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Mixed Reviews: On (Not) Using the Stories of Genesis in Ministry to Children

R. CHRISTOPHER HEARD

Imagine for a moment that some intrepid Hollywood figure set out to make a “realistic” and “accurate” motion picture portrayal of the book of Genesis. Naturally, given the sort of audience that would tend to be drawn to a dramatization of a biblical book, our producer does not wish to titillate or appeal to prurient interests. Nevertheless, our filmmaker is also intent on reproducing the book of Genesis on film as faithfully as possible (although, thankfully, our producer has decided not to insist upon all dialogue being spoken in Hebrew). After a lengthy process of pitching, casting, funding, and filming, the picture is now ready to go to the Motion Picture Association of America to receive a rating. How might this film fare at its MPAA screening?

Clearly, a film accurately presenting the storyline of Genesis could not receive a G rating. To receive a G rating, a film must keep violence to a minimum and must be free of nudity, sex scenes, and drug use. The book of Genesis fails on several counts. The stories of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4), the war of the four kings of the east against the five kings of the plain (Genesis 14), the destruction of the cities of the plain (Genesis 19), and the assault on Shechem by Jacob’s sons (Genesis 34) can hardly qualify as keeping violence to a minimum.

Nudity could perhaps be avoided by careful placement of shrubbery in the Garden of Eden, but our filmmaker chose not to use that convenient tactic, finding it inconsistent with the text’s assertion that the man and woman were not ashamed of their nudity prior to eating the “forbidden fruit.” Our filmmaker also found it impossible to avoid nudity in the scene depicting Noah’s postdiluvial inebriation without a profound sense of missing the point.

Sex, however tastefully handled onscreen, cannot be eliminated from the film without skipping the stories of the sons of God and the daughters of men (Genesis 6), Sarah and Pharaoh (Genesis 12), Abram and Hagar (Genesis 16), Sodom and Gomorrah and the aftermath with Lot and his daughters (Genesis 19), Sarah and Abimelech (Genesis 20), Rebekah and Isaac outside Abimelech’s window (Genesis 26), Jacob’s unexpected marriage to Leah (Genesis 29), Shechem and Dinah (Genesis 34), Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38), and Joseph and Potiphar’s wife (Genesis 39).

Depending on the MPAA board’s strictness, Genesis might even fail the drug-use test, depending on how they understood Rachel’s use of Reuben’s mandrakes (Genesis 30) and how dramatically the film portrayed Noah’s and Lot’s abject drunkenness (Genesis 9, 19).

On to PG, then. Our filmmaker could live with a PG rating, which would likely be better for ticket sales anyway. Some violence or brief nudity is possible in PG-rated films, as long as neither is considered to be



intense enough to warrant a stronger caution to parents. The MPAA board, however, rightly considers the annihilation of entire cities (whether by fire from heaven, Genesis 19, or by swordsmen, Genesis 34), not to mention the entire populated world (by flood, Genesis 6–8), to constitute “intense violence.” Then again, there’s the drug issue in the stories mentioned above; a PG rating is reserved for films without any drug-related content.

In any event, our MPAA board has already decided that the violence, nudity, and sexual content of *Genesis: The Motion Picture* go beyond the PG level. The question before them now is whether the film reaches the R level. If not, they can assign a PG-13, which is a strange, hybrid rating, sitting uncomfortably in between PG and R.

To determine whether an R rating is required, the MPAA board must ask whether the violence in *Genesis* is too rough or persistent—the MPAA standard—for a PG-13 rating. Given our filmmaker’s tastefulness in such scenes when compared with other Hollywood movie fare, probably not. Any sexually oriented nudity will also take the picture immediately to an R rating. However, our filmmaker has been tactful

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about this: neither the humans’ shameless nudity in Eden (Genesis 3), nor Noah’s drunken exposure (Genesis 9), nor even a graphically depicted circumcision scene (Genesis 17) are necessarily sexually-oriented, and our filmmaker has treated most other sex scenes modestly, using innuendo and convenient camera angles to keep human genitalia off-camera.

However, the MPAA board decides that the *Genesis* film has not completely dodged the R bullet.

Despite the production crew’s best efforts, our filmmaker simply could not find a way to accurately convey the events following Onan’s levirate marriage to Tamar (Genesis 38) without graphically depicting sexual activity. *Genesis: The Motion Picture* will be rated R, then, our producer grudgingly admits.

The MPAA board, however, is not quite so sure. They must now determine whether the film adaptation of *Genesis* contains a level of violence, sex, aberrational behavior, drug abuse, or any other elements that parents might consider off-limits for children under age 17, and thus deserve an NC-17 rating. It’s the sexual content that really has the board concerned. Our filmmaker has carefully ensured that nudity is not used for prurient ends in sexual contexts. However, the board notes, the script nevertheless calls for divine cohabitation with human females (Genesis 6; see Christopher Rollston’s article in this issue of *Leaven*), unidirectional wife-swapping (Genesis 12, 20, 26), polygamy (Genesis 16), the threat of male-on-male rape (Genesis 19), incest combined with drunkenness (Genesis 19), sororal polygyny (marriage of one man to sisters, Genesis 29), a sex-for-drugs scheme (those mandrakes again; Genesis 30), male-on-female rape (according to the conventional interpretation of Genesis 34), solicitation of prostitution from a family member (Genesis 38), and sexual harassment leading to charges of attempted rape (Genesis 39), not to mention the whole Onan scene.

Still, looking back on some of their past decisions, the MPAA board just can’t stand to give a script adapted from the Bible an NC-17 rating, so they back off and assign the film an R rating, and our filmmaker breathes a big sigh of relief.

Meanwhile, Nonesuch Church of Christ in Nameless, Tennessee, announces that the book of *Genesis* will form the basis for its fall-quarter elementary grades Sunday school curriculum.

My perspective on the use of the book of *Genesis* in ministry to children is naturally informed by my particular social and professional location. I am not a child psychologist. I am not an expert in elementary grades education. I have no seminary training in ministry to children. I am not a big-budget filmmaker or a

member of the MPAA ratings board. I am merely a biblical scholar, a specialist in the book of Genesis, and the father of a five-year-old boy.

As a Christian father, I want to pass on my faith to my son. As a Christian reared in and committed to the Bible-oriented tradition of churches of Christ, I want my son's emerging faith to be shaped by encounters with scripture. As an exegete, I want my son to care about what I do for a living, namely, careful study of the Bible. Thus, at every turn, I have a deep desire for my son to learn and to love the biblical stories and poems that mean so much to me spiritually and professionally.

So my wife and I decorate our son's room with Bible characters and scenes. We take him to Sunday school. We give him Bible story coloring books and picture books. We read to him from *The Beginner's Bible* at bedtime. We act out Bible stories with him. (He prefers Noah's ark and David and Goliath. Naturally, he's always David, and I'm always Goliath.) We show him *VeggieTales* and Nest Entertainment's *Animated Stories from the Bible*.

But as a biblical scholar, my parenting practices sometimes frighten me a little. I am all too well aware of the "dark underbelly" of the book of Genesis. This is a book written by adults, for adults. Genesis does not shy away from narrating distasteful and offensive activity. The book's candor about its characters' moral failings has greatly impressed many commentators, but that selfsame candor makes large portions of the book inappropriate for children. Nevertheless, Genesis is often mined for "children's Bible stories." Thus, as a biblical scholar and a father looking at my own parenting and church curricula, I have two broad areas of concern.

Exposing Children to the Stories of Genesis Might Prove Overwhelming

Children with no understanding of death are not equipped to understanding even a relatively harmless story such as Abraham's purchase of the cave of Machpelah (Genesis 23), much less to handle tales of murder (e.g., Cain and Abel) or mass annihilation (e.g., the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah). Children with no understanding of human sexuality and reproduction are not equipped to handle Genesis stories about barrenness and fertility.

It is altogether too easy to expose a child too soon to too many of the harsh realities of life that are reflected in the scriptures, and thereby either to terrorize or desensitize the child. Even a seemingly innocuous activity like drawing Abraham's family tree involves concepts of polygamy, divorce, and concubinage, and elementary-grade children are generally ill-equipped to deal with such topics.¹

Exposing Children to "Sanitized" Versions Might Lull Them into a False Sense of Familiarity

I frequently encounter first year college students whose knowledge and understanding of Old Testament stories is largely limited to what they were taught in Sunday school in primary grades but who *think* that they have little left to learn about these texts. Having heard stories about Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, and Jacob year after year in Sunday school, they are often surprised, even troubled, when they read these stories in college and discover their distasteful dimensions. This is not exactly a matter of familiarity breeding contempt but more precisely of familiarity breeding complacency, even boredom.

How then can we share with our children our love for the scriptures that have nourished our own faith while remaining sensitive to the stages of our children's psychological and spiritual development in a way that avoids giving our children the impression of greater knowledge and understanding of these texts than they actually have? I offer the following seven suggestions.

SUGGESTIONS FOR SHARING GENESIS WITH CHILDREN

1. *Emphasize stories that display God's greatness and love.* Stories that depict God as a powerful, loving, ordering, reassuring presence help to give children a sense of confidence and stability in the world. The

creation account in Genesis 1 is beautifully suited to this end. God is shown here in cosmic majesty, ordering the world step by step into a habitat suitable for human beings. Of course, Genesis 1 has depths of riches that even adults must work hard to grasp. Yet it does not distort this chapter to introduce even very young children to its most basic claim: God created the world, and it was good. Assurance of God's goodness and love is one of the most important building blocks of healthy spirituality for children, especially in the first five years of life.²

2. *Defer stories that emphasize divine punishment.* The American cultural cliché of getting “zapped” by God for bad behavior is all too present in some of the stories in Genesis. “Noah’s ark,” one of the most popular stories for children, presents serious problems in this regard. I am not sure, historically speaking, how the story of the flood came to be so favored by adults who want to present Bible stories to children. Perhaps

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it is as simple as the assumption that children like animals, so a story about animals must be a good children’s story. A kindly old man and a boat full of animals—what’s not to love?

My five-year-old son cites Noah’s ark as his favorite Bible story because it has a flood in it, and he loves floods, waterfalls, rivers, oceans, geysers, and all such bodies of water. Yet I wonder sometimes whether he fully appreciates what happened to all the people and animals who weren’t on the

ark. The idea of God drowning the entire human race and most land animals and birds is staggering and sobering. To be sure, one of the important elements in the story is God’s promise never to do it again, so the story might actually prove reassuring in some contexts. However, exposing children too early to the Bible’s images of God as a destructive, punishing deity may simply scare them.³

3. *Be very cautious with stories that contain intra-family violence.* Older preteens from very secure family contexts might be able to handle the stories of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4) and Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 37), for example, without experiencing undue fear for their own safety at the hands of siblings. Younger children, however, or those with tense or fragile home lives might very well find these stories to be catalysts for fear of mistreatment at home.

Perhaps one of the most difficult texts in this regard is the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). God’s demand for Isaac’s slaughter is horrifying, even for readers who know that it is a test (Gen 22:1). The terror is heightened for children who respect their parents’ devotion and hear Abraham being praised for his “faithfulness” in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. It would be a terrible thing for a Sunday school lesson to cause little children to think their parents might try to kill them to pass a divine test.

A blanket avoidance of violent content is not necessarily warranted, however. For children with firsthand experience of or exposure to intra-family violence, some of Genesis’s stories of internecine conflict, such as those mentioned above might actually be a source of unexpected comfort. Such stories might reassure some children that family violence has occurred since time immemorial and cannot be blamed on the victim. However, teachers run the risk of having children interpret such violence as if it were divinely sanctioned (simply because it is a Bible story), and therefore should exercise great care in the use of such stories—and should almost certainly avoid turning Bible classes into amateur therapy sessions.

4. *Don’t sanitize stories whose “mature” content is central to the plot.* Instead, defer them until a later stage in the child’s life when the full story can be told. This principle is particularly applicable to stories where sexual content is in the foreground, as in a number of Genesis’s stories. Until children have been helped to develop a healthy understanding of reproduction, human sexuality, and marriage, they should not be studying Bible stories that involve illicit or aberrant sexual behavior. Skilled teachers might be able to help

older preteens navigate the tricky waters of patriarchal polygamy, but stories involving adultery, incest, rape, and prostitution really have no place in an elementary-grade classroom—even if those stories are in the Bible.

5. *Be slow to embellish biblical stories.* Biblical narrators tend to choose their words economically. Some are given to repetition, true, but most eschew the kinds of vivid descriptions that might capture children's imaginations. Take something as simple as color. Color words are extremely rare in Genesis. The word green appears twice in connection with plants for the purpose of distinguishing edible portions from nonedible portions. The word red appears twice in the stories about Esau as a play on his other name, Edom (which sounds like the Hebrew word for red). The words white and black appear up to four times each in the story of Jacob's selective breeding of Laban's sheep, and the whiteness of teeth as compared with milk is mentioned once. Three times, gray hairs are cited as signs of old age. Otherwise, Andrew Lloyd Webber notwithstanding, Genesis makes no mention of yellow, brown, scarlet, ochre, peach, ruby, olive, violet, fawn, lilac, gold, chocolate, mauve, cream, crimson, silver, rose, azure, lemon, russet, purple, pink, orange, or blue.

Of course, adding color words to a Bible story for preschoolers is pretty much harmless. Telling preschoolers that God created the bright yellow sun and the big blue sky in no way distorts the story. But be slow to add other kinds of "color" to Bible stories. Adam and Eve's famous daily strolls through the Garden of Eden, hand-in-hand with God, are nowhere to be found in the actual biblical text. Genesis 2–3 does not even claim that God ever spoke to the human creatures between warning the first human away from the forbidden tree and calling out to the humans after they ate from the tree.

Noah's nasty neighbors, who taunted him for being so foolish as to build a boat so far inland, are likewise absent from the biblical text, as indeed are any geographical clues to Noah's whereabouts prior to the mention of Ararat. Ancient Israelites might just as easily have pictured Noah living on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea or the Persian Gulf, perhaps even the Black Sea or Caspian Sea, as in the arid spaces often pictured in illustrated Bibles and Bible storybooks.

Embellishments of this latter type are *not* harmless, for at least two important reasons. When we embellish biblical accounts by adding characters and events that don't appear in the biblical stories, we end up telling *different* stories than the biblical narrators tell. How we "fill in the blanks" that a story presents to us can decisively shape our understanding of that story.

If we picture Noah as living in a dry, hilly region, we might be impressed with his incredible faithfulness in building a boat there; nobody would ever need a boat in such a place, but Noah believes God despite the odds. What wonderful faith! On the other hand, if we picture Noah as living in southern Mesopotamia, in the Tigris-Euphrates flood plain or even on the shores of the Persian Gulf, we are unlikely to be surprised that Noah takes the threat seriously, and we will look for other (and more probable) messages than "be like Noah."

Young children have a particularly difficult time disentangling fact from fiction, especially if the two are commingled in a single presentation. If we teach embellished versions of Bible stories, children are likely to accept these versions, internalize them, and treat them as if they were the biblical stories themselves.

6. *Seek to understand Genesis's stories deeply before teaching them to children.* Bible stories books and Sunday school curricula that aim at a simplicity appropriate to the cognitive development of young children can easily give the impression that the stories in Genesis are plain and straightforward. In fact, the Genesis narratives are subtle and complex. Even absolutely straightforward narration can get distorted in our memory and over the course of our retellings, so we should constantly reexamine the texts both to appreciate their complexities and ambiguities and to remind ourselves of their explicit features.

One small example will have to suffice here: the function of the rainbow after the flood story. As a young child, I "learned" that God put the rainbow in the sky to remind people of God's promise to never again wipe out humanity by means of a flood. It wasn't until I came back to the story in college that I finally learned the true purpose of the rainbow according to the book of Genesis: it is to remind *God* not to flood

the earth again. That is a significant difference but one that is easily overlooked if we fail to keep a constant check on our own “Bible knowledge” as we teach biblical stories to children.

7. *Emphasize formation over information.* “Sunday school” curricula have sometimes been driven by a desire to teach children as much biblical content as possible. This type of motivation is especially strong in the Stone-Campbell heritage and other movements with Bible-centered commitments or leanings. The traditional emphasis of the Stone-Campbell movement on inductive reasoning from biblical “facts” to theological claims and the movement’s rejection of creeds contribute to the “Bible story of the week” model for children’s church classes. Perhaps, however, the challenges posed by Genesis’s stories would suggest that such practice puts the cart before the horse.

Although I am personally sympathetic with Campbell’s plea for an inductive theological *method*, I am no longer convinced that spiritual *pedagogy* should follow the same model. Our children might be better served by being taught *theology* (and I am thinking primarily of “theology proper,” teachings about God) rather than biblical stories at young ages. Of course, such teaching could and should be illustrated by appropriate biblical stories. Even so, I am (at present, at least) inclined to think that breadth of knowledge of biblical stories is less important in elementary grades than depth of knowledge of, love for, and commitment to the Lord God. That sort of spiritual formation can provide a matrix within which teenagers and adults can more healthily process the less savory and more disturbing stories of Genesis (and other biblical books).

As a Christian parent who is also a biblical scholar, I want the Bible to be an important part of my son’s life. As a biblical scholar who is also a Christian parent, I want to protect my son from too-early exposure to some of the Bible’s more disturbing stories. The narratives in Genesis, it turns out, have a rather high occurrence of unseemly elements.

The creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2 can be profitably used with even very young children to introduce them to a sense of wonder at God’s creation and security in God’s provision for human beings. Many of the other stories in Genesis, however, are not entirely “safe” for preteens, and ought to be deferred perhaps for the most part until the middle and high school years. Yet, even as some of the *stories* of Genesis should give teachers of young children pause, the *theology* of the book of Genesis—which presents God as one who creates, directs, protects, and blesses—could enrich children’s spiritual formation enormously.

The book of Genesis has wonderful power to shape Christian life and faith. Unfortunately, it also has the power to shock, disturb, frighten, and even impede faith if used carelessly. Critical discernment and careful judgment will help us share Genesis with our children in appropriate doses so that we nurture rather than threaten their spiritual formation.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 On children’s development of family and kinship concepts, see Carolyn Pope Edwards with Patricia G. Ramsey, *Promoting Social and Moral Development in Young Children: Creative Approaches for the Classroom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986), 105–113.
- 2 Valerie A. Wilson, “Understanding Infants and Toddlers,” in *Childhood Education in the Church*, ed. Roy B. Zuck and Robert E. Clark (Chicago: Moody, 1975), 62, 67; V. Gilbert Beers, “Understanding Twos and Threes,” in Zuck and Clark, 78; Margaret M. Self, “Understanding Fours and Fives,” in Zuck and Clark, 89, 92; V. Gilbert Beers, “Teaching Theological Concepts to Children,” in Zuck and Clark, 138–139; Eleanor Daniel, John W. Wade, and Charles Gresham, *Introduction to Christian Education* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1980), 105.
- 3 Beers, “Teaching Theological Concepts to Children,” suggests children can begin to learn that “God is against evil” at ages six and seven (140), that “people who do not accept Christ as their Saviour will be separated from God forever” at ages eight and nine (143), that “God hates all sin” and that “people who have not trusted Christ as their Saviour will spend eternity in hell” at ages 10 and 11 (143, 145). Although I am not entirely comfortable with all of Beers’ wording and age assignments, it is telling that the concept of this-worldly divine punishment for sin finds no place in his “schedule” until ages 10 and 11, and even then that punishment is directed at Jesus on the cross (which of course presumes substitutionary atonement, but that is a discussion for another article), not at individual sinners (note the oblique wording of his statement about hell).