

## Introduction

Once upon a time . . .

As soon as we read these words, we know that we are leaving our workaday world to enter a land of make-believe, where wishes make things so and where ever after is always happy. As children, we gladly gave ourselves up to this dream, but we have since lost our innocence, and so we read on, charmed but not taken in.

It's different with the Bible. It doesn't begin with "Once upon a time." Instead, the first sentence steps forward onto hard bedrock: "When God began to create heaven and earth." This is not the world of make-believe. But neither is it the world we ordinarily inhabit. It's the liminal realm of prehistory, of God's reality, the moment before the Big Bang. The stories in the Bible defy the neat conventions of fairy tales: many a hero lives unhappily ever after, and many maidens remain in distress. These stories are linked together in a chain of consequences: the sins of the fathers are visited upon a hundred generations; villainy dooms whole nations; an act of faith summons angels. No wonder this Book of Books has endured for two millennia.

How then does one take this often disturbing account of the Jewish national story and make it suitable for children?

Over the centuries, many have made the attempt, mostly in the Christian community. In the 12th century, French writer Peter Comestor produced a popular illustrated children's Bible in Latin, *Historia Scholastica*, intended for Christian children and uneducated adults. A few centuries later, the invention of the printing press resulted in the mass production of children's Bibles, most notably, Martin Luther's children's Bible, an abridged illustrated version of his German Bible translation. For the most part, these Bibles were intended for moral instruction; their authors pressed the Bible into service for this aim. Thus biblical stories were expurgated, abridged, rewritten, and more often than not, Christianized. The Bible was thus turned into a morality play for children.

The Jewish community has also long used the Bible for the moral instruction of its children, but it has done so not by rewriting the original text as in Christian children's Bibles but by filtering it through the interpretations and fables of the rabbinic sages. Jewish tradition has always regarded the Hebrew Bible as the foundation of its "core curriculum" of lifelong learning. That is why, according to the popular anthology of early rabbinic teachings known as *Pirke Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers), a child's education should begin at age five with Bible study. An important part of this core Bible curriculum are the interpretations by the classical Rabbis, who refract the Bible through the dual prism of exegesis, or *peshat* (reading

out of the text on its own terms) and eisegesis, or *derash* (reading into the text from the perspective of one's own time and place). In effect, then, though Jewish children begin their education with the Hebrew Bible, it is really the Rabbis' Bible that they study—the Hebrew text as interpreted—and reimagined by—the ancient sages.

In modern times, especially in the United States, Jews have adapted this traditional core curriculum to suit American need and tastes. Early on, many Jewish teachers and textbook publishers borrowed from the theories and practices of American educational philosophers, especially John Dewey. What has emerged over time is a new kind of specialized Jewish children's literature, including Bible stories written and illustrated expressly to further the moral and intellectual development of young readers.

Unfortunately, the Bible does not sit comfortably within the framework of Western liberal education. More often than not, biblical explanations about the how's and why's of nature clash with the theories of modern science. The tribal politics of ancient Israel may offend some modern sensibilities. And some parts of the Bible are too violent, sexually explicit, or culturally alien for today's children. So, like their Christian counterparts, Jewish children's Bibles have generally represented ingenious compromises. Through abridgment, censorship, euphemism, and tact, the authors of these Bibles have cut scripture down to scale, sometimes preserving the essence of the original, other times making a hash of it.

The same is true of the illustrations that usually appear in these American editions. Pictorial styles range from realism to cartoons, from photographic precision to Disney fantasy. Although pictures in modern children's Bibles do not generally allegorize their subjects as was the case in earlier centuries, artists cannot neutrally depict a biblical scene. Like rabbinic commentaries, landscapes and figures necessarily reflect what the illustrator reads into and out of the biblical text. Indeed, all translation, even from word into image, is interpretation.



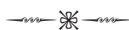
This Jewish children's Bible is different from others.

My principal aim in this volume is to reproduce the unique texture and rhythm of biblical language, specifically, that of the 1985 JPS English Translation (NJPS), which itself aims to capture the idiomatic nuances of biblical Hebrew. The stories that you find within these pages are abridged but not improved or modernized. Whenever possible, I have kept the NJPS wording, so that my readers and listeners can appreciate the simple narrative style of the Bible: sentences anchored in active subjects and verbs, few adjectives or adverbs, only rare editorializing by the

narrator. Like any good yarn, much of every Bible story is told through dialogue, with “He said” or “She said” inserted only to differentiate speakers. All the familiar techniques of good storytelling—suspense, dramatic irony, repetition, wordplay, stock characters—are present in these stories, but the specific ways that these techniques play out are unique to the Hebrew Bible. So, too, are the names of people and places, of holy days and sacred acts.

I have selected 53 stories for inclusion in this book. My choices were guided mainly by my sense of what makes a good story for children, but a few were included because they are pivotal to an understanding of the Jewish national story. Some I excluded as being inappropriate for young readers. Much more was left out than left in: poetry, prophecy, songs, psalms, genealogies, legal material, ritual and priestly material, wisdom literature, and folklore. I leave this for others to translate for children.

As I worked, I made many judgment calls—about word choice, translation, editorial intervention, censorship, and gendered language. In the back of this volume, in a special section called “Writing a Jewish Children’s Bible: An Author’s Notebook,” you can find brief explanations about my editorial choices, with a few examples to illustrate them. These notes are intended for teachers, rabbis, librarians, and parents who want to understand in greater detail how my version compares to NJPS.



Rabbi Ben Bag Bag, one of the sages of the Mishnah, said of the Torah: “Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it.” Although the volume in your hands does not contain the whole Torah, it’s a good first leg of your journey toward Ben Bag Bag’s promised reward. I pray that you find wisdom, inspiration, and delight along the way.

Ellen Frankel  
25 Tammuz 5768  
July 28, 2008