

“A Review of Children’s Bibles” by John Beeson

Tremper Longman and DA Carson have put out two very fine slim volumes that review Old (Longman) and New Testament (Carson) commentaries. I highly recommend them as a guide for sermon preparation. If you don’t have them, get them. It is money well spent.

What does this have to do with children’s Bibles, you ask? Well, reading these brief surveys got me thinking that the world could use a similar review of children’s Bibles. Any of you with children know what a task it can be to find decent children’s Bibles. My wife and I have already tossed two (one was tossed so quickly that I don’t review it here since I’ve forgotten its title).

Let me speak first to the purpose of a toddler’s Bible. I would encourage all parents to read the “real” Bible with their kids, but I also think that toddler’s Bibles used well are an invaluable pedagogical tool. Used well they can stir a love for the word of God in the child’s heart, helping children think and process biblical stories, truths, and God’s redemptive story from an early age.

Writing a toddler’s Bible is a monumental task and I hope my reviews are read in that light. I don’t intend to attack the authors who I believe haven’t done well. After all, the author is tasked with a) paraphrasing the Bible (a hard enough job!); b) paraphrasing it in a way toddlers will not only grasp, but find intriguing (!); c) picking and choosing which stories to tell; and d) in all of this somehow not completely corrupt or distort the meaning of the Holy Scriptures! Surely it is an impossible task I wouldn’t dare take up myself. That said, it is a task many have failed, and some have failed miserably.

On with the reviews!

My Favorite Bible Storybook for Toddlers

The Good:

My kids love the flip-up tabs on each story that has a paraphrase of a Bible verse on it. The questions at times are helpful in engaging your children in the story.

The Bad:

Where do I begin? This is probably the worst Bible we’ve owned. The stories are poorly told and usually miss the point. The selection of the stories is also lousy. Perhaps my biggest problem is the fact that there is no story of Jesus’ crucifixion (The book tells the story of the Last Supper and then the story of the resurrection. “Was Jesus resurrected from his meal?!” a friend of mine asked after reading it.).

The Grade:

F: Ahhh, the irony of the name. But there’s no two ways about it, this is a lousy Bible. From the puddle-deep theology to the misleading questions to the ludicrously insipid pictures (I’m looking now at the Garden of Eden where a googly-eyed squirrel sits perched on a tree watching a

googly-eyed elephant chase a googly-eyed mouse) this Bible is one big belly flop in the pool of children's Bibles.

Baby's First Bible, Baby's Bedtime Bible Stories

The Good:

The story has a wonderful interactive pedagogical component to it where each story encourages your baby to interact with the story (e.g. for the creation story, the baby is told to: "Look outside. Point to the things God made."). Additionally, there are a handful of scripture verses sprinkled through the book that are great for memorization.

The Bad:

Each story is told over only 1 or 2 pages and is told in only 2-3 sentences. This style makes it a difficult read. Do you read through the whole book in one setting with your baby, the stories following one after another with seemingly no connection? Do you just read the one or two pages with a few sentences and stop?

The Grade:

D: The publishers would have been better suited to put one or two stories in each book, giving each book an actual narrative and thus engaging your baby through the whole book. The artwork is below average: the typical tacky, characterless baby fare.

The First Step Bible

The Good:

Mack Thomas, the author, clearly has a knack for engaging his audience. He has a playful way to narrate stories that works well for babies and toddlers. Each character engages your child and engages with him or her. At the beginning the style is a bit odd, but it grows on you as you read it. In a playful way, this brings your baby right into the story.

The Bad:

Admittedly the story of Christ's death and resurrection is difficult material for any children's Bible author. But it must also be admitted that this Bible fails that critical test. The story is probably the worst in the whole Bible. Jesus, we are told, has been "hurt" by "some bad people" and now hidden in a cave. Confusingly, Jesus then appears and tells Mary a message that would confuse anyone under the age of 12: "Mary, go tell my disciples that I will soon go up to Heaven." It all adds up to sheer confusion for any child.

The Grade:

C-: One of the fundamental flaws of this Bible is that it tells most stories in typical “good guys” vs. “bad guys” fashion where your child is encouraged to identify with the “good guys.” This ubiquitous pitfall is clearly difficult to avoid in writing for children, however, one wishes it could be handled better. I also understand that illustrating such a long book (440+ pages) makes the task difficult, but the dredge that passes for illustrations here is really unacceptable.

[The Beginners Bible](#)

The Good:

Karyn Henley has chosen an excellent selection of stories that make up this Bible. She includes such often omitted stories as Balaam’s ass, King Saul, Elijah, Pentacost, and Paul’s conversion story. The crucifixion esurrection is a good enough retelling. It is direct, clear, and does not shroud the fact that Jesus did, in fact, die.

The Bad:

The writing tends to be rather choppy and the stories are uneven: some are written pretty well, others poorly. There is not much by way of theological interpretation or application.

The Grade:

B: This classic has been around the block and has aged pretty well. Like many other Bibles, the illustrations are really just rubbish. Unlike *The First Step Bible* there are actually a handful of decent illustrations among its 500+ pages, but on the whole it’s an unenthusiastic artistic attempt.

[The Preschoolers Bible](#)

The Good:

V. Gilbert Beers’ retelling of the story of Christ’s death and resurrection is exemplary, explaining exactly what happened and the theological significance of the event. He also does an excellent job of making the stories connect to the larger redemptive story.

The Bad:

All authors have rhythms, and Beers’ rhythm of retelling stories involves asking some simple questions usually at the beginning or end of each story. Sometimes this distracts from the story itself, and many times it obfuscates the point of the story. Beers writing style is also a bit halting for my taste.

The Grade:

B+: I really recommend this Bible. Like *The Beginners Bible* it does a good job of telling a good sampling of Bible stories including such rarely told stories as: God giving the Israelites meat to eat, David and Mephibosheth (!), King Joash, Dorcas, Agrippa and Paul, and Philip and the Ethiopian. The book is aimed at ages 3-5, but I think you'll find it is really better suited for ages a bit younger (2-4). The illustrations are well done (despite the stupid illustration chosen for the cover). Teresa Walsh has a nice touch and manages to actually make most of the characters look like they come from their proper country of origin (what a concept!).

[The Eager Reader Bible](#)

The Good:

Daryl Lucas gets it. He just knows how to write for his audience. He has a smooth style, an ability to separate what is necessary to the story and ancillary, and a good grasp of the whole story that overarches all of the particular stories. The selection of stories is as good as either *The Preschoolers Bible* or *the Beginners Bible*. His telling of the crucifixion is four pages long (most other Bibles are two), and he tells the story poignantly. Lucas uses dialogue well and it keeps his narration moving forward. He also includes questions that actually will make your toddler think and retell you the story. The Bible also has a very helpful topical index at the back.

The Bad:

Not much. There are times where I wish Lucas would allow his theology to come out a bit more, but he wants the story to do the talking and I appreciate that.

The Grade:

A-: An outstanding Bible that should be on the bookshelves of parents everywhere. It's only weakness are its illustrations which are an uneven match to the brilliant narrative. The illustrations, in contrast, are very pedestrian.

[The Jesus Storybook Bible: Where Every Story Whispers His Name](#)

The Good:

Sally Lloyd-Jones pulls no punches. She sees the Bible through a strong redemptive-historical context and she proclaims it through every story. She is a good story teller and has a nice way of bringing the drama out of each story. She also makes her characters come to life, frequently moving beyond the bounds of what scripture tells us as she re-imagines the characters.

The Bad:

The pattern that is used in the telling of the Old Testament stories can become tiresome as Jesus inevitably becomes woven into every story at the end. Who is the true hero who will come? Jesus. Who would be the Prince who would one day come from God? Jesus. At times one feels

like the story-telling leads to the condition that has been jokingly told to lead Sunday School children to answer “Jesus!” to every question asked.

The Grade:

A: This is a wonderful Bible and should be a staple on every church’s and family’s bookshelves. It is important for children to engage the Old Testament through New Testament eyes and to see Christ as the center and end of history. What separates this Bible from the pack are its breathtaking illustrations. Jago’s whimsical and vibrant illustrations actually surpass the fine writing of Lloyd-Jones, often providing unique interpretations through the drawings themselves. Jago seems to turn every story sideways and sees something fresh in it I missed.

The Children’s Bible Story Book

The Good:

This Bible claims to be for ages 3 and up, but skews a bit older than that in reality. It is, by far, the most complete of the Bibles reviewed, both in the telling of the stories and the number of stories included. It is told simply, but does not cut many corners in its telling.

The Bad:

The length of the stories will be too much for younger kids. Sometimes three or four stories will be placed around one large picture which means that only one of the stories has a picture that accompanies it.

The Grade:

A: This is a great transition Bible for older toddlers. The stories are fuller than in any of the other Bibles on this list. Younger kids may have some trouble with the length of the stories, but it’s a great bridge to getting your kids into a “real” Bible. The illustrations are top notch and the large size of the pages enables the artist freedom to do some creative things with the illustrations.

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