

'ALL THAT GLISTERS IS NOT GOLD!'

Choosing a Bible for Children



Walk into any Christian bookshop, and you'll see a dazzling array of books for children. Story books. Picture books. Bible jigsaws. Crossword collections. Activity books. There's plenty to choose from. Nestled among them you will see an ever growing collection of children's Bibles. These days there's a wide range out there, most of which look great, with shiny covers and fantastic pictures. But when it comes to Bibles for children, it's sadly true that 'all that glitters is not gold'!

Whether you are a parent, godparent or Sunday School teacher, you will want the children in your care to come to know the Lord for themselves— through His Word. So any children's Bible you choose needs to support that aim, not hinder it. The purpose of this article is to look at some principles to guide you in choosing a children's Bible, so that you can browse the bookshelves with more confidence.

STARTING OUT

Imagine a family with three children, aged 3, 8 and 13. You would see a wide range of books on their bookshelf, from picture books for the three-year-old up to teen novels and magazines for the teenager. No-one would expect these three children to read the same things. However, we can have an unfortunate tendency to think that one children's Bible will serve a child right through childhood until they're ready to graduate to the NIV!

In reality, we need to look at different Bible versions for each age group. As a general rule of thumb, infant Bibles (Under 7s) are actually books of Bible stories, juniors (7-11s) need a full Bible in a child-accessible version, and teenagers will use an adult Bible in a good modern translation.

WHICH BIBLE TO CHOOSE:

There is no such thing as a 'perfect' translation. Even the ESV, now seen by many as the most accurate of modern translations for adults, has places where scholars question its choice of words. When it comes to a Bible for children, there will always be a balance between accuracy of translation and accessibility of language. The more that a writer has chosen to use concrete ideas and words that children easily understand, the more you may find they have obscured the original meaning in the process. It's up to you to decide how that will shape your choice of Bible version—but here are a few pointers to look for:

INFANT BIBLES (Under 7s)

These are actually books of Bible stories, so start with the contents page. How many stories are included? Are there enough for your child to be introduced to a good range of Old and New Testament stories? Look to see which stories have been included, and which left out. Has the writer linked the stories together to show the 'big picture' of the whole Bible, or are they written as separate, stand-alone stories?

Check how the writer has covered key Bible events. Start at the front to see how they handle the garden of Eden. How do they describe sin, and God's response to it? Look at the beginning of the New Testament, and note how the Christmas story is presented. Is there any link with the bigger picture of God's promise to send Jesus as the new King? Then find the Easter story to see how they handle Jesus' death on the cross.

Read a few stories through, and check how they are written. Are they basically a paraphrase of the Bible account, rewritten in simple language, or has the writer added extra material? And if they've added things, what has been added? Some writers will insert questions, or extra description, to help a young child engage with the story. Others will include comments about what's happening in the story and why. Some will put words in Jesus' mouth, imagining what He might have said in a particular situation. Be particularly cautious about writers who add things to a story. As an adult, you will know what's really part of the Bible story, and what is extra. But a child will not! For example, one infant Bible tells the story of Jacob cheating Esau out of his birthright, and then fleeing to his uncle. On the way, Jacob has a dream of a ladder stretching from heaven to earth. So far, so good. But according to this particular version, Jacob has a difficult journey which includes a scary encounter with a wolf! There's even a fantastic picture of

the wolf for the child to focus on and remember. Sadly, when you check for yourself in Genesis 28, the wolf is nowhere to be found. But a child may remember it for ever...

JUNIOR BIBLES (7-11 yrs)

With older children, you'll be looking for a full Bible. But be aware that most children's Bibles are in fact adult translations, with a new cover and some pictures. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but it's worth bearing in mind that most children's Bibles weren't actually translated with children in mind.

With a junior Bible, start by reading the introduction. This will tell you what the main aims of the translation team were and will give you a feel for the kind of translation decisions they have made. Then look at some key stories or verses to see how they have been translated. You may find it helpful to have a good adult translation with you so that you can compare passages.

Look at any additions to the Bible, in the form of maps, charts, pictures etc. These can often be helpful, but your top priority must be the Bible text itself, rather than any add-ons. Some junior Bibles come in the form of study or 'Adventure' Bibles. These are worth a look, but be cautious. Sometimes the extra information distracts from the main point of the text.

Youth Bibles (12+)

This article looks at children's Bibles, but most of the principles apply to youth Bibles as well. Most are actually an adult version with a new cover and some fact boxes. You will find that the fancy cover can add £5 to the price! Be especially wary of youth Bibles with fact boxes, since your teenager may be tempted to look there for the answers instead of in God's Word. For most teenagers, a good modern translation, such as the NIV, will give a high level of accuracy while using language that is accessible for the age group.

SOME VERSIONS TO CONSIDER

Please do apply the above principles for yourself, bearing in mind the reading age of your child. However, here are a few versions that are particularly worth considering:

THE BEGINNER'S BIBLE

This was one of the first infant Bibles, and, in my opinion, it is still the best. This is a book of 95 Bible stories—so plenty to choose from. It's basically a paraphrase of the Bible. That means it doesn't add to a Bible story, but it does simplify it. The Beginner's Bible links stories together, so that children get something of the 'big picture' of Bible history. It mainly stays faithful to the original text, although it's sometimes weak on sin and judgment (as are most infant Bibles). The pictures are excellent—very appropriate for the age group, while avoiding inaccuracy (which can be a common problem with infant Bibles). Out of the infant Bibles, this is still the best of the bunch.

INTERNATIONAL CHILDREN'S BIBLE

Unlike most children's Bibles, the International Children's Bible (ICB) was translated specifically for children. It is the children's edition of the New Century Version (NCV)—but is a new translation. The text is not the same as the NCV. This Bible is well written for junior-age children, with excellent use of language and a high level of accuracy. It also has well designed pages, with helpful pictures, maps, dictionary etc. This is currently the best junior Bible available.

NEW INTERNATIONAL READER'S VERSION

Unlike the ICB, the New International Readers Version (NIRv) is an adult translation. It is based on the NIV, but designed to be clearer and easier to read. The result is a good balance of child-friendly language and faithful translation. The children's edition in the NIRv range is called the New Light Children's Bible. This version is well worth a look, especially if it is likely to be used alongside an NIV (e.g. in family Bible studies) since there is a great deal of similarity in the text.

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