Superior Wisdom, Justified Disobedience and the Other: The Boy Jesus in Children’s Bibles (1870–1920)

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May 29, 2017

Introduction

In the entirety of the 7,957 verses in the New Testament, only eleven verses are devoted to Jesus’ childhood. The thirty-year gap between Jesus’ infancy and adulthood leaves Jesus’ childhood entirely up to the imagination of the reader, requiring commentators and storytellers to imagine what Jesus might have been like as a child. While the elaboration on Jesus’ childhood occurs in a variety of forms such as popular novels and movies, children’s Bibles present a unique space for authors to exercise their creative license. Thus, the imagination of Jesus’ childhood in children’s Bibles is extensive and covers everything from what Jesus wore to his favorite pastimes.

Currently there is minimal scholarship that addresses children’s Bibles more generally, and even less that addresses Jesus’ childhood. However, two key articles, “The Word Became Text: The Boy Jesus in Children’s Bibles” by Melody Briggs and “Meek and Mild: American Children’s Bibles’ Stories of Jesus as a Boy” by Russell W. Dalton, provide critical scholarship on the boy Jesus in children’s Bibles. Briggs uses the story of Jesus as a boy (Luke 2:40–52) as a case study to explore different strategies children’s Bibles use to create meaning. Perhaps more pertinent to the following paper is Dalton’s study on how children’s Bibles portray and emphasize Jesus’ characteristics. Dalton argues that children’s Bibles portray Jesus as maintaining the status quo by emphasizing his “submission and obedience to authority, hard work, and contentment in one’s station in life.”

Dalton explores how Jesus has been portrayed as meek and obedient in children’s Bibles over the last two hundred years. While Jesus is certainly submissive to authority, he is only obedient to the particular authority of his parents. Dalton’s argument fails to account for the many instances of Jesus’ disobedience that children’s Bibles choose to retain, and even emphasize.

By looking at children’s Bibles between 1870–1920 in the United States, I argue that children’s Bibles portray stories of Jesus as a child to illustrate when obedience is expected and when disobedience can be justified. While children’s Bibles are certainly intent on portraying Jesus as an obedient child, I argue that the moral of the story is not really about obedience. Instead, it is about urging children, specifically young boys, to educate the un-enlightened “other,” who in this case takes the form of Jewish teachers. Thus, children are taught to be obedient to their parents while also learning that disobedience, when justified on the grounds of cultural, racial and ethnic superiority, is celebrated.

Setting the Stage: 1870–1920

Childhood

Formulated during the nineteenth century, the “child” and “childhood” are relatively modern phenomena. The construction of the child as distinct from the adult—and subsequently, childhood as distinct from adulthood—stems from several changing ideologies during the nineteenth century including Christian nurture, Romanticism, scientific information and mandatory education.

In 1861, Congregational minister Horace Bushnell published a pivotal book titled Christian Nurture that summed up the beliefs of the growing evangelical movement. Diverging from the Calvinist belief that children were born into sin and conversion was a painful confrontation of one’s worthlessness, Bushnell argued that becoming a Christian was a long-term process that begins in one’s earliest childhood. For Bushnell and other evangelical Protestants, the child was imagined as holy and innocent, which rendered them particularly susceptible to piety. Bushnell explained, “Never is it too early for good to be communicated. Infancy and childhood are the ages most pliant to good.” Thus Bushnell encouraged parents to take an active role in the Christian education of their children. By constructing children as innately pure and spiritual, childhood became worthy of protection. However, as American religious scholar Robert Orsi notes, the discourse of innocence denies children of their agency. He states, “The emptiness of innocence deprives children of the authority and integrity of their own experience. Ironically, the discourse of innocence put children at the greatest risk because the emptiness of innocence creates a space into which adult desire can be projected.” Children—their bodies, rationalities, imaginations and desires—ultimately become the battleground on which adults made meaning of their religious worlds.

Victorian discourses of Romanticism during the nineteenth century also contributed to the sentimentalization of childhood. In the Victorian period, sexual maturity—understood as a sense of crisis and discontinuity in adolescence—created a distinct separation between children and adults. Anxiety over sexual maturity led to an increased emphasis on protecting childhood innocence. By emphasizing childhood innocence, the social status of children increased and parents, who had the socio-economic means, began to indulge their children with toys and books to prevent children from growing up too quickly.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, scientific notions of childrearing also contributed to the construction of the child. Science began to explain the stages of children’s development and its effect on their emotional, physical and sexual maturity. Several pivotal psychological studies conducted by G. Stanley Hall and Charles Darwin concluded that personality development and moral character could be developed through proper nurture. The proliferation of the scientific study of children led to institutional developments such as the advent of universal, compulsory education during the 1880s. As a result, teaching materials began production on a vast scale under the assumption that children had their own reading needs and requirements and children’s literature was created to fulfill these needs.

9Ibid., 188.
10Reynolds, Children’s Literature, 27.
Children’s Literature

Children’s literature is unique in many regards because it is the only genre named not for the content of the text, but for its intended audience.11 While children’s literature is named for its intended audience, children’s literature is almost never actually purchased by children. The purchaser of children’s literature is the adult which forces producers to make decisions based on what adults are willing to purchase or what adults believe will appeal to children.12 The “child” in children’s literature, then, is a construction of the adult’s imagination, specifically their nostalgic imagination.

Children’s literature often addresses adult fear over childhood innocence and serves as a method of teaching morals and values. According to Perry Nodelman in his book *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children’s Literature*, children’s literature shares the following common features that set up the child as innocent and in need of moral instruction: the writing style is simple with a focus on actions rather than descriptions, the tone of the text is matter-of-fact, images supplement the narrative, the protagonist is a child, the texts invite readers to identify with the protagonist, children do not know the danger of their desires and must learn it, what happens to the character is meant to represent a path for future behavior in readers, and children either get what they want and are happy with it or they are wrong to want what they want and learn from their error.13

Discipline and obedience is often a prominent feature of children’s literature and fictional parents are often necessary to set children on the right course.14 The appearance of discipline in children’s literature stems, in large part, from the rising tide of industrial capitalism during the nineteenth century. As an increasing number of people began to gain money and property, children became the inheritors and the reason for accumulating and spending wealth.15 Thus, objects produced and purchased for children, such as literature and toys, functioned to instruct children in bourgeoisie values and ideologies in order to maintain them.16

Perhaps the most unique element of children’s literature is the role of images in telling the story. Michael Cadden, in his book *Telling Children’s Stories: Narrative Theory and Children’s Literature*, discusses how what we see has become the measure for what is real and true in our “image-dominated era.”17 The combination of the verbal and the visual in picture books allows for a complete and total access of the characters—their acts and their deeper thoughts—which establishes an authoritarian and unquestionable text.18 The relationship between images and text also have a long history in illustrated Bibles.19

However, while most children’s literature establishes the child as an imagination of the adult, the range of meanings and possibilities within any given text or image must be accounted for. Reception theorist David Rudd argues that our constant interaction with texts allows for a range of possible outcomes. Rudd states that “we, from our own particular historical and social location, are forever in dialogue with the texts we encounter; and these different discursive affiliations interact

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12Ibid., 5.
13Ibid., 76-81.
16Ibid.
18Ibid.

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with a text that is itself made up of different discursive elements.\textsuperscript{20} Returning then to children’s literature, Rudd argues that the space in between the adult (as author and producer) and the child (as passive consumer) is a space of dialogue and possible meaning making.\textsuperscript{21} Children may rework stories they read and hear, which ultimately leaves room for contestation. Thus, children will come to know and make sense of the stories they read in ways that go far beyond the adult imagination.

Print Culture and the Bible

During the 19th century, the Bible was not only the center of Christian activity but also the center of the Christian home. As Colleen McDannell argues in her book \textit{Material Christianity}, the Bible was not merely the writings from the Old and New Testaments, but rather the Bible was symbolic of the unification of family and religion.\textsuperscript{22} According to McDannell, Bibles were created to produce religious emotion and satisfy family needs by providing a connection between the physical and the sensual. The sacred words of the Bible became matter, or “the ‘Word’ literally became ‘Flesh’ and ‘dwelled among us’ (John 1:14).”\textsuperscript{23}

McDannell argues that the proliferation of Bibles in American homes was dependent on Romanticism and the industrialization of material goods. A key tenet of Romanticism was the notion that religion and religious sentiment existed at home. Within the home, faith evoked emotions, engaged the senses and allowed Christians to move towards God. Thus, the family increasingly became the foundation of religious faith. Although church services were still important, the clergy frequently promoted family worship and prayer, which elevated the status of the family Bible. Coinciding with Romanticism was industrialization, which made material goods readily available to individual families and homes. Religious artifacts, including the Bible, were commodified and marketed across America.\textsuperscript{24} As Bibles became a centerpiece of the American home, Bible reading “served as the source of spiritual strength and moral instruction.”\textsuperscript{25} While family Bibles were the most common form of the Bible, children’s Bibles also gained popularity during the nineteenth century.

Children’s Bibles

Children’s Bibles occupy a particular space at the juncture of children’s literature and the adult Bible. Children’s Bibles carry the elements of children’s literature (i.e., entertainment, visual imagery, lessons, morals) and the elements of the Bible (i.e., sacred, word of God). The sacred, moralizing, didactic, and entertaining elements of children’s Bibles have been combined in complex ways to produce a text that is neither children’s literature nor the adult Bible.

The first children’s Bibles emerged during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, coinciding with the increased efforts to print Bibles in the vernacular. Early children’s Bibles were primarily written for and only accessible to upper-class children who were privileged enough to have leisure time and access to education.\textsuperscript{26} But by the middle of the nineteenth century, children began to leave the factories and farms to gain an education.\textsuperscript{27} As literacy rates increased, children’s Bibles,

\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., 297.
\textsuperscript{22}Colleen McDannell, \textit{Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America} (New Haven: Harvard University Press), 84.
\textsuperscript{23}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., 83.
\textsuperscript{26}Ibid., 93.
\textsuperscript{27}Mintz, \textit{Huck’s Raft}, 181.
among other forms of children’s literature, became readily accessible to children from a wider range of socio-economic backgrounds. Further, book production on a mass scale allowed for rich and poor children to read identical texts with identical illustrations and bindings.\textsuperscript{28} The children’s Bibles were specifically manufactured for children as they were much smaller than the adult Bible and were approximately a quarter of the length.

The first children’s Bibles were collections of biblical stories, which included the most graphic and violent stories told in full.\textsuperscript{29} However, as the romanticization of the child and notions of childhood innocence specifically took hold in the mid-nineteenth century, adults began to question the mature content of the Bible and whether biblical stories could reliably guide children down the proper path. The result was an increased effort to remove “mature”—violent and sexual—content from the Bible, which included the deletion of certain stories, extreme redactions of stories with violent and sexual elements, and additions to the narratives to bring out the “clear and correct sense of the original.”\textsuperscript{30} While notions of mature content and the “correct” interpretation have changed over time, children’s Bibles to this day are distinguished by their erasures, deletions and insertions.

Children’s Bibles also grapple with theological concerns of how to retain the sacred status of the Bible while editing God’s word. The editions and deletions necessarily render children’s Bibles as a derivative of the word of God because children’s Bibles are indisputably written by people. The sacred status of the Bible is disrupted, which was particularly evident when nineteenth-century tracts distributed pamphlets arguing that the revisions in children’s Bibles “mutilated or supplanted the Word.”\textsuperscript{31} However, children’s Bibles often address this concern by attempting to reconcile the redacted narrative with the Bible itself. For example, the preface of \textit{Bible Stories for Children} (1903) states, “In preparing these Bible stories for young readers, it has been the aim of the author to give them as simply as possible, without note or comment. There has been no attempt to criticism and no explanation of events narrated other than the Bible gives.”\textsuperscript{32} The idea that the words of the Bible should speak for themselves, without note or comment, was part of a larger movement by the American Bible Society (ABS) to circulate Bibles that did not express any Protestant denominational preference.\textsuperscript{33} The ABS Bibles did not include illustrations, commentary or marginalia in order to “rise above the sticky doctrinal issues that distinguished one denomination from another” so that readers could “focus their attention on what united all Protestants—a belief in the redemptive power of the word of God.”\textsuperscript{34} However, children’s Bibles differed quite drastically from the ABS Bibles because they were always supplemented with images, commentary and significant redactions. But, by presenting the text of children’s Bibles as unedited, the editors attempted to re-align children’s Bibles with the sacred, unalterable word of God.

Children’s Bibles not only assert themselves as sacred, but implicit and explicit moral lessons as well. The moral lessons found in children’s Bibles are rendered distinctly important because they carry the weight of God’s word. For example, \textit{The Children of the Bible} (1884) states: “More than thirty distinct characters are traced in this little book, all yielding helpful lessons in the patient formation of true character.”\textsuperscript{35} The stories are often presented as having a singular correct moral, rendering other possible interpretations of the story invalid. For example, \textit{A Life of Christ for Children} (1909) includes a question and answer portion before the story of Jesus’ birth. The story

\textsuperscript{28}Ruth Bottigheimer, \textit{The Bible for Children From the Age of Gutenberg to the Present} (New Haven: Yale University, 1996), 101.

\textsuperscript{29}Ibid., 40.

\textsuperscript{30}Ibid., 54.

\textsuperscript{31}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{32}Sarah Elizabeth Dawes, \textit{Bible Stories for Children} (New York: T.Y. Crowell & Co., 1903), iii.


\textsuperscript{34}Ibid., 63.

states:

Louise: How was it that God, who is his father, and who made all things, did not give him a nice cradle and a beautiful home, instead of letting him lie in a manger in a miserable stable?

Grandma: Because the Child Jesus wished to show us, by his example, that we must not desire the riches of this world, nor set our hearts on those things that wealth can give; and that we must love privations and humiliations.36

The explicit moral lessons in children’s Bibles seek to tame the complexities and nuances of biblical stories that rarely, if ever, have a singular interpretation.

In addition to providing sacred moral lessons, children’s Bibles also provide entertainment value by advertising themselves as fun, amusing storybooks.37 Some children’s Bibles advertise themselves as books filled with tales of adventure; for example, the introduction of Bible Stories for Children (1899) states, “This Bible has more wonderful things than you will find anywhere else. It tells of great battles, of the sun and moon standing still, of cities falling down at the blowing of trumpets; of fire descending from heaven; it tells of shipwrecks and storms, the cruel kings, and men willing to die for the name of Jesus.”38 The sensational elements seek to draw the children in by tapping into their emotions, desires and imaginations.39

Because children’s Bibles are didactic, moralizing, sacred and entertaining, they present a particularly interesting site to analyze societal expectations. The didactic and moralizing nature of the text seeks to transmit norms on everything from the mundane to the sacred, which includes everything from how one should think, act, dress and even eat.40 For example, Scenes in the Life of Christ tells the miracle of when Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes. The conclusion of the story states, “This miracle teaches us again that we should not be wasteful or extravagant... Many grown people are very wasteful and extravagant in their way of living, spending so much on dress, and that which is unnecessary, as tobacco, which not only does not do them any good, but is even injurious.”41 Here the text goes so far as to provide commentary on everything from contemporary consumer culture to health concerns. Further, the societal norms transmitted in both the texts and images hold the sacred weight of God’s word and as a result carry an added layer of legitimization. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, children’s Bibles are a particularly significant site to analyze societal norms because children’s Bibles are arguably the only book that children will return to later as adults.

Like All Other Boys

Children’s Bibles between 1870–1920 are particularly concerned with setting up Jesus as a role model for children, specifically for boys. However, children’s Bibles must contend with the notion that Jesus, as the son of God, is far from ordinary. Orthodox Christology, established at Chalcedon in 451, states that Jesus is both fully human and divine:

40Armstrong, The Children of the Bible, 4: children should “emulate in the diet, dress, and habits.”
41George Augustus Nixdorff, Scenes in the life of Christ. Adapted to the comprehension of children, and designed especially for Sabbath schools (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1876), 91.
Our Lord Jesus Christ: the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, of a rational soul and body...acknowledged in two natures which undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no separation: at no point was the difference between the natures taken away through the union, but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single person and a single subsistent being.42

The idea of the two natures in one being is a complex concept that children’s Bibles are forced to grapple with and explain to young children. They must acknowledge Jesus’ extraordinary origins while also ensuring that he remains relatable to young boys. Talks to Boys and Girls about Jesus (1881) contends with Jesus’ humanity and divinity with the statement: “Although Jesus came down from heaven, yet in his boyhood he was like other boys.”43 Similarly, Stories from the New Testament (1911) remarks, “the young Jesus, though he was the son of God and the promised Messiah of the Jews, was at that time only a dear child.”44

The interest in making Jesus relatable to young boys often went beyond children’s Bibles. Several books filled with Sunday school lessons also sought to establish Jesus as a peer to young children. For example, a book for Sunday school teachers titled On the Highway; the Bible for the children, from Genesis to Revelation explains an activity in which the teacher mounts a picture of Christ onto a wooden board and brings it to class. The teacher is instructed to “tell the pupils that we are going to have a new pupil join our class today.”45 Other books are interested in making Jesus specifically relatable to young boys. An Introduction to the Bible for Teachers of Children (1904) provides a lesson plan whose aim is to “1. Give reality to the boyhood of Jesus, and, 2. Establish a feeling of likeness or kinship between the boy Jesus and the children whom you are teaching.”46 In order to achieve this aim, the book recommends that teachers emphasize the human surroundings and elements of Jesus’ life and think of Jesus as a real boy, “liking a boys’ sports, doing a boy’s homework, subject to temptations like their own, living in a human family.”47 By rendering Jesus as a white, American, Christian boy, Jesus became a figure that other children might relate to and thus be able to emulate.

Children’s Bibles sought to establish Jesus as the perfect example for how other children should act. Children of the Bible (1884) states: “Little boys, there is no fancy sketch, wrought out by a vivid imagination, aided by a cup of strong coffee, neither is it a novel-hero, but a real, living human boy—flesh, blood, and bones—like yourselves, without the sin. Study his perfect character, and imitate it as much as lies in your power.”48 Although boys will certainly and consistently fail in their attempts to emulate Jesus, they are nonetheless encouraged to try. The Old, Old Story of the Holy Child (1900) also explicitly encourages children to model their behavior after Jesus. The book states, “Let us study the story of the boy Jesus, and see how He lived, and follow His steps.”49 Evidently, children’s Bibles consider themselves to be instruction manuals, designed to teach boys how to think, act and live. However, given that children’s Bibles draw from a complex

43Wilbur F. Crafts, Talks to Boys and Girls About Jesus, with Bible links to make a complete and chronological life of Christ for the young (New York: I.K. Funk & Co., 1881), 86.
45Ella Nancy Wood, On the Highway; the Bible for the children from Genesis to Revelation (Boston: United Society of Christian Endeavor, 1921), 131.
46Georgia Louise Chamberlin, An Introduction to the Bible for Teachers of Children (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1904), 93.
47Ibid., 94.
48Armstrong, Children of the Bible, 204.
biblical narrative, what traits are possible and/or desirable for children to emulate is far from obvious. How then do children’s Bibles shape and redact the biblical narrative to construct Jesus as a compelling role model?

Luke 2:41–52

The only biblical story of Jesus’ childhood comes from Luke 2:41–52. In the story, twelve-year-old Jesus traveled with his parents to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. After the celebration, Jesus’ parents returned home but the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem unbeknownst to his parents. After traveling for a day’s time, Jesus’ parents realized that Jesus was nowhere to be found. They could not find him among their relatives and friends and eventually they turned back to Jerusalem. Then, “after three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers” (2:46–47). His parents were astonished when they saw him and his mother said, “Son why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you” (2:48). To which Jesus replied, “Why were you searching for me? Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” (2:50). The biblical text states that his parents “did not understand what he was saying to them” (2:50). Then, Jesus went back to Nazareth with them and he was “obedient to them” (2:51). The story concludes with the statement, “And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man” (2:52).

Luke 2:41–52 stands alone in the biblical narrative as an independent unit. The story is the only narrative about Jesus’ childhood (or the only narrative between his birth and his ministry at age 30), it does not depend on any preceding text in the Lukan narrative, and it is the first words Jesus speaks. Because the story of Jesus in the Temple is the only story of Jesus as a child, it is unsurprisingly included in every children’s Bible. However, many children’s Bibles expand the story to highlight particular elements, such as Jesus’ obedience and wisdom.

Obedient Son

Most children’s Bibles use the story of Jesus in the Temple to emphasize Jesus’ obedience. They often explicitly conclude with a statement that Jesus obeyed his parents and so too should all young children. Scenes in the Life of Christ (1876) concludes the story by stating “As Jesus immediately obeyed His parents, and went back with them, and was ‘subject unto them at Nazareth,’ so too should we be in our young days.” The addition of the word “immediately” is noteworthy because the biblical narrative does not place a time frame on Jesus’ obedience. The addition adds a sense of urgency to Jesus’ obedience. Bible Talks with Children (1889) similarly concludes, “But when His mother Mary came to call him, He went home with her directly; and He obeyed her and Joseph in all things.” Again, the addition of “directly” emphasizes Jesus’ obedience as immediate and absolute.

Some children’s Bibles even set up hypothetical situations to describe how Jesus might have acted, but did not. For instance, The Old, Old Story of the Holy Child (1900) states:

Jesus was obedient. When He found His parents did not understand His intense desire to remain in the temple and become a student, He did not say, ‘Mamma, why can I not remain here in the Heavenly Father’s work?’ He did not burst into tears, and pain His

50Nixdorff, Scenes in the life of Christ, 23.
mother by His grief. He did not tease her to let Him remain a little while longer. He did not pout and lag behind, and make them all unhappy. He went down cheerfully with His parents to the city of Nazareth.\(^{52}\)

By describing how Jesus might have acted, the story seeks to set up Jesus’ cheerful obedience as the only correct behavior and all other possibilities are considered inappropriate.

Other children’s Bibles even go so far as to project into Jesus’ future behavior after the incident in the Temple. For instance, *Jesus of Nazareth* (1906) states that Mary and Joseph wondered if Jesus would be different after they got home, wondering “if the time was come for Him to be less subject to them; if He was going to continue the work of teaching He had begun in the Temple,” but no, “He was just the same as before... There was the same ready obedience, the same eagerness to find out their wishes, to spare them trouble, to make the home happy for them.”\(^{53}\) Evidently, then, Jesus’ experience in the Temple had no effect on Jesus as he remained the same obedient child as before.

Children’s Bibles often include other extra-biblical stories about Jesus’ childhood that also serve to emphasize Jesus’ obedience towards his parents. For example, *The Old, Old Story of the Holy Child* (1900), explains that Jesus diligently and enthusiastically learned from Mary. The story remarks, “As soon as Jesus could speak, His mother taught Him a verse of the law. As soon as He learned one text, he was taught another. Then a scroll, on which the verses were written, was placed in His hand, and He gradually came to know the letters and learned to read.”\(^{54}\) Through Jesus’ obedience to his mother, he is able to gain superior intelligence. *Stories from the New Testament* (1911) includes an image of Jesus learning from his mother titled “The Teaching of Jesus” (see image G). In the image, Mary holds a scroll as Jesus sits next to her, illustrating Jesus’ dependence on his mother’s wisdom.

The most common extra-biblical story included in children’s Bibles depicts Jesus happily doing chores for Joseph as he learns how to be a carpenter. *Bible Talks with Children* (1889) explains, “The little boy Jesus obeyed His father and mother. He did it cheerfully—never fretted because He was asked to do anything... He drew water, carried in wood, picked up chips and ran errands.”\(^{55}\) Jesus’ willingness to do chores for his parents expresses his unquestioning submission to his parent’s authority. A similar story in *Stories from the New Testament* (1911) describes Jesus helping his father in the workshop. The book states, “After a few more years Jesus learned to help his father... He learned to work with Joseph in the shop, and when he was ten years old he could plane a board to satin smoothness, and could paint a chest as neatly as his father.”\(^{56}\) By learning from Joseph, Jesus was able to master new skills quickly. An image found in *A Life of Christ for Children* (1909) shows Jesus doing work for his father (see image F). Joseph is the dominant figure in the illustration and Jesus assists Joseph by giving him wood.

Despite the overwhelming textual and visual support for the argument that Jesus was a perfectly obedient child towards his parents, there are several discrepancies in the Lukan narrative. In fact, the story begins with Jesus’s disobedience because he chooses to stay behind in Jerusalem instead of returning home with his parents. Not only does he stay behind, but he evidently does not inform his parents of his whereabouts (Luke 2:34). Biblical commentary often comments on the Temple story as the first sign of Jesus’ autonomy and independence from his parents.\(^{57}\) However, children’s


\(^{53}\)Mother Mary Loyola, *Jesus of Nazareth; the story of His life written for children* (Cincinnati: Benziger Brothers, 1906), 97.


\(^{55}\)Sooy, *Bible Talks with Children*, 260.


Bibles often absolve Jesus of his disobedience by inserting various explanations for Jesus’ choice to stay behind. For example, *Scenes in the Life of Christ* (1876) explains why Mary and Joseph did not realize Jesus was missing, “The reason why they did not miss Him earlier may have been that there were sometimes a number of families together, who may also have had children; and knowing Jesus to be a loving and dutiful child, they may not have made themselves uneasy about Him.”58 By explaining Jesus as a loving and dutiful child, Jesus’ disobedience towards his parents is explained away as unintentional or an innocent mistake.

**Disobedient Student**

While children’s Bibles make quick work of Jesus’ disobedience towards his parents, they do not do the same with Jesus’ disobedience towards the teachers in the Temple. Instead of showing deference to the authority of the elders in the Temple, Jesus counters his teachers by “asking them questions” (Luke 2:46). While asking questions and disputing Torah was—and continues to be—a central component of Jewish study, already in antiquity Jesus’ attempts to educate his teachers was understood as an offense.59 Given the plethora of strategies employed by children’s Bibles to explain away Jesus’ disobedience towards his parents, it is reasonable to assume that Jesus’ interactions with the teachers in the Temple would be similarly edited. However, children’s Bibles not only justify Jesus’ act of disobedience but they often celebrate it by evoking Jesus’ superior wisdom. The scene of Jesus in the Temple is often elaborated on in two ways: the age difference between Jesus and the teachers and Jesus’ wisdom beyond his years. The additions to the Temple narrative portray a variety of strategies that emphasize supersessionism, or the idea that the Christian Church and the New Covenant have replaced or superseded the Israelites as the chosen people.

The first strategy employed by children’s Bibles is an emphasis on the age difference between Jesus and the teachers. By inserting various adjectives, the teachers are portrayed as ancient old men. For example, *Scenes in the Life of Christ* (1876) states that when Mary and Joseph found Jesus they “must have thought, ‘well, He is in a good place, at any rate,’ but then the idea of one so young sitting in the midst of aged, learned men, with perhaps their grey beards, must have struck them as very strange.”60 Although the biblical narrative makes no comment on how old the men are, *Scenes in the Life of Christ* (1876) use words such as “aged” and “grey beards” to establish a substantial age difference.

Not only do children’s Bibles emphasize the age difference but they also use it to show Jesus’ superior intelligence that extends far beyond his young age. For instance, *Bible Stories for Children* (1899) states, “Jesus sat in the midst of the wise men, whose place it was to teach and to preach to those who came to the feasts, and the old men bent their heads to hear what the young lad had to say. For it was the first time they had met with one so young in years who was so wise in speech.”61 The men are shocked by Jesus’ wisdom, a sentiment similarly echoed in *A Life of Christ for Children* (1909), which states “and there they found the Child, ‘sitting in the midst of the doctors, hearing them and asking them questions,’ and explaining to them obscure passages of the sacred writings so clearly that the Doctors of the Law ‘and all that hear him were astonished at his wisdom and his answers.’”62 Jesus is so intelligent that he is able to explain to the learned teachers what they failed to understand.

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59In the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 6:8 and 13:2, Jesus refuses to show deference to his teachers which warrants the employment of physical punishment.
Jesus’ superior wisdom is perhaps most explicitly stated in *Jesus of Nazareth* (1906). The story explains:

There He sits, the carpenter’s Son, the center of that learned gathering. Every eye is fixed on Him in wonder and admiration. He has put questions to which none can reply... Old men are there whose lives have been spent in the study and explanation of the Law. But they have found their Master to-day and are forced to keep silence before Him. Mary and Joseph wait. They must not interrupt Him. He has a work to do here. They wait patiently and delightedly as He answers His own questions and explains hard passages of the Scripture and clears away difficulty from the minds of the men... There is no disputing what He says, for He speaks with authority and such wisdom that all are astonished. Silent and thoughtful, one after another leaves the group.63

First, the teachers are presented as “old men,” thus establishing the age gap. Second, Jesus’ superior wisdom is incredibly apparent as he not only astonishes the teachers but also dumbfounds them. Jesus becomes their Master and they ultimately concede to his superiority by leaving the Temple. Finally, and perhaps most noteworthy, is that Mary and Joseph wait for him to complete his mission. They look on as proud parents while Jesus diminishes the authority of the teachers by questioning them. Evidently, Jesus’ disobedience is acceptable as long as it is not directed towards them, but towards the teachers. Jesus’ usurpation of authority is also particularly evident in the images accompanying the text.

**The Visual Other**

The images found in children’s Bibles cannot be considered mere supplements to the featured text, rather they provide their own version of the story. As *The Children’s Bible Hour* (1888) reminds its readers, “I need not ask you to look at the pictures; of course you will do that willingly; but will you study the pictures? They will tell you many things that cannot be written.”64 While not all of the children’s Bibles include illustrations, those that do depict a scene that looks remarkably different from the illustrations of Jesus’ family life. Whereas those images portray a scene of domestic tranquility, the scene of Jesus in the Temple is fraught with tension as Jesus, a young innocent child, is surrounded by a cluster of creepy, aged men. Although there is no literary description of what Jesus might have looked like, the images bear a remarkable similarity to one another.65 However, the similarity does not come from similarities in physical attributes but rather in the way Jesus is presented (see images A–E in appendix). In other words, the viewer recognizes Jesus in the drawings not because of his physical attributes such as hair color or style, clothing or facial structure, but rather because he contains a certain “likeness.” Likeness, according to visual theorist David Morgan, is the ability of a viewer to imagine the person they know, in this case Jesus, even though they have never seen the man.66 Morgan notes that for many Christians, “the likeness of Jesus presents not so much how he looked but what he was like.”67 Further, Morgan states that likeness is not a mere display of Jesus’ unique qualities but it is also a “recognition of an affinity between Jesus’s appearance and what believers know, feel or see within themselves about him.”68 Thus, Jesus’ likeness is grounded in the ability of the viewers to recognize what they know to be

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63Loyola, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 95-96.
66Ibid.
67Ibid., 179.
68Ibid.
true about Jesus and in their ability to see themselves in his image. In children’s Bibles, then, Jesus is presented as simultaneously human and extra-human and he takes on the form of a Caucasian Christian boy.

The most obvious similarity between the images is the glowing light that surrounds Jesus, imbuing him with divinity. In images A and C, Jesus is portrayed as the focal point of the room, which not only illuminates Jesus but also casts those standing around him in the room’s shadows. Although Jesus sits off to the side of the room in image B, the light appears to stream in through the window, which illuminates Jesus from behind. In images D and E, the artist goes further to emphasize Jesus’ divinity by drawing a halo of light around his head. In contrast, the teachers in the temple are depicted in the dark shadows and the old men huddle together, leaning forward out of the shadows into Jesus’ light. They are crowded together and their long, flowing dark robes always stand in contrast to Jesus simple white robe.

In addition to the contrast between light and dark, the images also present a contrast between Jesus youth and the teachers’ old age. Although Jesus is twelve years of age in the biblical narrative, he is often depicted as a small boy, who appears to be much younger. For example, in image A, Jesus barely reaches the height of the teacher’s waist. In images A, C and E Jesus face retains the round, softness of a small child. The teachers, in contrast, are drawn as very old men with long white beards, wrinkles and hunched postures. The men’s faces are sharp and angular, and are stereotypically depicted with hooked noses. Further, Jesus is clearly the active agent in most of the drawings, as he is portrayed in the midst of speech, captivating the attention of those around him. Images B and C even present Jesus animatedly gesturing to a passage in the scripture. Despite Jesus’ activity, he remains calm and his face is serene as he instructs the teachers. The teachers, on the other hand, are drawn in varying states of distress, befuddlement and despair. In some instances, such as images A and B, the teachers hold their heads in their hands as they look down towards the floor. Thus, the images clearly present Jesus’ absolute authority in the Temple by imbuing him with superior physical and spiritual qualities and rendering the teachers as ethnically and racially other.

The drawings of the teachers contrast the images of Jesus, and his parents, who are depicted as white Christians of European descent. As a result, the reader identifies with Jesus and his parents, and thus is taught to view the teachers in the Temple as the other. According to Hugh S. Pyper, in his article “Looking into the Lion’s Den: Otherness, Ideology, and Illustration in Children’s Versions of Daniel 6,” one of the key features of children’s education, and subsequent literature, is teaching the “ability to categorize and to assign individual people or objects to the correct culturally and linguistically recognized categories.” The child is taught to identify with the protagonist while simultaneously taught to see those existing in opposition to the protagonist as other. In the Temple story, the hunched, wrinkly old men who possess inferior wisdom, are rendered as the other because they clearly oppose the protagonist, Jesus.

Further, a key instrument of colonization is educational authority. Pyper quotes Jerry Phillips article “Educating the Savages: Melville, Bloom, and the Rhetoric of Imperialist Instruction,” who states, “In its classic formulation the moment of imperialism is also the moment of education. Imperialism...has never strayed far from a field of pedagogical imperatives, or what might be called an ideology of instruction.” In other words, education in the imperial context is the assumed

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69 Images 1 and 3 are the only images included in the children’s Bibles that identify an author. French artist Gustave Doré and German artist Heinrich Hofmann painted images 1 and 3 respectively. Both artists were a part of the Romantic movement that was known for powerful contrasts of light and dark and expressive poses and gestures.


71 Ibid., 65.

72 Jerry Phillips “Educating the Savages: Melville, Bloom, and the Rhetoric of Imperialist Instruction” in Pyper,
superiority of a group that gives them the right to educate others and define what education means. By emphasizing Jesus’ role as a teacher of the teachers children’s Bibles seek to validate imperialism by determining Jesus’ right to educate others in the higher and superior Christian wisdom. Thus, the story ultimately teaches young children how to identify and interact with the other.

**Conclusion**

Although obedience is certainly a prominent feature in the stories about Jesus’ childhood, I argue that the story is not particularly concerned with obedience, but rather seeks to justify disobedience when it is directed towards the other. The concern, and some might say obsession, with children at the turn of the twentieth century led to the belief that children must be properly nurtured. Adults began to view children as innately pure and spiritual, they stressed over the physical and sexual development of their children and they sought to protect the innocence of childhood. It is therefore unsurprising that discipline and obedience were prominent features in children’s literature at the turn of the twentieth century. After all, how else could adults be expected to guide children down the proper path? However, children’s Bibles present an interesting departure from other forms of children’s literature. Children’s Bibles certainly retain the entertaining, moralizing and didactic elements of children’s literature, but they also carry the sacred status of God’s word and they draw from a complex biblical text that was not originally intended for children. As a result, they are forced to grapple with how to make their historically long-dead, divine protagonists relatable figures for young children in their contemporary moment.

In a sophisticated interplay between text and image, children’s Bibles printed between 1870–1920 encouraged their readers to identify with Jesus and emulate his behavior. The illustrations invited young children to see themselves in Jesus’ image, as a white, Christian boy of European descent. The illustrations also encouraged children to identify with the domestic tranquility of the nuclear family by seeing their own parents in the images of Mary and Joseph. The text emphasized Jesus’ boyhood and encouraged other children to follow in his footsteps. And yet, Jesus was born without sin, he was the Son of God, fully human and fully divine. Children’s Bibles thus had to contend with the reality that children will certainly and consistently fail in their attempts to emulate Jesus’ divinity. However, children might—if they follow the implicit and explicit instructions found in children’s Bibles—emulate Jesus’ humanity.

Ultimately, I have argued that children’s Bibles construct Jesus as a figure who exercises perfect obedience to his parents but is disobedient towards the other. In fact, Jesus disobedience is not only acceptable but even encouraged and celebrated because his “whiteness” and “Christian-ness” is understood as superior to the racial, ethnic and cultural otherness of the Jewish teachers in the Temple. Although children will certainly never possess Jesus’ perfect nature, they will inch ever closer if they followed his actions and behaviors. Because Jesus is thought to be the perfect and ultimate role model, how children’s Bibles construct and depict Jesus will have massive implications for societal norms.

As a point of comparison, the current best-selling children’s Bible today titled *A Child’s First Bible* (2000), differs quite drastically from the 1870–1920 children’s Bibles. In the story, Jesus’ parents are absent from both the text and the image. Further, although the teachers were “surprised at how much Jesus knew about God,” Jesus does not instruct them. The story concludes with the statement: “Where can you learn more about God?” The moral of the story is not about

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“Looking into the Lion’s Den,” 65.

73 Based on the best-selling book list from Amazon.com


75 Ibid., 169.
obedience, or disobedience, but rather it is about seeking out knowledge instead of presuming to know all of the answers. The image accompanying the text spreads the entirety of the page and although Jesus is white with European facial features, so too are the teachers (see image H in appendix). Further, Jesus is depicted as a much older boy, appearing as a teenager, which makes the age difference between him and the teachers less drastic. Finally, Jesus sits on the ground at the teacher’s feet and they are all illuminated in the same light. The contrast between contemporary children’s Bibles and those printed between 1870–1920 illustrates that conceptions of childhood and beliefs about what constitutes the ideal child depend on the historical moment. Evidently, who Jesus was as a boy, how he behaved, and the example he sets for children is entirely up to the historical context in which he is imagined.
Appendix

(A) *Bible Talks with Children* (1889), page 261.

(B) *Bible Stories for Children* (1899), page 41.
(C) Bible Stories for Children (1903), page 249.

(D) Stories from the Life of Christ (1905), page 11.
(E) *A Life of Christ for Children* (1909), page 29.

(F) *A Life of Christ for Children* (1909), page ii.
(G) *Stories from the New Testament* (1911), page i.

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CHILDREN’S BIBLES (In Chronological Order)


