



Religious Topics in Children's Literature

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THREE CENTURIES AGO, TO EXPLORE RELIGIOUS TOPICS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE would have been a redundant exercise, since all children's literature was religious. Spiritual guidance was, in fact, the only existing rationale for writing for children, whose souls were thought to be in need of saving from the moment of birth. One of the earliest documented works for children to come out of the European-American tradition is James Janeway's *A Token for Children: Being an Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives, and Joyful Deaths of Several Young Children* (1671). A famous stanza from this book reads:

When by spectators I am told
What beauty doth adorn me,
Or in a glass when I behold
How sweetly God did form me—
Hath God such comeliness bestowed
And on me made to dwell—
What pity such a pretty maid
As I should go to Hell!¹

In later centuries, children's books were published with an eye toward entertaining their young readers at the same time they were molding their behavior. Only recently have we begun to see children's books whose primary function is to

¹Cited in *The Riverside Anthology of Children's Literature*, ed. Judith Saltman, 6th ed. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1985) 3.

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entertain. Nowadays simply enticing children to spend time with a book can be an end in itself.

Of course, a book does not need to have an overt spiritual, moral, or educational lesson to inspire, guide, or teach. Kent L. Johnson recently mounted a convincing demonstration of David Jasper's thesis that all literature is religious, a claim that can equally apply to quality children's literature.² When children respond to a particular style or set of illustrations or to the lyricism of a picture-book text, their spiritual selves are nourished. Similarly, the connections young readers make with characters in a story can guide them to a richer understanding of themselves and others and help in the complicated process of sorting out their own value systems.

While all children's books published by religious and denominational presses have some connection to religion, a surprising number of children's books published by secular houses also address religious topics, primarily for Christian and Jewish audiences. Many of these are holiday books, fiction and nonfiction stories centering around Christmas and Hanukkah or, less frequently, Easter or Passover. Others are retellings of well-known Bible stories, generally from the Old Testament, in a picture-book format. Religion also appears in some fiction for teenage readers as an integral part of the plot or setting. Additionally, as an outgrowth of the multicultural movement in education, some recent books have appeared that describe religious practices outside the Judeo-Christian tradition. Since it is not possible to present a comprehensive survey of all these books, what follows are some of the more interesting and recent examples of how religious topics are addressed in contemporary children's books.

I. ILLUSTRATED BIBLE STORIES

Five recent children's books take as their subject the creation story, with approaches so different as to render the familiar story anew with each telling. *God's Gift*, with text by Jean Richards and illustrations by Norman Gorbaty, synthesizes the first two chapters of Genesis into simple, lyrical prose.³ Although the main structure of the biblical story has been retained, the author has taken the liberty of inventing details to make the story concrete for young listeners. Hence, though no mention is made of elephants in Genesis, Richards describes God as putting "his hands into the mushy clay" to make a huge body with four thick legs, a thin tail, and a big head with floppy ears and a long nose. When God sets this creature down next to his human creation, Man decides to call it Elephant. "'Elephant,' repeated God. 'What a fine name for a creature so big.'" Man has a slightly harder time finding an appropriate name for the graceful, large-winged insect that God creates, and children will laugh at his first attempt, Butterdog. The large format of this picture book allows for illustrations on a grand scale—images of God's creations that

²Kent L. Johnson, "Religious Themes in Best-Selling Novels," *Word & World* 14/3 (Summer 1994) 342.

³Jean Richards, *God's Gift*, illustrated by Norman Gorbaty (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

cover a full page and sometimes two, set against a black background of nothingness until the final two pages where the world in its completeness emerges into lightness and a dizzying array of color set against white. Such illustrations cannot help but reinforce the wonder of creation.

For slightly older readers, artist James E. Ransome has illustrated James Weldon Johnson's poem, "The Creation," which was written in 1919 and later appeared in Johnson's volume, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (Viking, 1927).⁴ Ransome's version of *The Creation* offers an earthly setting, opening on an outdoor scene where a southern country storyteller sits at the foot of a tree surrounded by young listeners. Told in the cadences of African-American oral tradition, the text begs to be read aloud from the first lines:

And God stepped out on space, —
And he looked around and said,
"I'm lonely —
I'll make me a world."⁵

The world reflected in Ransome's illustrations is decidedly American, from a panoramic landscape scene that suggests the Grand Canyon to a rushing mountain stream to a forest filled with fauna and flora. This book ends with the creation of human beings: "Then into it He blew the breath of life, and man became a living soul," to which the children in the story respond, "Amen. Amen." And so will all young listeners with whom this book is shared.

Johnson's text has also been illustrated in another edition with pictures by a different artist, Carla Golembe.⁶ Golembe's approach is similar to that of Gorbaty in *God's Gift*, in that she begins with a representation of nothingness, out of which come stars, mountains, and other creations, all rendered abstractly in bold strokes of color against a dark background. When Adam and then Eve appear, they are placed in a setting suggestive of a Caribbean island. It is they who in turn utter the final two amens.

Jane Ray's ornate book, *The Story of the Creation: Words from Genesis* is the only one of these five books to use as its text the actual Bible passage in the King James Version.⁷ She frames the story with two sentences: "This is a story of how the world began," and "And that is a story of how the world began." In keeping with the ornate language found in the King James Bible, Ray's illustrations are intricate and elegant. With touches of gold leaf, they give the appearance of illuminations, filling the pages in arched shapes above the text and borders beneath. Her painting style draws on folk art for its images of stars and moons, animals and trees all packed into the paintings.

⁴Johnson also wrote the lyrics to "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," the hymn that has become known as the Black National Anthem. The text of this hymn is available as a children's book, *Lift Every Voice and Sing* (New York: Walker Books, 1993).

⁵James W. Johnson, *The Creation*, illustrated by James Ransome (New York: Holiday House, 1994).

⁶James W. Johnson, *The Creation*, illustrated by Carla Golembe (New York: Little, Brown, 1993).

⁷Jane Ray, *The Story of the Creation* (New York: Dutton, 1993).

The Book of Creation by Pierre-Marie Beaude, illustrated by Georges Lemoine, is considerably longer, and for good reason. It is at once the story of God's creation of the earth and a story of two shepherds, a father and son, set in the land of Canaan five hundred years before the birth of Christ.⁸ During their long nights out in the desert, Eliezer tells his son, Jonathan, the story of how the world came to be, a story that was told to him when he was Jonathan's age. The words came back to him slowly "from across all those years before they arrived there at his lips," a gentle reminder to readers of the oral nature of history. Eliezer parcels out the story in pieces, connecting it to his son's experience and drawing from it lessons on how to live. Jonathan rediscovers the first morning of the world as he awakens in the desert, seeing and sensing the vast sky, the feel of the air, the bubbling sound of a nearby spring. He thanks God for the sun and moon, finds joy in the plants and trees that yield shelter and food, learns from the animals, and observes his mother's patience and serenity.

With his father's guidance, Jonathan comes to understand his responsibility toward all these treasures: "The earth is an immense gift offered to woman and to man. It has been given to us to explore, to love, to discover and transform. We can do anything we choose on the earth, with only this one exception: We may not despoil it." This thoughtful book, appropriate for older children (and even teenagers, despite its illustrated format), speaks directly to humans today even as it describes a way of life over two thousand years ago.

II. BIBLE VERSES AND PRAYERS

Two well-known children's book illustrators, Tasha Tudor and Bijou LeTord, have both chosen to illustrate the Lord's prayer and the twenty-third psalm, and their interpretations of each couldn't be more different. Tudor's images are Victorian, and LeTord's contemporary. Depending on their preferences, readers will quickly gravitate toward one or the other.

Tasha Tudor has set *Give Us This Day: The Lord's Prayer* in the New England countryside. Using the traditional version of the prayer, she illustrates each section with framed vignettes of children in indoor and outdoor scenes, clothed in old-fashioned dress.⁹ By contrast, LeTord has chosen a rain forest as the setting for her book, *The River and the Rain: The Lord's Prayer*.¹⁰ LeTord's text is neither the traditional nor contemporary version of the prayer, but a retelling in her own words. "Our Father in Heaven," it opens, "Be praised! for your loving ways." Animals and people of the rain forest are loosely framed on a white background. LeTord's stylized art renders the ethnicity of the people unidentifiable, although olive skin tones and brown hair are in keeping with the Latin American setting.

⁸Pierre-Marie Beaude, *The Book of Creation*, illustrated by Georges Lemoine (Saxonville, MA: Picture Book Studio, 1991).

⁹Tasha Tudor, *Give Us This Day: The Lord's Prayer* (New York: Philomel, 1987).

¹⁰Bijou LeTord, *The River and the Rain: The Lord's Prayer* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

Similarly, Tudor's *The Lord Is My Shepherd: The Twenty-Third Psalm* follows a day in the life of a young girl who lives on a New England farm.¹¹ In the first illustration, an evening scene, she is saying her bedtime prayers. On the facing page, morning arrives, and with it the first verse of the psalm. Tudor's picturesque world of farm animals and garden flowers presents a feeling of security and shelter from life's more trying vicissitudes. In *The Little Shepherd: The 23rd Psalm*, LeTord retells the psalm from the point of view of a shepherd.¹² Her spare watercolors reflect the simplicity of her text. The phrase "I shall not want" becomes "I will not need much/ to make me happy each day." Two pictures accompany this line; the first shows the shepherd enjoying a midday meal of bread and fruit; the second picture reflects the affection that exists between the shepherd and his dog. For readers who may not know the psalm of David by heart, the King James Version is printed as a preface.

Bijou LeTord, French by birth but now a resident of New York, has also compiled a book of prayers from around the world, entitled *Peace on Earth*.¹³ The title page, as well as each chapter head, is printed in five languages—French, Chinese, English, Arabic, and German—but the selection of prayers has not been limited to these countries. The chapter "Plants and Harvesting," for instance, includes prayers from Mexican, Indian, Native American, and Israeli peoples as well as a prayer from Deut 8:7-11. From France comes this Breton fisherman's prayer with its universal application:

Dear God, be good to me.
The sea is so wide,
And my boat is so small.¹⁴

The chapters are arranged so that "Night and Moon" comes last, making this a good book from which families can choose bedtime prayers. As with her other work, LeTord's illustrations here are suggestive of the many people and places that make up God's world.

A larger and perhaps more useful collection is *A Child's Book of Prayers*.¹⁵ These prayers are divided into chapters by purpose or intention (e.g., "Saying Good Morning to God," "Telling God I'm Glad, Telling God I'm Sorry"). Like LeTord's volume, this one begins with morning and ends with night, encompassing all that passes between. The Breton fisherman's prayer is here, too; in fact, the majority of these prayers come from European traditions. But other cultures are represented as well, and Toki Miyashina's "Psalm 23 for Busy People" shows that prayers can also be humorous. It begins, "The Lord is my pace-setter, I shall not

¹¹Tasha Tudor, *The Lord Is My Shepherd: The Twenty-Third Psalm* (New York: Philomel, 1980).

¹²Bijou LeTord, *The Little Shepherd: The 23rd Psalm* (New York: Delacorte, 1991).

¹³Bijou LeTord, *Peace on Earth: A Book of Prayers from Around the World* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

¹⁴Ibid., 38.

¹⁵Linda Yeatman, *A Child's Book of Prayers*, illustrated by Tracey Williamson (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1992).

rush; he makes me stop and rest for quiet intervals.”¹⁶ Spot art decorates the pages and presents a westernized (and usually idealized) view of the world.

III. ILLUSTRATED CHILDREN’S BIBLES

Many illustrated versions of the Bible for children exist, but a recent one stands out. *The Children’s Illustrated Bible*, published by Dorling Kindersley, contains not only stories and pictures but also historical background and snippets of explanatory material.¹⁷ Everything is presented in a format that is familiar to children, as Dorling Kindersley, a British publishing firm, also created the popular *Eyewitness* series of nonfiction books. Like those books (and unlike any other children’s Bible), *The Children’s Illustrated Bible* combines artwork, photography, diagrams, and maps to bring alive the times and places talked about in the text.

In the chapter titled “Judas Plots to Betray Jesus,” for instance, marginal information includes a lifelike drawing of spikenard, the precious ointment that Mary used to anoint Jesus, and a photograph of an alabaster jar, with captions that describe their use in Jesus’ time. Such extensions serve to put Mary’s actions into context and deepen the reader’s understanding of what took place.

Most children’s Bibles include only selected passages of the Bible, retold for their young readers. So too, has Selina Hastings focused on the narrative aspects, citing the portion of the scriptures on which she based her retellings. Each Testament is prefaced by an introduction that places it historically and explains how it came to be written. All of the books of the Old Testament are represented in biblical order, while for the New Testament Hastings combines threads of the gospels to tell a clear narrative of the life of Jesus. The result is an eminently accessible book that does not sacrifice the complexity of the material. It is important to note, however, that Hastings does not make reference to the sometimes contradictory details contained in the four gospels but has simply chosen one over the other in her retelling.

IV. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

All of the above books and many others not discussed are published by secular publishing companies. In general they present a marked contrast to children’s books published by presses affiliated with a religious organization or driven by a religious mission. Part of the reason may lie in the market served, as religious publishers have traditionally published for their own market, which begins with congregational use but also includes denominational and Christian bookstores. Until recently, religious publishers have made no attempt to market to the general public, which has always been served by secular houses. Thus the books offered by religious houses often seem didactic and even unappealing in comparison.

¹⁶Ibid., 37.

¹⁷Selina Hastings, *The Children’s Illustrated Bible*, illustrated by Eric Thomas (New York: Dorling Kindersley, 1994).

An average of four thousand children's trade books are published each year, and competition among these books is keen. For sales, trade publishers depend on schools and libraries as well as bookstores. Although school libraries are a strong component of the market for children's trade books, they are naturally not part of the market for books on religious topics. Yet happily the number of these titles being published—and their variety—is increasing. The loss of the school library market is made up for in sales to church libraries as well as Christian and general interest bookstores, which find a small but steady clientele in parents, relatives, and godparents seeking gifts to commemorate baptisms, confirmations, and other important milestones in a child's religious life.

The proliferation of children's books on religious topics is significant, because it indicates a consistent interest in the religious education of children. Happily, it also offers a valuable benefit: a choice in how religious topics can be presented to children in a way that will capture and sustain their interest.