthew peeped out cautiously through his little window, then ducked his head again and pretended to be very busy with his papers. What happened then was beyond the understanding of all those who saw it. Jesus walked past the customs house and cried, 'Follow me.' And Matthew stood up, left everything and followed him." (pp. 95, 111)

This example is from J. Klink, *The Bible for Children*, translated from Klink's original fiction into English by P. Crampton)

Compare this fiction to the Biblical text. (See Matthew 9:9, Mark 2:13 – 14, and Luke 5:26 – 28) Then, ask yourself if the fiction teaches the theology of the gospel writer for the storyteller? Will children misunderstand the intent of the gospel writer if given this fiction as the Bible?

The Biblical writers use language carefully. The insertion of fictional details distorts the meaning and trivializes the story. We should not teach our children to read a false Bible.

Readability: An unread Bible is no Bible. Cheaper bookends and dust gatherers are available. You do not teach a child that the Bible is an important book by keeping it beautiful and unread. The book you purchase should be one that a child can understand.

An assessment of readability can be made without doing actual word counting and without using the readability graph, simply by knowing the factors used to judge readability. The fewer syllables per sentence, the lower the reading age. Shorter words and shorter sentences equal lower reading age. The closer the simple subject (noun) is to the simple predicate (verb), the easier the sentence is for children to understand.

It is important that you know the child will be using the Bible and then judge the readability level the way that particular child uses language. If the Bible is to be read to a child, the readability level can be higher than if the child is expected to read the Bible alone.

Randomly, read at three or more locations in each book to assess readability.

Integrity: People who write fiction as Bible stories often harmonize the Gospels even though the Church has long said it should not be done. Harmonized and amalgamated fiction should not be given to our children who must later unlearn mistaken lessons.

First, these fiction writers tell stories as if all four Gospels said the same thing. Second, they rewrite the story of Jesus as if from one person's point of view, not the point of view of the four separate communities from which the original Gospels came. Third, those who attempt to harmonize the Gospels usually do it by taking details from all four Gospels and weaving them into one story without regard to the original context or the purpose of the original author for using the detail in a specific way.

Examples of amalgamation of gospels are many and easy to spot. One well-known example is inclusion of the wise ones (wrongly called "Kings" by song and story writers) from Matthew's Gospel at the birth of Jesus alongside the shepherds from the Luke's Gospel. Another is combining Matthew stories of Joseph with Luke's stories of Mary without any regard for the purpose or setting of the original authors in writing these two birth stories.

In H. Doss, *Young Readers Book of Bible Stories*, you can read: “See that you do not despise one of these little ones,’ Jesus murmured as he stroked the child’s hair. In heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father” (p. 282.) (For comparison to the Biblical text, see Matthew 18:1-6, Matthew 19:13 – 15, Mark 10:13 – 15, Luke 9:46 – 48 and 18:15 – 17) Note that in none of these texts are angels mentioned nor is “the face of my father.” To understand the Biblical message about the “children’s passages” in the Bible, see H. Weber, *Jesus and the Children* (WCC).

Compare for yourself, the fictional text with the biblical text. In taking stories out of context and harmonizing all of the Gospels into one text, Biblical fiction writers distort the intention of the original authors and, in doing so, write into the text their own theology without recognizing the ancient wisdom of the Church in maintaining the four separate and distinct Gospels.

Sex-inclusive Language and Imagery: Biblical fiction writers reflect their own society in giving preference to strong male images and weak, or nonexistent, female images. This occurs both in the writing and in the choice of subjects. These practices give children a greatly distorted understanding of the Bible and the roles and relationships of men and women.

The risk that children will need to discard, after finding incorrect, their first and often most lasting and deeply learned understandings of the Bible. If they do not later find them to be incorrect, they will be condemned to continue throughout life with mistaken belief that they know what the Bible says, because, earlier in their life, they were told they were reading “The Bible.”

An example comes from M. Franchiotti, *Stories from the Bible*, “The men of the family shared in the great services of the Temple. The little brothers thought that Jesus was a man indeed when they saw him going off with Joseph wearing his praying (sic) shawl for the first time. ... ‘We shall find the young rascal, never fear...’ said Joseph with his steady cheerfulness.’ (pp. 179 – 180) To compare the Biblical text, see Luke 2:41 – 52.

Usually, you will not need to look beyond the table of contents to tell whether a particular book is sex-inclusive or if male imagery is distorted. If all of the titles are about men and if the titles used that sex-stereotyping words (e.g. girl, virgin, widow, daughter), you have a clue to what you will find in the contents.

Arch books, for example, has 12 sets of six books each. In all of these titles, there are only four female-specific titles and two of those define women in terms of their role in relationship to men. (“The farmer takes a wife” and “The innkeeper’s daughter”). There are 26 male specific references in the book titles, none of which are defined in relation to women.

The following are only two examples of the kinds of sex– distorted writing that can be easily found by paging through a wide variety of children’s Bibles: in H. Hoffman, *Children’s Life of Jesus*, the author writes: “The ancient Jews told a story about the first

men. Men lived in a beautiful garden.... God said to the man....”. (Compare the Biblical text in Genesis 2:3.)

In D. Murray, *Illustrated Children’s Bible*, the author writes, “Scarcely had he finished praying, when a beautiful girl came bearing a pitcher on her shoulder.” (p. 24). Compare the image of women this represents with the text in Genesis 24:45.

Illustrations: At the bookstore, the first thing to catch your eye, as publishers intend, is the illustrations. No publisher sells children’s Bibles to children. Illustrations exist to sell children’s Bibles to adults. Bible illustrations are then forced on children by adults who do not realize that the illustrations have a greater impact on children than will the words which they are used to illustrate.

We are a visual culture. Pictures convey feelings and emotions as well as interpret the story. Children do not have an adequately developed sense of history to appreciate that the illustrations are intended to depict scenes from the first century and earlier. When we use historical art with children, we end up teaching them history and ancient culture more than theology.

Artistic accuracy is essential. Historical art, if accurate, is appropriate for older children and adults as they seek to understand the Bible in the cultural and historical setting in which it was experienced and written. Children should first learn that the Bible is primarily theology about the deepest concerns of people. Later, they will develop the understanding that it is also, but secondarily, a book of history.

When looking specifically at the illustrations, note the number of times that women are depicted, and the number of times women are shown as central figures, compared to men. All children need to be able to identify with the characters and situations in the text and in the pictures. This is essential for girls as well as boys. The original Bibles had no illustrations. Illustrations reflect cultural choices of the marketing departments of publishing houses.

In reviewing children’s Bibles, I have divided the illustrations into three basic types and give each type a label:

1. Victorian historical art;
2. Hollywood art, depicting perfect people in a perfect world; and
3. 20th century art styles depicting first century culture.

Victorian Art: At its worst, this is the stereotyped Sunday School, doctor’s office, bathrobe art, which most of us grew up seeing and which has become “standard” religious art for children. It is not historically accurate. It is frequently very poor art. It conveys a standard of contrived and insipid feelings in the characters or the situation of the written text. It is flat art that emphasizes a feeling of sentimentality.

Hollywood art showing perfect people in a perfect world: These children’s Bibles are usually printed on very slick paper with many vivid colors. This kind of art

makes the biblical characters and situations highly unreal, glamorous, and perfected. It is historically inaccurate and has a modern, but unreal sense about it. Although this type of art usually illustrates an historical situation, sometimes it mixes historical and modern characters, such as modern children wearing pretty pink dresses and blue suits in a little white church or among beautiful flowers and trees with an historical Jesus. One example of Hollywood art can be found in *Great Bible Stories for Children*, illustrated by C. Tora and A. Mairani.

20th Century art styles depicting first century culture: These art styles have potential for helping children connect their life with the text. However, it suggested to the young reader that the Bible is to be read from an historical perspective, which limits a young child's ability to identify their own experiences with the text.

Examples include the colorful paintings in B. Wildsmith, *Illustrated Bible Stories* and the line drawings of A. Vallotton in *The Good News Bible* (TEV). Both of these artists depict most of their biblical characters as male.

Theology: The theological stance of translators, editors, and publishers is particularly evident in all children's Bibles. It is very important that you be aware of the theological perspective a child's Bible presents. This means that, as an adult, you need to read examples of the text carefully and compare them with your own spiritual experience and understanding of the Bible's message. Have confidence in your own experience in assessing the text of children's Bibles.

We must not have an easy and simple theology, which we give to children with comfortable confidence that they will discard it as they grow and mature. If an idea is taught to children, it should be one that will be true when they are adults as it is asserted when they are children. Their theology will mature. However, children should not be burdened with a theology that must be discarded as they grow into mature adults.

Translations for children

After looking at several children's Bibles, you will most likely be relieved to find that after 400 years of translating the Bible for adults into many languages, a few actual translations into English for children are now being sold as children's Bibles. But, this relief is tempered with serious disappointment. Meeting the one criteria of readability does not meet all of the important criteria for children's Bibles.

Two examples are the *Taize Picture Bible*, which is a book of selected Biblical passages adapted from the text of the *Jerusalem Bible*, with illustrations by E. de Saussure of the Taize community. *The International Children's Bible* (ICB) New Century Version is a translation specifically for children.

However, both of these translations for children fail the test of accuracy in their lack of use of the inclusive language of the original Greek and Hebrew. They use male terms (e.g. man, men, he, him, and his) as generic terms. Because these books are at a

readability level of children and, therefore aim to have short sentences, male image pronouns are used more frequently than in translations for an adult audience.

Both of these Bibles for children also retain technical theological terms. The international children's version has helpfully included a dictionary of terms and uses asterisks to note the terms that are defined in the dictionary. However, when looking at this Bible, look at the definition of a few key terms, as a way to check both its helpfulness in defining difficult terms and to compare its theological perspective with your own. Examples of dictionary entries include: "spirit" ... is part of man that was made to be like God because God is Spirit. The New Testament also talks about evil spirits (John 4: 23–24, James 2:24 – 26); See also "demons" "Holy Spirit" and "soul". "Holy Spirit" ...is one of the three persons of God. The other two persons are God, the Father and God, the Son, (Jesus). The Holy Spirit helped the apostles do miracles. He led men to write God's Word. The Holy Spirit lives in Christians today. He is also called the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of God and the Comforter."

Translation into English as a Second Language

The Good News Bible (TEV) was not translated for children, but for people who read and speak English as a second language. It uses maleness – imaged words for which there is nothing in the Greek to indicate maleness. Its theological bias is particularly evident and can be most easily seen in the letters of Paul.

Before purchasing any Bible for anyone, it is good to compare several passages from the candidate Bible with other translations that you respect, such as the Revised Standard Version (RSV), being aware that the RSV also does not use inclusive language. When selecting a Bible for a child, compare with these translations.

Choosing a Bible for a child is a difficult task and should be undertaken carefully. Take time to do it thoughtfully. It is my hope that these six criteria will help the family and friends who want to choose wisely.