

Meek and Mild: American Children's Bibles' Stories of Jesus as a Boy

Russell W. Dalton
Brite Divinity School

Abstract

The four canonical gospels provide readers with few details of the life of Jesus as a boy. Many authors of children's bibles in America, however, have been happy to fill in some of the details. This paper, based on a study of hundreds of children's bibles and bible storybooks published in the United States, suggests that these retellings regularly create or adapt stories of Jesus' childhood to teach children virtues that serve to affirm the status quo rather than virtues that would lead children to become agents of change or advocates for justice.

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While there are certainly examples of American religious education materials that have promoted work for freedom and justice, most of the religious education materials for children published in the U.S. function have used the Bible to teach lessons that maintain the status quo by promoting virtues such as submission and obedience to authority, hard work, and contentment in one's station in life. In addition, these materials often ignore or downplay potential meanings in Bible stories that might inspire virtues such as speaking truth to power, standing up for justice, promoting radical hospitality and inclusion, etc. Since the majority of these materials have been written and published by white Protestant Christians, members of the dominant culture with status and power, this is perhaps not surprising. Also, it is predictable that parents and teachers, who are charged with supervising children, would tend to publish and purchase resources that would encourage children to be submissive and obedient to those in authority over them. Still, these religious education lessons provide children with an early foundation of what it means to be a person of faith and these understandings often remain with them into adulthood and for the rest of their lives. Those who wish to educate for peace and justice today will benefit from understanding the long-standing historical trends and assumptions they must overcome. The stories of the childhood of Jesus discussed in this paper serve as one significant illustration of this trend.

Numerous children's bible authors state in their introductions that they have simply sought to retell the Bible stories faithfully and have engaged in no elaboration or speculation. When it comes to the childhood of Jesus, however, the temptation to use the boy Jesus as a role model for other children often appears to have been too great for these authors to resist. Beyond

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the story of Jesus teaching in the temple from Luke 2:41-51, the only descriptions the canonical gospels give of Jesus' childhood are that "the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom and the favor of God was upon him" (Luke 2:40) and "Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." (Luke 2:52) Many children's bible storybook authors, even those who elsewhere stay quite close to the biblical text, go beyond these gospel accounts to speculate and imagine much more of the life and character of Jesus as a boy. Some of these storybooks begin with the caveat that the Bible itself does not say much about Jesus' childhood, but as they continue to tell their stories it is often difficult for readers to determine where the events of the biblical texts end and the storybook authors' imagination begins. In the process, many of these children's bible storybook authors go beyond the content of the canonical gospels and create for themselves and their readers a picture of Jesus' childhood that advances their own theological, social, or moral agendas.

An interesting example of this phenomenon can be seen in John Watson Wilder's *His Name Is Jesus*. In his introduction, Wilder insists, "This book does not create imaginary scenes... the events... *must have happened*, even though many of their details are not included in the Biblical text." (Wilder 1934, 11, italics in original text) Wilder goes on to tell tales in which the young Jesus shyly hides behind Mary's skirt during his first visit to the well and is complimented by the other mothers and allowed to carry the water jug home (34). Mary's friends are particularly struck by Jesus' eyes, which were "the very light of God" (32-33). According to Wilder's story, Jesus was a natural leader among his little friends because "he was always fair and square" (34). He always helped a blind boy in town (35) and was a very good carpenter (48). These details are all integrated seamlessly into the biblical narrative with no indication that they are speculation and not part of the biblical story.

Some of these children's bibles have created or retold canonical stories of Jesus' childhood in ways that emphasize his divinity (e.g. White 1900, 165-166; Sheen 1947, 7; Maxwell 1956, 67). Others create tales of Jesus' childhood that provide a background for Jesus' later ministry, such as having him meet a good shepherd, find a lost lamb, meet a good Samaritan boy, and so on (e.g. Jones 1955, 40-42; Peale 1973, 174; Scheck, 1990; Riegert and Loehr 1996). Still others foreshadow Jesus' destination on the cross and emphasize his future role as a savior (e.g. Annie White 1903, 22-26; *Easy Bible Stories* 1910). In Fulton Sheen's fanciful retelling, for example, Mary "was often worried when she saw Him with nails in His hands, and she was always afraid that one lying on the floor might pierce His feet." (Sheen 1947, 7) Some apparent music lovers work into their narratives that Jesus loved music as a child (e.g. Burdick 1925, 324; Fitch 1955; Jones 1955, 40; Maxwell 1956, 69), while others make the case that he loved nature by describing how he would pet animals or walk through fields for hours at a time (e.g. Willard 1905, 14-15; Stirling [1920], 338; Burdick 1925, 324; Snyder 1929b, 63; Neff 1953, 55; Eberling 1954 [See Figure 1]; Jones 1955, 44, 54). However, by far the most common use of the stories of Jesus' childhood is to teach children the virtues that are assumed to be the best virtues for them and for all Christians.

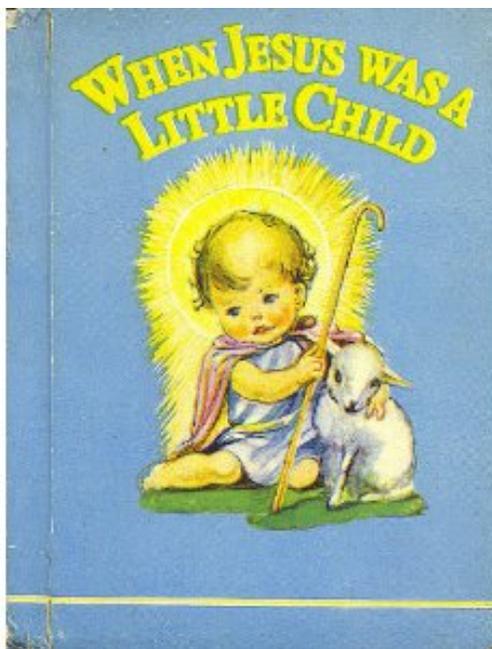


Figure 1. Eberling, Georgia Moore. 1954. *When Jesus Was a Little Boy*, New York: Grosset & Dunlap. Illustrations by Katherine Evans.

THE MEEK CHILD

When listing the virtues of the boy Jesus, meekness is one of those most commonly mentioned. As one early book describes him in front of the scholars in the temple, “How meek and how innocent, yet how wise and holy did Jesus look in the midst of the doctors.” (*The Child Jesus* [1854], 11) The book *Sequel to Mamma’s Bible Stories* describes Jesus’ childhood as follows:

There Jesus grew as other children grow, but his words and actions were unlike those of other little boys and girls of the same age. He was so good, so pious, so meek, so gentle, so wise, so holy, that those who saw him might have known him to be God’s own child. (Wilson 1856, 163)

According to 1894’s *Gentle Jesus*, Mary could see that, even as a baby, Jesus never fussed. The text of the book states, “How often she must have kissed His sweet peaceful little face that no temper or crossness had ever ruffled.” (*Gentle Jesus* 1884) Harriet B. McKeever wrote of the many virtues of the boy Jesus and advises her readers, “If you are meek, and lowly, and loving as he was, you will be happy here on earth, and be getting ready to dwell with him in heaven.” (McKeever 1866, 30)

Later, color illustrations have often depicted Jesus as a sweet little white child with rosy cheeks (See Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2. Gerard, Mary. 1939. *When Jesus Was a Little Child: Stories from the Bible for Little Children*. New York: McLoughlin Bros. Cover illustration by Priscilla Pointer.

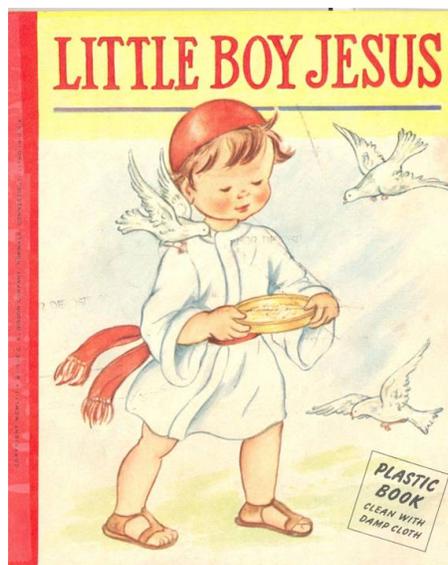


Figure 3. *Little Boy Jesus*. 1953. Norwalk, CT: C.R. Gibson Company.
No author or illustrator credited.

AN OBEDIENT BOY

Obedience, both to God and to one's parents, is the most common virtue weaved into all children's bible stories in the United States. In Norman Vincent Peale's *Bible Stories*, he speculates that "there may have been times that he got into mischief and perhaps was scolded occasionally" (Peale 1973, 172). This, however, seems to serve as the exception that proves the rule when writing of Jesus' childhood. According to Luke 2:51, after Mary and Joseph found Jesus in the temple, he went with them to Nazareth "and was obedient to them." Most children's bibles explicitly or implicitly suggest that this means that the boy Jesus obeyed every single wish or command of his parents from that point forward (e.g. Linden [1858], 80, *Young People's Illustrated Bible History* 1871, 366; *Early Life of Jesus* 1882, 5; Headley 1895, 389; Yonge 1898, 227; Sangster 1905, 398; Willard 1905, 15; *Easy Bible Stories* 1910; Hult 1920, 15; Blyton 1946, 1996, 26; *365 Bible Stories for Young Hearts*, 2006, 320). The lesson for children seemed to be, as one early 19th century children's bible put it, "if Jesus was obedient, how will you excuse yourselves if you are not so?" (Miller 1812, 10)

According to Sophia G. Ashton in 1856, Jesus' obedience started very early. Ashton writes, "When he lay in his cradle he obeyed his mother." (Ashton 1856, 9) She explains that most babies cry when they are hungry, cold, or want to be held, "but this little baby of whom I am speaking, learned very soon when his mother wished him to lie still, and he was obedient and did not cry, but lay (*sic.*) quite still and quiet till she was ready to take him." (10-11)

According to many children's bibles, not only did Jesus obey his parents' every wish, but he always did so immediately and with a pleasant attitude. Typical is Adolf Hult's statement, "If mother Mary asked him to help her, He did it at once. And He was happy to do so." (Hult 1920,

15) In the same vein is the statement in *Easy Bible Stories*, “He never sinned. When His parents gave Him a command, He obeyed at once. His mother never had to speak sharply to this beloved child” (*Easy Bible Stories* [1910]). In 1905, J.H. Willard wrote, “And he tried to teach his young friends to do the same. He tried to teach them to be obedient and helpful to their parents, to be useful and to be kind to others.” (Willard 1905, 15) According to many later bible storybooks, the boy Jesus was happy to do whatever he was told (Diener 1935, 17, 26; *Bedtime Bible Stories* 1955, 185; Hughes 1988, 90; Beers 1991, 309; Davidson 2000).

The one detailed story of Jesus’ childhood that appears in the canonical gospels, the story of Jesus in the temple from Luke 2:41-51, actually serves as a potential threat to this picture of perfect obedience. Jesus does not follow his parents home from Jerusalem, and when Mary finds him and chastises him for causing them such anxiety, Jesus’ abrupt response “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49) can sound unrepentant and even disrespectful. If that were the case, then it would not serve the purpose of presenting Jesus as the perfect example of a boy who always respected and obeyed his parents. Mrs. Grive focuses on how Jesus obeyed Mary’s command to come home and warns children that “Jesus obeyed his mother’s voice, and therefore he cannot love ‘a disobedient child’” (Grive [1867], 265). Many storybook authors creatively correct this problem by inserting into the story subtle additions that change its tone. Some state that Jesus responded to his mother “gently” (e.g. Kirby 1952, 21; *Bedtime Bible Stories* 1955, 185; Larcombe 1992, 138), “in a kindly manner” (Gilmour 1881, 1904, 139), “kindly” (Snyder 1929a, 74), “lovingly” (Maxwell 1956, 83), or “calmly” (Stoddard 1983, 235). Others add the description of a kind or submissive posture, having Jesus respond as he “put his arm around his mother” (Doane 1946, 100) or while holding her hand quietly (Jones 1955, 52). An illustration in Elaine Ife’s *The Childhood of Jesus* shows this submissive pose (See Figure 4). In these ways, the biblical account is adapted in a manner that retains and bolsters the image of Jesus as a respectful and obedient child.



Figure 4. Ife, Elaine. 1982. *The Childhood of Jesus*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. Illustration by Eric Rowe.

In the 1950s at least a couple of authors felt it necessary to make clear that, while Jesus was a good and obedient boy, he was still macho and athletic (cf. Putney 2001). Rufus M. Jones wrote, “He was not, however, what boys sometimes call ‘goody-goody.’ He was strong and manly. He was interesting.” (Jones 1955, 57) In the same decade, Arthur Stanley Maxwell suggested:

He also “increased in ... stature.” This means that He was not a weakling. He paid attention to His health. He ate well and took lots of exercise. Knowing that He was to be the Messiah, He understood that He would need great strength to stand the strain. (Maxwell 1956, 87)

THE HAPPY AND HARD WORKER

Other than the virtues of meekness and obedience, perhaps the most common virtue weaved into children’s bible storybooks in the United States is that of hard work. During the middle and late the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, many white Protestant Christians voiced their fears that they could no longer trust the parents of immigrants or freed slaves to teach their children the virtues necessary to make them into good citizens and good workers (McClellan 1999, 22-23). They argued that the Bible should remain in the public schools and be used to teach children good citizenry virtues such as obedience, loyalty and hard work (Kniker 1982, 126-130).

In 1905, Margaret Elizabeth Sangster’s *The Story Bible* turned almost every Bible story into a lesson about working hard, and the story of Jesus’ childhood is no exception. Sangster wrote

We can see what great honor Jesus put upon work, the hard work of men’s hands, when He Who was the Child of God handled the tools of the carpenter, made yokes for the oxen and chairs and tables and everything that a carpenter made. We may be sure that He never did poor work, that everything Jesus touched was finished all through just in the best way He could do it. He was getting ready, little by little, for a life more full of toil in other ways than ever man lived on this earth. (Sangster 1905, 398-399)

Others wrote about how much Jesus enjoyed doing work. According to *Bible Stories for Children by a Catholic Teacher*, “Cheerfully and without complaint He went about working hard, always with a sweet, gentle smile for all.” (*Bible Stories for Children by a Catholic Teacher* 1919, 84) Likewise, *Best Bible Stories for Children* speculated, “And I am sure He never complained about His tasks. If there were errands to be done, He could be depended on to do them quickly and faithfully” (*Best Bible Stories* 1926, 4). In 1946, in her book *Once There Was a Little Boy*, Dorothy Kunhart wrote that when Joseph said that he had a job for the boy, Jesus responded, “What is it? I love jobs.” (Kunhart 1946, 9) As two children’s bibles of the 1940s put it, “He worked as a carpenter because He wanted to show how much God loves work” (Sheen 1947, 7), and “He was thankful that he could make his hands serve others.” (Jones 1955, 61)

Some authors have assumed that Jesus' moral perfection influenced the quality of his carpentry work, as is seen in the following examples:

He always did his work honestly and well. He never wanted to send out a piece of poor work. (Hall and Wood 1906, 47)

When Jesus was old enough, Joseph taught Him, too, how to fashion wood, and as He was obedient and attentive, He learnt quickly. We are told that Jesus was a good carpenter. (*Great Stories of the Bible for Children* 1925, 189)

He did his work so carefully and quickly that all the people in Nazareth liked to have Him make their doors and cabinets and fix their houses. (Diener 1935, 19)

How square would be the saw cuts! How exact the mitering! How smooth the surfaces! How invisible the joints! The finest cabinetmakers in the world would say, This is the work of a master craftsman! (Maxwell 1956, 88)

“Yes,” said Mary. “Jesus is a good carpenter.” (Beers 1991, 310)

Many illustrations from these children's bibles depict Jesus' work ethic beginning at quite an early age (c.g. Figures 5, 6 and 7).



Figure 5: “The Divine Apprentice” by Virginia Demont-Breton included in Burdick, Jennie Ellis, ed. 1925. *The Bible Story*. New York: University Society.



Figure 6: Jones, Rufus M. 1955. *The Boy Jesus and His Companions*. New York: The Macmillan Company. Illustrated by Kalman Kubinyi.

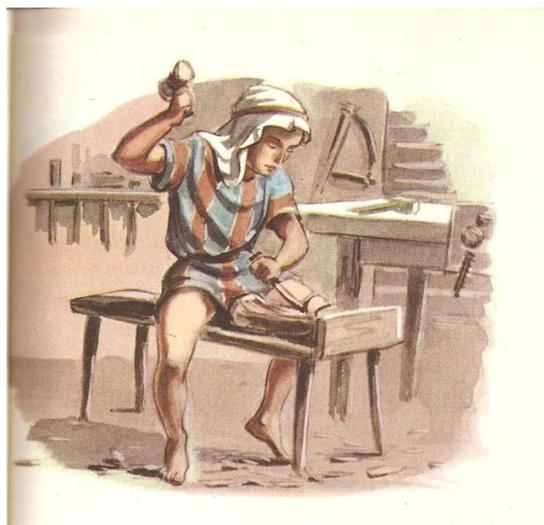


Figure 7: Sheen, Fulton J. 1947. *Jesus, Son of Mary* New York: The Declan X. McMullen Company, Inc. Illustrated by Raffaello Busoni.

CONTENT WITH HIS STATION IN LIFE

A recurring theme in the religious education of children in the United States, especially prominent in the 18th and 19th centuries, has been that one should be content with one's station in life and not be too proud of one's wealth or discontented if one is poor. Many children's bibles have suggested and even emphasized the notion that Jesus grew up in a poor family.

As early as 1811, *The Holy Bible Abridged for Children* inserted into the text the emphasis that Jesus “was brought up by [his parents] in a poor and low estate” (*The Holy Bible, Abridged* 1811, 7). *Peter Parley’s Book of Bible Stories*, in 1834, suggests that there are lessons for people of every economic class to be learned from this.

The circumstances of our Savior’s humble birth warn us against pride and vanity, and foolish or envious longings for fine clothes, and fine houses, and such other fine things as very few people can possess. Those who have not got them, should remember that their Savior had them not, and be contented; and those who have them, should think how many thousands are without them, and be doubly thankful. (Goodrich 1834, 153)

The book *The Children of the Bible* notes, “He had no servants to wait upon him, and no rich clothes to wear. There were but few of those comforts for him which other infants enjoy.” (*Children of the Bible* [1858], 76) It then concludes, “The New Testament does not tell us much about Jesus between the time when he was an infant, and that in which he was about twelve years old; though we are quite sure that he was contented, meek, loving, obedient, and holy, both toward God and man.” (77) Likewise, in 1900, James White wrote, “In His humble life, as the child of poor parents, He faithfully did His part of the work. Ever obedient and cheerful, He was a pleasant sunbeam in the home circle.” (White 1900, 166) In 1911, Josephine Pollard explained to children the reason for Jesus’ poor childhood:

And this part of the life of Je-sus – of which not a word is told in the New Test-a-ment – is to teach us to stay in the place where God has put us, and to do our work there in the best way we know how. (Pollard 1911)

James Chessor wrote of Jesus’ contentment as a child, “Although Joseph and Mary belonged to the peasant class, yet theirs was a sweet, simple, contented, happy life.” (Chessor 1924, 193) After describing the hard work involved in such a life, Chessor adds, “And yet, though the consciousness of his divine parentage was thus clearly present in his mind, in all dutiful simplicity and sweet obedience, he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was subject to them, contented with the plain life of their village home.” (195-196)

It is worth noting that there are other children lifted up in children’s bibles for being meek, submissive, obedient, and content despite the difficult circumstances that they face. The biblical stories of the boy Isaac, Jephthah’s daughter, the boy Samuel, and Namaan’s servant girl, are all often changed and expanded in dramatic and disturbing ways that make these children role models of meek submission to those in authority over them and of happy acceptance of their unhappy life circumstances.

CONCLUSION

In 1785, the Sunday School Society was founded in England with the motto, “To prevent vice, to encourage industry, to diffuse the light of knowledge, to bring men cheerfully to submit to their stations.” A review of children’s Bible storybooks suggests that these goals for the religious education of children made a smooth transition across an ocean and across the next few centuries. They appropriated the image of Jesus as a child in order to prevent vice, primarily by

encouraging children to be as obedient to God and their parents as the young Jesus was. They lifted up industry and hard work through stories of Jesus doing chores and working hard in Joseph's carpenter shop. Some unambiguously encouraged children to happily accept their place in life, either as children who should happily obey their parents or as poor people who should accept their status without complaint. The stories of Jesus' childhood, whether freely adapted from the gospels or created whole cloth, rarely if ever gave any indication of a Jesus who would grow up to speak truth to power, burn with anger at injustice, and to speak against the economic, political, and religious oppression that he saw in his day.

While this paper does not provide an exhaustive account of all religious education materials throughout the history of the United States, it does offer some insight into the ways stories of Jesus' childhood have been adapted, revised and created entirely to promote virtues that affirm the status quo. It also provides educators with a sense of the history and assumptions that they must overcome if they wish to use the Bible to teach the virtues of social justice, liberation and civil rights.

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