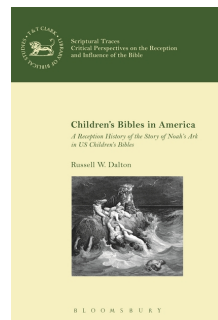


***Children's Bibles in America: A Reception History of the Story of Noah's Ark in US Children's Bibles,***  
by **Russell W. Dalton**

Scriptural Traces: Critical Perspectives on the Reception and Influence of the Bible 5 | Library of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 614 | London: Bloomsbury, 2016 | 304 pages | ISBN: 978-0-567-66015-2 (hardcover) \$122.00 | ISBN: 978-0-567-68392-2 (softcover) \$39.95 | ISBN: 978-0-567-66016-9 (ebook) \$35.95



*Children's Bibles in America* is a study of how the Noah's Ark story has been presented to children in works published in the United States. The Noah's Ark story makes for an interesting case study to explore Bible reception in children's literature. That a family would move onto a giant boat filled with animals seems like an immediately appealing tale for juvenile audiences. Yet the concomitant issues of violence, drowning, and divine wrath within a story about the destruction of all living things on earth challenges what contemporary culture deems suitable for children. Dalton explores how different authors have dealt with this topic since Colonial times, showing how these authors reimagine the story and why they present it in diverse but consistent ways.

In the introduction, Dalton explains the importance of studying materials aimed at children as part of the reception history of the Bible. He argues

that works aimed at children, “represent a sort of people’s history of the Bible” (3) since they were written equally by men and women, clergy and non-clergy from a wide variety of faith perspectives. They are not mere simplifications of the Bible but rather reflect a variety of interests and interpretations that adults aim at children. While Dalton does not interact with much scholarship on the study of children’s literature more broadly, the methods that he lays out in the introduction are consistent with those of this emerging discipline. Children’s literature here is studied as material that is produced by adults with adult interests and thus the goal of the work is not so much to study how children understand the Noah story after reading these works but to explore why adults have written what they have. In this regard, Dalton is careful to situate issues of theology within an historical context. Not only does he consider the history of religious thinking, but he also highlights changes in American society’s understanding of childhood as well as demographic issues related to child mortality (this is especially apparent in chapter 4).

Chapter 1 offers a brief but useful survey of the kinds of biblical materials produced for children from the Colonial era to the present. While the treatment is not exhaustive, it will be helpful for scholars who are not familiar with the study of children’s literature. Dalton also explains some of the general trends in the treatment of the Noah story in these works, using historically and theologically specific examples to demonstrate some of the literary techniques and approaches authors use to transform the text. He highlights some of the typical ways that authors writing for child audiences abridge the Genesis story and how they enhance it. Dalton introduces some of the moral lessons that are typically offered as well as indicating some of the different kinds of sources used for extra-biblical additions.

The rest of the book is more thematically oriented. Chapter 2 examines how the Noah’s Ark story has been used to explain the character of God to child readers. Dalton identifies three different phases in the evolution of presentations of God although he notes that not every book fits neatly into these three categories (46). The first phase begins in the Colonial era and is heavily influenced by Puritan theology; God is a wrathful, violent god and the death and suffering implicit in the story is emphasized rather than hidden. The second begins after the Romantics have reimagined childhood as a time of innocence; the God of these stories is long-suffering, reluctantly forced to punish his wicked creations. The third phase becomes particularly apparent with the baby boomers; God becomes a caring friend to the child, and God’s role in keeping the child safe is emphasized.

Chapter 3 explores how typological readings of Noah are merged with calls for salvation in some versions of the Noah story told for children. Dalton shows how typological readings have been adapted to American Christianity, using the story of Noah to fulfill the same function as an altar call in revivalist theology. Through numerous examples, Dalton demonstrates the logic in this theology: Noah calls for sinners to repent, they refuse and are killed in the flood. Thus, the altar call is for the young reader to repent, accept his or her sinfulness and establish a relationship with Christ so as to escape the same fate that befell the sinners in Noah's time. Dalton uses a number of examples from different theological contexts, showing how Protestants see Noah as a type of Christ, Catholics see the Ark as a type of church, and how the flood is sometimes understood as a type of baptism. In a brief discussion, he shows how debates about the nature of Christ amongst Seventh Day Adventists (was He begotten or is He eternal) are played out in juvenile literature. Noting that understanding the Noah story as a story of salvation through Christ is not necessarily common in children's Bibles, Dalton uses this particular line of reading to highlight interesting issues relating to biblical reception in the American context.

The longest section in the book is chapter 4, which examines how the Noah story has been used to inculcate particular values in children. Dalton raises the interesting issue of how the goals in reading the Bible have increasingly come to be oriented towards deriving moral messages from it rather than focusing on literary or historical content. He shows how this trend is apparent in children's Bibles and provides examples of how Noah and his story is retold as a means of teaching the values of the authors of children's Bibles. The earliest of these messages were relatively simple; children are merely taught to be good as opposed to naughty. The naughty in Noah's story are those who do not go onto the Ark, and so the consequences are fairly extreme. As children's Bibles come to be more complex, so do the messages. A Protestant work ethic is taught by emphasizing how Noah worked unquestioningly on the Ark and persevered against hardship. The importance of standing as a Christian amongst sinners is shown through Noah ignoring those who mock his efforts at building a boat on dry land. Dalton establishes the multivocality of this story and how malleable it is in being fashioned to represent the values of the authors (206) with a variety of examples of such values that are imposed on the Noah story (like obedience and environmental stewardship). Perhaps most surprising in this section is the complexity of messages relating to the drunkenness of Noah and the curse of

Ham. While these are normally omitted from children's Bibles (as one might expect), Dalton highlights some interesting examples of treatments of these stories to show that reception through children's literature is more complex than what one might imagine.

Chapter 5 is something of a catchall chapter in which the diverse subjects are perhaps connected by the larger theme of the tension between presenting the Bible as factual, or, at least accurately representing the Bible, versus providing children with amusing stories. Dalton identifies a few different approaches to what must be a thorny issue for children's authors, the historicity of the flood account. While Dalton does not deal with this issue in depth, he illustrates some of the approaches taken. Following that he discusses some of the ways the Noah story is made to be intentionally amusing for children, noting especially how anthropomorphic animals are used. Dalton makes a particularly interesting observation (250) that while one might expect more conservative publishers to provide more serious depictions of the Bible than secular publishers, in fact the opposite is the case. He ends the section with a discussion of creationist Bibles for children in which dinosaurs are shown as having been present on the Ark. All three of these subjects, as presented, are extremely interesting but perhaps are worthy of more extensive treatment. In his concluding chapter, Dalton reiterates that the Noah story is laconic enough to be refashioned in any number of ways. Yet curiously, he explains, it has less often been remade for children in relation to particular sectarian issues (although he notes exceptions to this throughout the work) and more often in relation to changing social norms, demographic issues, and publishing practices. He ends the book with a discussion on how parents might choose Bibles for their own children. While this may seem odd in an academic work, scholars of children's literature are very often asked for reading recommendations when engaging with non-specialists and so, in some ways, Dalton's inclusion of this discussion presupposes the expected question.

Dalton introduces readers to a tremendous amount of resources for the study of Bible reception. Not only is the bibliography of primary sources substantive and creative, the methodology he lays out for considering reception in materials created for child audiences promises to be productive for other scholars. His argument is clear and coherent, rooted in both an historical perspective and a literary perspective. This is undoubtedly an important work in an underrepresented area of biblical reception studies.

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