

## THE BAD BOOK

*For hundreds of years, children have had to be protected from the Bible.*

*THE BIBLE FOR CHILDREN: From the Age of Gutenberg to the Present* By Ruth B. Bottigheimer Illustrated. 338 pp. New Haven: Yale University Press. \$35.

By Nicholas Tucker

Children have always been drawn to the best stories. Classic fairy tales, initially published by and for learned folklorists had to adapt swiftly to the demands of a delighted young audience. Junior versions of "Gulliver's Travels" and "Robinson Crusoe" followed hard upon the publication of the originals. So it is hardly surprising that once the Bible became widely available in print, it too proved a rich treasure-trove for children's imaginations.

The Old Testament in particular is full of action-packed stories. Its cast of principal characters and props includes talking animals, flames that burn but do not consume and a hero who wrestles all night with a supernatural stranger. Prophetic dreams turn out to be all too true, and rods change into snakes, grow overnight into blossoming trees, make fire and part the waters. The giant Og, with his 15-foot bed, jostles for space with witches and magicians. Superman Samson single-handedly slays a thousand of his enemies, armed merely with the jawbone of an ass.

But just as Malory, Swift and even the brothers Grimm were partly rewritten with what were held to be the tender susceptibilities of children in mind, so too the Bible was amended, simplified and censored in editions for younger readers. Despite the fact that it was manifestly a holy book, there were some episodes in it that, in the words of one 19th-century commentator, required "constant artifice and evasion to divert the attention of inquisitive children" from unfit subjects. In her survey *The Bible for Children*, Ruth B. Bottigheimer, the author of *Grimm's Bad Girls and Bold Boys*, concentrates on passages that have often caused most concern. Her research is impressive in scale, admirable in scholarship and fascinating for the light it throws on different attempts to socialize the young through Bible stories rewritten according to particular social agendas. If there is a better book published about children's literature in the coming year, it will have to be a very good one.

Children's Bibles first came of age in the 16th and 17th centuries and were generally written by men with all the normal male prejudices of their times. Consequently, certain tricky moments in the text either disappeared or emerged as travesties of the original. Even Protestant editors, who believed strongly in making the Bible accessible to all worshipers, had no problems with occasionally falsifying the record for children. A potentially embarrassing incident like Noah's drunkenness vanished from most German and British children's Bibles. Roman Catholic versions kept it in, but added some face-saving excuses for this venerable worthy. A 1714 edition suggested that Noah became drunk only because the Flood had prevented him from taking wine for a year.

A more sinister idea comes across in the handling of Abraham's near murder of his son Isaac, Christianity's Oedipal story-in-reverse. Isaac, described by Josephus as 37 years old at the time, was gradually infantilized over the years until he became the 8-year-old child familiar in pictures. Abraham with his knife upraised is therefore carrying a strong message to young readers about the way small children are entirely at their father's mercy. (Eventually, most editors either dropped this story or else softened it by omitting any mention of sacrifice.)

Other grisly moments from the Old Testament, Ms. Bottigheimer observes, were treated with a mixture of blandness and moral confusion. The story of Jephthah's murder of his young daughter, as a result of an unwise vow made on the battlefield, was bafflingly described in 1915 as emphasizing "the providence of God Almighty, His justice and mercy." Lot's peace offering of his virgin daughters to the Sodom mob raging outside his house was said in 1824 to be "perfectly consonant with the usage of those times and countries . . . doing evil that good might come." His later incest with those same daughters, when it was described at all, was attributed to their depravity--in one example under the strange subtitle "Lot Loses His Chastity."

In the attempt to elevate the father's authority at all costs, it was inevitable that women as well as children would come in for more than their share of negative attention. David's adultery with Bathsheba was sometimes described as

equally her fault, with an 18th-century illustration showing her deliberately exposing herself during her ablutions to a thoughtful-looking David, who just happened to be passing by. Dinah's rape by Shechem, in Genesis, was explained in 1803 by the fact that she "had not exactly enjoyed the best upbringing." In 1763, the Levite's violated and murdered wife was described as "frivolous," although there is nothing in the original gory account, found in Judges, to justify this opinion, A German children's Bible published shortly afterward focused, unbelievably, on the Levite's own suffering as he dismembered his wife limb by limb as a punishment for a rape by others that he had been responsible for in the first place.

No one would have dared take such liberties with Jael, an Old Testament female warrior, also from Judges, who dispatched the defeated Canaanite leader Sisera by hammering a tent peg through his head. But far from applauding such vigorous patriotism, Ms. Bottigheimer points out, many male writers condemned Jael for carrying out "a cruel devilish trick." More often in the children's Bibles, she too was simply allowed to disappear, as was Deborah, another fighting Hebrew matriarch. Their roles in delivering Israel from its enemies proved too aggressive an example of femininity for many editors.

No scholar could cover all the different retellings of the Good Book for children. Moreover, with Bible reading itself having generally gone out of fashion, Classic Comics and the biblical films of Hollywood may be the most common way in which recent generations of young readers have become acquainted with Old Testament stories. Neither of these modern sources gets any systematic coverage in Ms. Bottigheimer's work, but perhaps they could one day form the grounds for an equally engaging sequel.

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