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Bible Story Teachings: A survey of children's bible stories about creation in 19th century Britain

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Every retelling of a story is an interpretation, and children's Bible stories are no exception. This paper analyzes changes made to the Biblical story of creation in a collection of thirteen Bible stories published in 19th century Britain. The aim of this paper is to answer two questions: what purpose did the story of creation serve in Bible stories in 19th century Britain, and what changes were made to the story to serve this purpose? Common themes and changes made to the Bible stories discussed here suggest that the story was told to children for various reasons. For many, the creation narrative was used to familiarize young children with the story, and changes were aimed to simplify the story. For others, the original sin was closely tied to Jesus' atonement, and in stories that stress this, Jesus often shows up as an additional character. Moreover, many versions of this story add lessons to impart moral or didactic advice to their audience. Overall, analyzing changes made to children's Bible stories reveals how authors changed the story of creation to influence their intended audiences.

Keywords: biblical reception history, Bible stories, Genesis 1-3, 19th century, religious literature, children's literature, Britain

Introduction

Now I shall tell you of the last thing God made.

God took some of the dust of the ground, and made the body of a man; then He breathed on it, and gave it a soul; so the man could understand about God. Adam was quite good like God. Adam loved God very much. (Mortimer, *Peep a Day*, 35).

Every retelling of a story is an interpretation, and children's Bible stories are no exception. The quote above is from the first lines of the story of Adam and Eve in Favell Lee Mortimer's bestselling children's Bible story collection, *Peep a Day* (MacFadden, 221). Even in these first lines, additions such as "Adam was quite good like God. Adam loved God very much" reveal explanations and lessons that Mortimer included in the story (Mortimer, *Peep a Day*, 35). To compare, the same verse pertaining this story in the King James version of the Bible reads, "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2.7). Analyzing changes made to Bible stories reveals the ideals and

assumptions of the authors as well as their purpose in telling the story. In one of the most comprehensive volume on Bible stories to date, Ruth Bottigheimer asserts the same importance for this genre, arguing that:

Children's Bibles express values and standards that are not universal and eternal but particular and ephemeral. Bound by place and time, they adapt an ancient and inspired text to changing manners, morals, ideas, and concerns. For authors, buyers, and readers in nearly every age children's Bibles have seemed to be texts faithful to the Bible itself. But their authors' common effort to use the Bible to shape a meaningful present has produced Bible stories that mingle sacred text with secular values (Bottigheimer, *The Bible for Children*, 218).

The term "children's Bible story" refers to a broad genre of Biblical stories intended to be read to or by children under the age of ten. This genre includes traditional children's Bibles story collections, as well as a diverse array of print formats for telling Bible stories. In 19th century Britain, Bible stories could be printed as stand-alone stories, as collections, as Sunday-School prize books, or as religious tracts. They could also be formatted as stories, letters, as mini lessons with questions, hymns, poems, or as conversations between an authority figure and child. Bible stories also appeared in Bible abecedaries and hieroglyphic Bibles. Much like the broader genre of children's literature at the time, different Bible stories would have been produced for different classes and groups of children, and for different levels of literacy (Bratton, 13).

Due to improvements in steam printing technologies and distribution channels for print materials, the availability of children's literature increased significantly in the 19th century (Bratton, 20). By the 19th century, children's Bible stories had grown considerably as a genre, and were important to both the literacy and religious education of youth in Britain. The spread of the Evangelical Revival in the 18th and 19th centuries allowed for the dispersion of religious teachings through print and oral culture (Ditchfield & Ditchfield, 100). Print culture was dominated by the religious tract, which first became popular after the publication of the Cheap Repository Tracts in 1769, and retained that popularity for seventy years (Cutt, 11). Tracts were cheaply produced and affordable, making it perfect for religious authors to publish Sunday School texts and other religious reading materials for children and adults alike. Moreover, the Sunday School movement, lasting from the later 18th century until the 1870 *Education Act*, focussed jointly on literacy education and the spread of religious beliefs (Bratton, 14).

Regardless of the type of publication, Bible stories of creation are important to analyze for three reasons. First, stories of creation allow a society to define who they are and where they come from. The stories of creation in Genesis 1-3 have had an undeniable impact on Western conceptions of the human condition (Pagels, xviii). Second, the story of creation is one of the most popular stories from the Hebrew Bible to appear in Bible story collections. When included, the creation story is normally the first in the collection. Exceptions in this study include Morton's *From the Beginning*, which only retells stories from Genesis, and Favell Lee Mortimer's *Peep a Day* which places creation as the seventh story in the book. Thirdly, the stories of creation in Genesis are short, and contain many gaps and contradictions. Like Dalton's findings regarding 19th century American Bible stories of Noah's Ark (16), gaps leave room for interpretation which can be analyzed. Overall, Bible stories of creation are important to analyze due to the importance of creation stories to a society, the prevalence of this story in Bible story collections, and the gaps which make room for author interpretation. Librarians and archivists can

maintain collections of these materials to allow for these important materials to be analyzed.

The reverence placed on Biblical stories makes the changes to these stories even more important. Many authors of Bible stories sought to stay as close to the Biblical version of the text as possible while adapting it for children. In her 1893 publication for children, *From the Beginning or Stories from Genesis for the Young*, Morton describes why she sought to stay close to the Biblical version:

It has often been remarked, that all attempts to paraphrase the Bible have invariably failed... Bearing this always in mind, I have endeavoured as much as possible to keep to the words of the original ; only altering them where the alteration seemed necessary to convey the true meaning to the mind of the young child” (Morton, vii-viii).

Morton’s defense of any changes made to the Biblical text is somewhat typical of the Bible stories analyzed here. It is not uncommon for authors to defend why they made changes to the Biblical text in the introduction or preface to their publication, and this was also found of 19th century American Bible stories (Dalton, 31). Some authors do this by changing only the narration of the story, leaving any quotes from God or other characters intact (Formby; Lucas). Other Bible stories simply print selected portions of the Bible, using chapter titles to differentiate between stories while leaving all text intact. For example, the *Child’s Bible* defends the choice to quote all text from the Bible by asserting that children’s Bibles have two problems: that they only contain parts of a story without context, and that the simpler language is too different from the Bible (*Child’s Bible*, n.p.). Since many authors make clear their intention to minimize alterations to the Biblical text, the changes that are made reveal decisions, conscious or not, that authors have made to influence their intended audiences.

The study of changes made to Bible stories falls within the field of biblical reception history, which is the study of how Biblical texts have been interpreted, and how those interpretations have changed over time. While the field of biblical reception history for Bible stories is growing, the intent of paper is to add to the body of literature on interpretations of children’s Bible stories. As such, this work will build from Bottigheimer’s studies on the portrayal of Eve, both in a Lutheran children’s Bible from the 18th century (“An Alternative Eve”), and in 15th and 16th century European children’s Bibles (“Publishing, Print, and Change in the Image of Eve”). This work will also borrow ideas about studying children’s Bible stories from Russel Dalton’s study of interpretations of Noah’s Ark in 19th century American children’s literature. Moreover, it will provide some continuity between Bottigheimer’s studies of early children’s Bible stories and David Shaw’s studies of creation in contemporary children’s Bibles.

As a genre, children’s Bible stories are important to our understanding of how religious ideals were transmitted to younger generations at a specific period in history. This paper analyzes changes made to the Biblical story of creation in a collection of thirteen Bible stories published in 19th century Britain. The aim of this paper is to answer two questions: what purpose did the story of creation serve in Bible stories in 19th century Britain, and what changes were made to the story to serve this purpose? Common themes and changes made to the Bible stories discussed here suggest that the creation story was told to children for various reasons. For many, the creation narrative was used to increase

biblical literacy for young children, and changes were aimed to simplify the story. For others, the original sin was closely tied to Jesus' atonement, and in stories that stress this, Jesus often shows up as an additional character. Moreover, many versions of this story add lessons to impart moral or didactic advice to their audiences. Overall, analyzing changes made to children's Bibles stories reveal how authors changed the story of creation to influence their intended audiences.

Methodology

One of the most important methodological choices made for this study is the choice of Bible stories to be included. The sample contains thirteen texts published in Britain between 1825-1890. This small collection of Bibles stories represents publications available in three archival and rare book collections used by the author in Ontario, Canada. The Osborne Children's Collection at the Toronto Public Library is a "world-leading research collection of rare and notable children's books", containing over 80,000 items (Toronto Public Library). The W. D. Jordan Special Collections at Queen's University maintains a collection of over 2000 volumes of children's literature, mostly from the 19th century (Queen's University Library). The last physical collection used in this work is a personal collection of women's writings about the Bible from Dr. Marion Ann Taylor at Wycliffe College in Toronto, Canada. Although initial studies were done with the print copies of these materials, wherever possible, freely available digital versions of the publications discussed here are cited for ease of access. This is a small sample of Bible stories available from this period to the author, and this study was limited due to geographic availability of Bible stories. As such, further research can amass a larger collection of this genre to determine whether the conclusions drawn here are more generalizable.

The content analysis for these stories consisted of using a simple spreadsheet to track metadata about each title and interpretive changes made to the story. Metadata about each title included the title of applicable chapter(s) in the collection, location of the creation story in the text, and format of the story. Details about the authors of these publication are sparse, and where they exist, hard to verify (this information was added where applicable). Of the twelve authors included in this sample, eight were published under what appear to be women's names, three under men's names, and three were published anonymously. It was quite common for women to publish under male pseudonyms at the time and it is possible that more of these texts were published by women. Few of the authors claim a religious affiliation in the preface to their work, but most are Christian, and given that these were published in London in the 19th century, it is likely that the authors were either Anglican, Methodist, Protestant Nonconformist, or Catholic. It is also safe to assume that these publications reflect the writings of Caucasian people in Britain in a specific period. As such, this sample is unlikely to reflect how other communities may have been using, telling, and interpreting this story. This too is an opportunity for further research.

Notes about interpretive changes made to the story follow a method first used by Bottigheimer ("An Alternative Eve," 73-78) and later by David Shaw (214-19) which categorizes changes made to Bible stories as additions, omissions, transformations, and reformulations. In this method, transformations refer to changes to the order of the story and reformulations refer to completely new changes to the story. Tracking changes to the story in this way allowed for trends to emerge. While the trends have been broadly divided into three categories for the purpose of this paper, these categories often overlap and do not represent all the changes made to these stories.

Findings

Biblical Literacy in Children's Bible Stories

The intent to teach biblical literacy—familiarity with key Bible stories and themes and the ability to apply that knowledge to life—is inherent in almost all the Bible stories analyzed here. Many changes were made to simplify and explain the creation story in these texts. Some authors made explicit their aim to increase biblical literacy among readers in the prefaces to their publications. For example, Morton states in her preface to *From the Beginning*, that “The object of this little work is to tell in simple language, suited to the capacity of young children, what God has revealed to us in the Book of Genesis” (Morton, vii). Moreover, in *Mamma's Bible Stories for her Little Boys and Girls*, the publisher uses the Advertisement in place of a Preface to explain how the stories were simplified to interest very young children, claiming that “in every instance [the author] confined herself to the simple narrative, without allusion to the doctrinal parts” (v-vi).

One of the common ways that the creation narrative was simplified in 19th century Britain was to harmonize the two distinct creation stories in Genesis: the story of the seven-day creation (Gen. 1-2:3), and the story of Adam and Eve (Gen. 2:4-2:23). Both children's Bibles and the popular theological beliefs of the 19th century harmonized these two narratives, moving Adam and Eve's creation into the sixth day of creation (*New Family Bible*). Although most Bible stories harmonize the two narratives, they often separate the stories by chapter. For example, *Scripture Histories* separates these stories into two chapters: “The Creation of the World” and “Adam and Eve”, but Adam is created within the first chapter on the sixth day of creation (6-7). However, shorter publications such as *Mamma's Bible Stories* combine the two stories in one chapter.

Another typical change made to help children understand the story of creation is to make lengthy descriptions of all the things God made each day. For example, Genesis 1:12 briefly describes the creation of flora and fauna on the third day: “Let the earth bring forth grass and herbes, and trees bearing fruit”. In children's versions of this story, this concept is often expanded. For example, Charlotte Mary Yonge embellishes the creation of flora in *Aunt Charlotte's Stories of Bible History for Little One's*: “God did not leave the land bare and stony: He clothed it with green fresh plants and herbs, with leaves and flowers, and trees to give us their fruit or their wood, and filled even the sea with plants formed to live under water” (12). This type of expanded discussion which lists of all the things God created is common in many of the publications discussed here. The longest description of the creation of flora is Mortimer's in *Peep a Day*, which uses over 150 words to describe the creation of different trees, fruit trees, vegetables, and specific flowers (27-28).

Explanatory notes are often added to help the audience understand the meaning of the biblical story. These may take the form of a simple change to the story, such as identifying the serpent as Satan or the devil, as in Barton, Harry, Mortimer, and Morton's Bible stories. Authors often provide descriptions of the meaning of the stories. For example, Nimmo introduces the story: “Adam and Eve Hide Themselves” by stating that “And now the happy freedom of innocence was exchanged for fears and artifices of the guilty mind” (5). This sets the stage for the story and prepares the audience for Adam and Eve's expulsion from the garden. Authors also helped children understand the emotional arc of the story by ascribing emotions to the characters, a change also found in contemporary Bible stories by Shaw. For example, Genesis 2:15 describes Adam's

placement in the garden as: “And the Lord God took the man, and put him in the garden of Eden to dress and keep it” In *Scripture Histories*, Adam’s placement in the garden is connected to his happiness: “And Adam was planted in the garden of *Eden* to dress it, and keep it, and was perfectly happy there : for he had no sin” (6).

Illustrations were also used for biblical literacy. In the *Pictorial Bible and Church-History Stories*, illustrations are described as serving “the valuable additional purpose of aiding the reader to distinguish promptly between the greater and lesser events, and to recall their chronological order with more ease” (Formby, 1870, vii). Images from the creation story are often woodcuts of Adam and Eve either eating the forbidden fruit [Figure 1], or being kicked out of the garden. Rarely included are images of the creation of the world.



Figure 1: *Looking, Longing for, and Taking*. 1886. Woodcut. *Bible Pictures for Little People. Illustrating Old Testament Scenes and Incidents*, pg. 10. Photo by author, publication courtesy of the Osborne Collection, Toronto Public Library.

There is also evidence that some Bible stories were intended for both biblical and educational literacy. Yonge’s *Aunt Charlotte’s Stories of Bible History for the Little Ones* is arranged to be read after each Sunday School lesson, and includes three “readings” of each story, as well as questions for children to answer. Moreover, all three of Mortimer’s children’s Bibles in this sample pair a hymn with each story and cite Bible verses for children to learn. Overall, Bible stories of creation simplify the stories of creation with the intent of making the story easier to understand.

Any Excuse to talk about Jesus: Connecting the Fall to Atonement

One of the most interesting additions to Bible stories of creation is Jesus. As Jesus does not appear in the creation narrative, or the Hebrew Bible for that matter, his appearance in seven of the thirteen Bible stories discussed here is somewhat surprising, but, understandable given the purpose that Jesus serves in these stories. Jesus shows up in one of two ways in these creation stories: as part of a discussion of the meaning of creation and fall, or as a character. In both, Jesus' inclusion serves to connect the story of creation with Jesus' atonement on the cross. For example, in Formby's *Pictorial Bible and Church-History Stories*, the narrator explains that God promised Adam and Eve a redeemer, "However, God had been very merciful to them, and had promised them the birth of a Re-deemer, who at some future time should crush the serpent's head" (8). Lucy Barton takes a similar approach in her letter-version of the story: "We are all naturally prone to do evil; thus we are partakers of Adam's sin: but our Heavenly Father so loved the world, that He promised Adam before he died, that He would send upon the earth his Son Jesus Christ...in order that we might become *reconciled*" (5). Both Formby and Barton's focus on atonement through Jesus harkens to crucicentrism—a focus on Jesus' atonement through the Cross—which has been cited as one of the four core characteristics of Evangelicalism in the 19th century (Bebbington, qtd. in Smith, 342).

In other versions of the story, Jesus is a character with agency. Both Morton and Mortimer introduce and conclude the story of creation with Jesus, and Morton's *From the Beginning* is an excellent example of this tactic. Morton introduces Jesus as a character at the beginning of the seven-day creation by reminding the audience that "God was not alone when He made the world. His Son Jesus Christ was with Him, for He was always with the Father, and nothing was made without Him" (2). Jesus reappears three more times in Morton's version of the story. God and Jesus have a conversation about the creation of humankind: "He spoke to His Blessed Son, and said,-- 'Let us make man in our image'" (11). In the same chapter, Morton asserts that the Sabbath should remind the audience of two things: "God's wonderful greatness and power in making the world, and God's wonderful mercy and love in sending Jesus to die for us" (12). Finally, Morton returns to Jesus when concluding the story of Adam and Eve, asserting that God loved Adam and Eve and

...planned a way by which all their sins might be pardoned, and they might enter heaven at last. What way was that? It was through the precious blood of Jesus. He told them [Adam and Eve] that a Saviour would one day be born, who should suffer and die for guilty men, that so He might win for them everlasting life" (20-21).

Morton's repeated prompts to bring the story back to Jesus are echoed in Favell Lee Mortimer's *Peep a Day* and *Scripture Facts*. In *Peep a Day*, Mortimer concludes the story with a conversation between Jesus, Adam, and Eve, in which Jesus promises that he will die for Adam and Eve (Mortimer, 17). The final lines of the story show Jesus thinking about his promise: "All the time the Son waited in heaven, he thought of what he had promised to do; but he would not go and be a man till his Father pleased to send him" (Mortimer, *Peep a Day*, 18). The atonement-centered theology which appears in Morton, Mortimer, Formby, Barton, and Yonge's stories reveals an interesting purpose for telling the story of creation: to connect it to atonement. As a focus on atonement is

characteristic of Evangelicalism, its presence in Bible stories may reveal the religious leanings of the authors or speak to the popularity of this belief in 19th century Britain.

Creation Stories and Moralism

Another purpose for telling the story of creation that is revealed in many of the children's Bible stories sampled here is to inspire moral feelings or behaviors in the audience. Although moralism in children's literature peaked in the 1730-1830's (Butts n.p.), the trend persisted well into the 19th century and can be detected in many of the Bible stories here. The feelings or behaviours intended by each author vary, but common changes to the story involve the addition of didactic lessons or explanations to the story which ask the audience to love and obey God, or to avoid sinning.

Some authors disclose their aim of inspiring moral or religious behaviour in the preface to their publication. For example, in *Three Hundred Bible Stories with 300 Pictures*, the author explains that "it is hoped that the Book of Books, having been thus explored and exhibited, will be opened by juvenile inquirers with a new zest : leading to a cheerful study of the Scriptures, and conducing also to the best results of personal religion" (Nimmo, vi). Another example is Barton's *Bible Letters for Children*, which, in the introductory letter, asks children to learn from reading the publication: "you might chance to find therein something to interest and instruct your young hearts, something that would lead you early to think upon the great and good Being who made you" (1).

Many authors use the story of creation to explain why their audience should love God and obey God. In Uncle Harry's *Bible Pictures for Little People*, the beauty of the world God created in seven days serves as a reminder to love God:

God has provided in every way for our happiness both in this world and that which is to come. He has given us kind parents, friends, and teachers, bright Sabbaths and the precious Bible, and much to do for Him...if we truly love God and serve Him now, we shall each have one to dwell in (5).

Harry also mentions that the audience should serve God, a theme that is echoed in *Mamma's Bible Stories For Her Little Boys and Girls*. In this Bible story, which mimics a conversation between mamma and Daniel, Wilson explains that God could see Adam and Eve when they ate the fruit, claiming that "God does not love people who do not obey and love Him" (Wilson, 6). Little Daniel responds by saying that he will always love God, to which mamma exclaims: "I hope you will, my dearest boy, and then I am quite sure you will be happy" (6). For both Wilson and Harry, the story of creation allows the author to remind their audience to love and obey God, asserting that if they do, they will be happy (Wilson, 6), or go to heaven (Harry, 5).

Narrations of the story of Adam and Eve also come with moral lessons about the consequences of sin, and the importance of obedience. A good example of this is Charlotte Maria Tucker's *House Beautiful or Bible Museum*, in which she explains the significance of various items in the Bible for young children. In her chapter on the forbidden fruit, Tucker uses the story of Adam and Eve to discuss what sin is and the effect it had on humankind, arguing that the story teaches us about the "poisonous nature of what we dare to call *little sins*" (9). To emphasize this, Tucker discusses how one sin from the fruit leads to many as one seed of the fruit can be the "parent of many" (10).

In *Streaks of Light or Fifty-Two Facts from the Bible for the Fifty-Two Sundays of the Year*, Mortimer introduces the story of Adam and Eve by discussing how children are often naughty and sometimes lie about doing naughty things (6). In Mortimer's example, a child may steal some sugar, and then lie about it to their mother. Mortimer muses, "How is it people are so wicked?" before narrating the story of Adam and Eve (*Streaks of Light*, 7). Finally, Mortimer concludes the story with another lesson, this time about the importance of asking for forgiveness for their sins (110-11). Overall, the addition of moral lessons to the story of creation allowed authors to make a point about the meaning of the story in the lives of their audience, all while inspiring the type of behaviour deemed appropriate.

Conclusion

The thirteen children's Bible stories analyzed here use the story of creation for various purposes: to familiarize children with the Bible stories, to connect creation to atonement, or to inspire moral behaviour in their audience. For each purpose this story is given, various changes are made to the story. To best familiarize and simplify the story of creation, authors add images and explanations, embellish lists of the things God made, and harmonize the two creation narratives. To connect the first sin to Jesus' atonement, authors add Jesus as a character, or use explanations to harken to the cross. To inspire moral behaviour, authors ask their audience to love God for creating the world, obey God to avoid sinning, and ask for forgiveness when they do. While these changes and purposes are discussed separately in this paper, some Bible stories connect all these themes simultaneously, simplifying while using Jesus' atonement to ask their audience to love God. For example, Yonge concludes the story of Adam and Eve by explaining what the story means while asking the audience to obey God to go to heaven: "We shall never be as happy as they were while we are living in this world ; but if we will try to obey God, and live holy lives. He will take us to heaven, and that will be still better than the Garden of Eden" (15). What becomes apparent from all these changes is that while 19th century Bible stories of creation resemble the biblical story, the retellings include various interpretations aimed to shape the story and the audience.

Overall, this study builds on growing research into how religious ideals were transmitted to young children through the changes made to the story of creation in children's Bible stories. Further research on this topic should amass a larger collection of children's Bible stories from the period to see if the changes found in this study are consistent with a larger sample. Even though information about the authors of children's Bible stories from this period are hard to find, future research would benefit from a more in depth look at how the positionality of an author -- gender identity, religious affiliation, class, race, etc. -- may correlate with certain types of changes made to these texts.

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