Article

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Power and responsibility: re-presenting the Bible for children in the secular West

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Abstract

This article explores the challenges of translating the Bible for children within a secular Western context. It examines debates on selective adaptation, paraphrasing, and the inevitable interpretive biases that arise in children's Bible translations. It highlights the tensions between textual fidelity and cultural sensitivity and a range of other concerns. Ultimately, it advocates a storytelling approach that includes interaction between teller and audience, so that the stories are co-created. At the same time, it suggests that transparency about where the original story can be located in a Bible is essential in a world of low biblical literacy.

Keywords

children's Bible, paraphrase, storytelling, translation

Introduction

This article follows two questions at the heart of translating the Bible with an eye to a young audience, although these two questions could also apply to any translation for any audience. First, what is the selection of material to be translated? Second, to what extent is it acceptable for the translator to paraphrase, or to otherwise interpret, the text for the reader/listener? These are two questions that are asked in various ways by many of those who comment on how children's Bibles have been translated. I will suggest that there are no easy answers to these questions, and that it depends on the context

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for which one is undertaking the work of translation. The context into which the translation is being made is often left out of the debate. However, if the Bible is to have an intimate relationship with the Church, then the situation in which the Church finds itself must be of importance to the work of translation. If the Bible is to play a role in evangelism, and in mission more generally, how it is translated matters. Examples will be given in this article of occasions when translations have deliberately pushed a particular agenda, in one case with sinister intent. Some other cases will be noted where seemingly strange translational choices appear to have been made because of the time in which the translation was made, likely without the translators being especially aware of what they were changing about the biblical text. I will begin with a brief examination of the debate on these questions over the last hundred years. I will then tackle the question of paraphrasing and interpretation, and the question of what to translate. I will end by exploring the example of storytelling versions of the Bible as one possible good answer to the questions raised here. There are no perfect answers, but storytelling has much to offer.

One hundred years of debate

In 1924, an editorial in *Theology*, by Gordon Selwyn, compared the virtues of different educational syllabi for the teaching of Christianity, along with some comments on the two children's Bibles (*The Children's Bible* and *The Little Children's Bible*) that had been published by Cambridge University Press at the same time as the Cambridgeshire syllabus for teaching religious education was published.[1] In regard to the Bibles themselves, the editorial is disappointed that the story seems to stop once Jesus has been resurrected, 'without a verse from the Acts of the Apostles and with only five snippets from St Paul's Epistles'.[2] The main concern is that the Bibles in question do not give any impression that the Church is an ongoing institution that 'Jesus … left to carry on his work'.[3] In terms of a critique of the Cambridgeshire syllabus, the editorial avers that it 'cannot discover any clear thread of faith or meaning running through the selections of stories from the Old and New Testaments here strung together'.[4] All of this is held in unfavourable contrast to another syllabus, developed by the Diocese of Winchester and held to be far more comprehensive.[5] This was all one hundred years ago. But the questions raised about the content of children's Bibles and the interplay of translation and interpretation have never gone away.

In his 1986 critique of children's Bibles, Harm Hollander essentially agrees with Selwyn's critique. He says that the value of many such books has been 'questioned by educationalists and theologians, since they think that these Children's Bibles present a picture of the message of the Bible which in many ways is not true'.[6] Hollander takes aim at two particular targets. First, often such Bibles do not feature a selection of texts that is 'representative' of the Bible. Second, they 'moralise in an inadmissible way' and simplify the complexity and ambiguity of the text.[7] He advocates for translating (ideally) the whole Bible in an age-specific way. He admits that sometimes this will necessarily mean paraphrasing, rather than translating some sentences, but when this happens there 'should not be any hint of additions to the text that breathe a particular ideological or theological spirit'.[8] Furthermore, 'passages should not be adapted in order to

make them more exciting than they really are, or be left out because they do not fit in with the translator's ideas'.[9]

In her analysis of Bible stories written for Jewish American children, Penny Gold observes editorial choices that would fall foul of Selwyn's or Hollander's strictures. She writes of the way in which these Bibles are usually 'collections of "stories" or "tales" centered on biblical characters'.[10] They also usually 'employ a highly simplified language, they avoid inappropriate subjects through omission or circumlocution, and they add explanatory material to enhance a child's comprehension'.[11] Gold notes that this is very similar to Christian Bibles for children, which Jewish authors have been well aware of in their work. Nevertheless, Gold feels that such authors have deliberately emulated the style, because they saw that it worked, while making careful, Jewish, editorial decisions for their texts.[12]

Gold points out that in his 1918 retelling of the Bible for 'Young Israel', Mendel Silber recasts the miracle at the Red Sea as a natural phenomenon. It is 'as though' the sea had divided for Israel, and then an 'angry sea' killed the Egyptians. God is mentioned, but more as moral fibre to give the Israelites courage to cross the sea.[13] Similarly, Gold notes that other texts for children reduce the supernatural phenomena of the Hebrew texts, so that, for example, God does not speak directly to humans, but appears to them in dreams.[14] Furthermore, Gold notes many places where texts designed for children heavily edit the Hebrew texts to fit the morality of the time. For example, female characters are given more prominent roles in many children's versions than they have in the Hebrew texts, and in thinking of children's Bibles from the first half of the twentieth century, Gold comments that, although authors were content with Deborah being a 'Judge' of Israel, they often shied away from her role as a 'military leader'.[15] With the story of the Red Sea, it is likely that Silber was influenced by the demythologization of the Bible, then so much in vogue.

The many texts that promote female characters while carefully constraining activities viewed as proper for them to undertake are also products of their time and place. In both these cases, it is apparent that the story present in the Hebrew text has been changed to accommodate the context into which the story is presented. In a similar vein to Gold's comments, in examining changes to the story of Noah, Russell Dalton says that children's Bibles generally edit it to such an extent that they 'create new stories that carry different meanings' from the Hebrew text.[16]

Attempts at the creation of children's Bibles are thus fraught with difficulty. Whether Jewish or Christian, such attempts over the last hundred years have never really satisfied everyone, and maybe have often satisfied only a few.

Choices in retellings

Dalton's comment about the ease with which new meanings can be generated gets to the heart of the potential problems in translating the text, especially when being sensitive to an audience of children. However, it is also important to remember that this is not necessarily a bad thing. Alissa Droog begins her investigation into creation stories in children's Bibles by stating the truth that 'every retelling of a story is an interpretation'.[17] Thus, the

question of whether it is appropriate or not to interpret as one translates is actually a 'straw man', easily knocked down. Nevertheless, even though interpretation is inevitable, there is great complexity around the appropriate extent of that interpretation. As Robert Alter points out:

> [T]he Bible itself does not generally exhibit the clarity to which its modern translators aspire: the Hebrew writers reveled in the proliferation of meanings, the cultivation of ambiguities, the playing of one sense of a term against another, and this richness is erased in the deceptive antiseptic clarity of the modern versions.[18]

That is true for most modern translations of the Bible. Nevertheless, I suggest that this is more of an issue for children's Bibles than it is for other Bibles. I suggest that those who purchase such texts do not mind that the whole Bible is not translated; nor do they mind that the Bible they have bought is a paraphrase. It is always possible to insert one's own views and values into a translation, but I contend that it is far easier with children's Bibles than with others. Readers and other users positively expect that it will not accurately render the Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek texts, and so are predisposed to lay to one side any criticism that may otherwise occur to them.

Although rare, the insertion of the translator's views and values can be used for sinister means. Few people would support the idea of Apartheid, and yet Jeremy Punt points out that a children's Bible published in South Africa during the Apartheid era did just that. Punt notes the often-held assumption that children's Bibles are somehow 'pure' and 'without bias', and then demonstrates just how untrue this can be.[19] So at the extreme end, there are cases of Bibles that are clearly peddling a racist ideology. Then, more in the middle ground, we find Bibles that do what Gold describes, with translators 'fixing' apparent problems in the text, where the text does not conform to their own gender, or other, stereotypes. However, this is quite different from a text written to support Apartheid. Those translating and editing the story of Deborah were almost certainly not thinking too deeply. They were just making Deborah not too far outside the bounds of believability and acceptability, perhaps in their own minds as much as in the minds of potential readers. They did not do anything that the average translator of children's Bibles does in any age, even if we might make different choices in our own age. Given that it is not possible to create a children's Bible without any paraphrasing or interpretation, the best advice to translators is probably that they should try to be aware of what they are adding to and subtracting from the text.

In the creation of a children's Bible, it is, of course, possible to attempt to translate and present everything. But the question of whether this is a good approach is another matter. For example, the lengthy passages of highly detailed laws are difficult to make into something that would work for a children's Bible, unless they are highly paraphrased, and even then it would be a challenge. A good, recent, example of an attempt to recount the whole Bible for children has been written by Tom Wright.[20] The genius of Wright's work is that every story is pretty much the same length, and it is written in accessible language, but language that does not obfuscate what the stories actually say. More than this, though, Wright has explicitly chosen to translate the entire sweep of the narrative of the Bible,

without attempting to translate the whole of it. In doing so, the question of interpretation and theological position is again front and centre. Clearly, what an Anglican bishop chooses to include will be different from what an Orthodox rabbi might choose. What the 'sweep' of such a narrative is depends on the position of the one translating or retelling.

Perhaps the key question in deciding what to translate is to decide what story the translator wants to tell. J. David Velleman comments that 'a story does more than recount events; it recounts events in a way that renders them intelligible, thus conveying not just information but also understanding'.[21] In thinking about the overall arc of a narrative, Velleman goes on to comment that a good storyteller enables an audience to understand the narrative by getting the audience to connect emotionally with the story; such audiences understand because they know how it feels, and they empathize with the characters or situation.[22] Of course, there is a difference between simply reading a story and telling one. Rebecca T. Isbell notes that one of the great advantages of telling rather than reading is the ability to keep eye contact with the audience and to be more playful with the story, as well as there being simply more personal connection between teller and audience.[23] Suzanne Keen points out that the emotional response elicited by good storytelling is part of the education of children about emotion, particularly noting voices and facial expressions used by storytellers.[24] To rewrite a story from a text of the Bible for reading or for telling does not, therefore, simply mean to retell each and every detail, but, first, to be selective about the actual story that is to be told, and, second, to be selective about which elements to tell and how to tell them in such a way that engenders real engagement with the story.

A storytelling approach

One possible way forward is to lean into the storytelling approach, thinking about what it means actually to tell stories, rather than to rewrite primarily for reading. This approach makes no pretence to translate everything, and instead uses the written text of the Bible as a basis for the recovery of an oral and performative tradition. Richard Swanson notes that, in preparing the story for performance (whether as a single storyteller or as a company of actors), the story is re-membered; the physicality of the story is rediscovered as it is discovered anew that this is a story about real people, with real bodies, in real places.[25] He points out that such re-membering is done as an interplay between the text and the cultural context of the storyteller and audience.[26] One example of this is Donald Schmidt's book *Bible Wonderings*, where he retells stories from the Bible in new ways, imagining conversations between characters, and sometimes inverting gender expectations for those characters (such as having female Magi, who, incidentally, travel by car rather than by camel).[27] The beauty of Schmidt's stories is that they cannot be mistaken for the original text, and yet they nevertheless convey at least what Schmidt has decided to focus on as the message of the text.

In terms of the connection of Schmidt's stories to the actual text of the Bible, he provides the reference at the beginning of each story. He also provides a few sentences on what he has done with the story. The reader can therefore easily refer to the text, but

has also explicitly been informed that Schmidt's story is not the original, but rather is a riff on the tradition. The same thing has been done by Bob Haverluck in his lengthy stories explicitly set as 'stories in defense of the Earth'. He has a section at the end of the book that gives the Bible reference and an extensive explanation of his thought process in composing the story he has presented.[28] Schmidt's and Haverluck's stories were written for reading rather than storytelling per se, although, of course, they could be read aloud to children and presented in a storytelling format. However, Bob Hartman employs the same tactic of letting the reader know his sources in his book of Bible stories that were written specifically for storytelling. The contents pages of Hartman's work note the Bible reference for each of the stories he retells.[29] It is therefore not a stretch to suggest that it is best practice for storytellers to let audiences know the source of their materials, and I have followed this practice in my own retellings, at the start of every story, a presentation shared with various other children's versions, such as Julie Lavender's *Children's Bible Stories for Bedtime*.[30] For Bible storytellers, this means that no one can misconstrue the origin of the story as the storyteller's own idea. Instead, everyone knows that it comes from a tradition, and everyone is aware that the storyteller will have reshaped it.

To return to the idea of the physicality of a story, a number of retellings make use of the possibilities of interaction between teller and audience as a means of communicating the story through an element of co-creation. Hartman has included ideas for sounds and actions that audiences can be taught beforehand, which feature at various places in the story, so that they are ready to join in with the telling of the story. Hartman includes these at the end of the book.[31] In my own work, I have also included such sounds and actions, but have such suggestions with each story. Others have used other forms of interaction. Illustrators Stacy Peterson and Dan Crisp have created a Bible sticker activity book aimed at young children. The children become co-creators of the story through the interactive elements of adding stickers to pictures to complete the tellings of the stories.[32] Although not strictly interactive, in a similar vein, Phil Smouse has created retellings for children that rhyme, making the language especially enticing such that on subsequent readings, children may well join in with elements of the text.[33] One of the key things to remember with all interactivity is that a story will rarely be told the same way twice. Audiences will respond in different ways to apparently the same material, and so skilled storytellers will subtly change the telling to playfully interact with the audience.

The obvious interactive elements of a storytelling approach, along with the clear and careful referencing of the biblical source material, makes storytelling an engaging way of bringing biblical narratives to life. This approach not only honours the original text but also fosters a dynamic relationship between the story, the teller and the audience. By embracing co-creation and reimagination, the stories are re-membered, making the Bible accessible and meaningful, while also pointing beyond the stories as they are retold, and back to biblical tradition.

Conclusion

There is no such thing as a perfect approach to creating biblical retellings that are appropriate for children. In re-presenting the Bible for children, we confront a delicate balance

between faithfulness to the text and the necessity of interpretation. This task is inevitably shaped by cultural, theological, educational and other concerns. As has been noted, past translators often moulded biblical stories to fit contemporary values and norms, sometimes at the expense of biblical complexity, and sometimes with huge inbuilt bias, occasionally quite deliberately so. This demonstrates the inherent challenge of adapting biblical narratives for young audiences, who require both accessibility and depth. The storytelling approach to presenting biblical narratives offers a means of engaging audiences in a way that is both creative and faithful. By integrating interactivity, clear referencing and imaginative retellings, storytellers bridge the gap between ancient texts and contemporary listeners. By openly acknowledging the interpretive choices involved and providing clear references to the original texts, and by encouraging creativity on the part of teller and audience, the 'original' story is held in creative tension with the story as it appears in storytelling form in print, and with the story as it is actually told. Ultimately, the goal of presenting the Bible for children in a secularized society is not simply to transmit information but to kindle a sense of wonder and imagination. It is an opening of the door to the transcendent. Translators and tellers of the stories of the Bible have a responsibility to remain mindful of the power wielded by the way the stories are shaped, so that these narratives remain enriching for generations to come.

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Notes

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