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GOD AS FATHER: THE REPRE-SENTATION OF THE TENTH PLAGUE IN CHILDREN'S BIBLES[1]

ABSTRACT

The Book of Exodus' account of the ten plagues as moment of Israelite liberation from Egyptian servitude is particularly poignant. The troublesome nature of the story's climax — the slaying of the firstborn — proves difficult to relate to a contemporary child audience in light of the nature and seeming injustice of the punishment meted out to their innocent peers. Along with the death of all Egyptian firstborn, Israelite deliverance is ultimately attained by the inclusion of even the pharaoh's own son in this final act of devastation. The latter's death through the direct agency of God presents a problematic perspective on the portrayal of the deity as loving father in light of the anti-hero, Pharaoh's, loss. This article investigates children's Bibles' multiple approaches to this narrative. It is considered in light of current societal emphasis on non-violent behaviour and as commentary on the manner in which contemporary society negotiates moral-ethical quandaries in the transfer of religious meaning to children.

> The ultimate father in Bible stories is God himself; in stories in which he plays a part, violence permeates the narrative. God smites the Hebrews' enemies and occasionally, as a reminder of his power, the Hebrews themselves. In the New Testament, the God who so loved the world nonetheless allowed his only begotten son to be crucified. A complex theology accompanied the Crucifixion narrative from the moment it was recorded, for so violent an act must have its precipitating causes, but for a naive [*sic*] reader it, like most Bible stories, demonstrated that God was a fearsome and problematic model for parenthood (Bottigheimer 1996:71).

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1. INTRODUCTION

Professor Fanie Riekert has been a colleague and friend for many years. This article salutes his indefatigable efforts to raise the profile and broaden the scope of the teaching of the study of religion at the University of the Free State. His broad disciplinary range and unfailing efforts on behalf of his students, present and future, is commemorated in this article by combining two topics close to his heart: Egypt and the religious education of generations to come.

The poignant Exodus 11-13 account of the tenth plague and the celebration of Passover that ultimately awards the Israelites their liberation from Egyptian slavery is particularly crucial to the religious identity of both Christian and Jew. As Martin Noth (1962:87-88) explains:

> The Exodus from Egypt comes about as a direct consequence of the slaughter of the Egyptian first-born on the night of the Passover … in the slaughter of the first-born we have the last plague, which now produces the intended result, the release of the Israelites from Egypt.

The exodus and the prevailing theme of liberation engineered by Yahweh through Moses have resonated in Judaeo-Christian interpretive tradition and have proved "foundational" (Hendel 2001:601) to both religions' concept of selfhood. Nevertheless, the disturbing violence wrought on innocent children as direct consequence to Israel's liberation — one of the events that makes Exodus for children a "text of terror" (cf. Matthews McGinnis 2008) — is often underplayed. It is either censored in its entirety; transformed into a redemptive act removed from its violent context; or explained away as pharaoh's just deserts for his slaughter of the Israelite boy-children in Exodus 1:22 or as consequence of his inability to recognize Yahweh's godly supremacy translated into his stubborn disobedience of Yahweh's directive to free the Israelites (Exodus 11:9-10).

The story itself is highlighted for its crucial importance in the broader narrative by the juxtaposition of the event and the commemoration, the Passover, it invokes (cf. Childs 1979:176). The repetitive quality of the ritual also creates a sense of constant immediacy, which in turn invokes the reality of the historical event, as Hendel (2001:601) explains:

> In some texts (and featured prominently in the Passover Haggadah), the historical distance of the exodus event is drawn into the present by the elastic quality of genealogical time: "You shall tell your son on that day, 'It is because of what Yahweh did for me when he brought me out of Egypt'" (Exod 13:8; cf. Deut 6:20-25). In its existential actuality, the exodus, more than any other event of the Hebrew Bible, embodies William Faulkner's adage: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

Furthermore, in penning this tale for children, the command to repeat this story as part of the annual ritual acts yet again as mnemonic device in order to keep the liberation event — and Israel's utter dependence on Yahweh for redemption — central to the collective memory for generations to come. Thus, the reading of the story from children's Bibles by generations of parents proves in itself mimicry of compliance to the command (Exodus 13:8). It is this story within story that actualizes for a contemporary child audience the original ritual, the event and its outcome, as they and their parents become active participants in its commemoration. This simultaneously results in the creation of a living memory bank for the recognition of Israel's utter dependence on Yahweh for its liberation from slavery, but also from death:

> And thou shalt show thy son in that day, saying, This is done because of that which the Lord did unto me when I came forth out of Egypt (Exodus 13:8).[2]

Nevertheless, the overt violence in the story, perpetrated against children with whom future generations of child audiences could certainly identify, has presented an ethical quandary to the exegetes (cf. Schüssler Fiorenza 1988) and authors of children's Bibles. Along with the death of all Egyptian firstborn — human and animal — the climax of the achievement of freedom for the Israelites is the egalitarian and democratic inclusion of everyone from the low-liest creature in Egypt to even the pharaoh's own son in this final act of punish-ment for pharaoh's disobedience to the directive of Yahweh. Only the Israel-ite firstborn are spared because of the rites commemorated by the Passover as indication of Yahweh's care for Israel, his "son". The pharaoh's firstborn's death through the direct agency of Yahweh thus presents a contradictory, and hence problematic, perspective on the portrayal of the deity as loving and compassionate father-figure (Exodus 3:7-9) in light of the non-discriminate, hence unfair, punishment visited upon the pharaoh's innocent progeny.

It therefore needs to be considered how children's Bible authors have dealt with the portrayal of clearly uncomfortable presentations of the position of the innocent child in the narrative and the paternal qualities assigned to Yahweh and to his adversary, the pharaoh, in light of growing societal emphasis on non-violent behaviour. The question begging for consideration is, given the universal importance of the paternal bond emphasised by Judaeo-Christian tradition and cemented in the symbolic portrayal of the God-supplicant relationship as father and child (see, for example, Böckler 2002), how is Yahweh's indiscriminate and deliberate violation of such a bond justified in the text? Of particular import is the motivation for decimation of the firstborn offered to a child audience as indicator of how current society negotiates moral quandaries and inconsistencies in the transfer of religious meaning and ethical practice to children.

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2   All biblical references are quoted from the *King James Version*.

The significance of a consideration of children's Bibles as means of analysis to determine "core ideals" central to contemporaneous mainstream, or "adult", religious identity is best described by Sally Gallagher's (2007:169) argument for the use of children as "religious resources":

> Children, I argue, are religious resources. They are visible signs of truths and goods that reflect and embody aspects of class, culture, and religious identity for adults. … I argue that children are a type of religious resource in that they instantiate and reflect core ideals associated with adult identity.

I would like to suggest that children's Bibles perform the same function for the transmission of biblical interpretive tradition and will illustrate this argument by means of the consideration of the representation — in text and picture — of the exodus event of the tenth plague and Israel's consequent liberation from Egypt.

2. THE "SACRED GAZE" (MORGAN 2005): TEXT AND PICTURE IN CHILDREN'S BIBLES

Children's Bibles present a particular challenge. They represent the narrative of the adult text but, because of adaptation for a child audience, also function as interpretative mechanism. Furthermore, an adult intermediary is anticipated to read the story and interpret its meaning to the lap reader, often at bedtime. Carolyn Larsen, for example, in her preface to *My Favorite Bible Storybook for Early Readers*, clearly outlines the function of the contemporary children's Bible in the tradition in her address to the presumed interpretive intermediaries, the parents:

> Dear Parents,
>
> Children grow so quickly that it seems like one minute they are snuggling in our laps while we read to them, and the next minute they are proudly reading by themselves! Much of your child's character is formed during these years of growth. One of the greatest gifts you can give your child is a love of the Word of God … I hope this book will provide many opportunities for precious times and wonderful conversations with your child (Larsen 2003:6-7).

The additional challenge of the genre lies in the integral nature of the transfer of message of both picture and text despite the aniconic predisposition of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Furthermore, as is the case for all children's books, neither text nor picture can be isolated for purposes of interpretation as both contribute equally, and in conjunction, to the transfer of meaning. This despite the prevalent yet erroneous assumption that, "The 'language'

of pictures is … international, capable of transcending linguistic and cultural boundaries" (O'Sullivan 2006:113). Based on this faulty assumption, a discontinuity is often found in translated children's Bibles as the text would be translated for the new target audience, while the visual representation of the same narrative would be left unchallenged in the belief that visual language is universal and culturally and linguistically non-specific.

This matter is of import in so much as Egypt, as foil for Israel, is imbued with the romantic and pseudo-realistic colonial impressions wrought by Napoleon's "rediscovery" and description of Egypt in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century with concomitant effect on the presentation of the land and its rulers in Western imagination and disseminated to consequent generations of child readers with the rise of the children's Bible in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

2.1   The depiction of the "other": Egypt and the pharaoh

As mentioned before, Egypt represents Israel's biblical opposite and as such it provides the counterpoint for the birth of Israel and Israelite religion, both geographically and conceptually, as Jan Assmann (1997:208-209) explains:

> The Biblical image of Egypt means "idolatry." … The Egypt of the Bible symbolizes what is rejected, discarded, and abandoned. Egypt is not just a historical context; it is inscribed in the fundamental semantics of monotheism. It appears explicitly in the first commandment and implicitly in the second. … Egypt's role in the Exodus story is not historical but mythical: it helps define the very identity of those who tell the story.

The manner in which this opposition is translated in modern children's Bibles is informed also by Napoleon's late eighteenth century "rediscovery" of Egypt. The Napoleonic presentation of Egypt to Western scholarship cloaked this otherness in "projective grandeur" (Said 1994:118) and the visual quality assigned to its portrayal was the direct result of the innumerable French illustrations and models to allow for what Edward Said (1994:118) refers to as unprecedented "exotic distance":

> The reproductions of the *Description* therefore are not descriptions but *ascriptions*. First the temples and palaces were reproduced in an orientation and perspective that staged the actuality of ancient Egypt as reflected through the imperial eye; … then finally, they could be dislodged from their context and transported to Europe for use there.

Egypt therefore stands not for reality, but for the projected otherness *vis-à-vis* Israel. Its depiction, especially in the accompanying illustrations of children's Bibles, becomes the representation of all that biblical Israel is not. The

exotic "ascription" Said describes translates to children's Bibles where the depiction of Egypt and its ruler is typified by often caricature-like presentations cloaked in a wealth of exotic gold and purple hues and the seeming realism of a depiction informed by nineteenth and twentieth century travel writing and the ever present pyramids as indicators of geographic placement.

As much as the Egyptian otherness translates to the representation of time and space, it is also relevant to the depiction of otherness in terms of the portrayal of Egyptian society, its kinship relations and moral and ethical values. "Family and household," state Philip King and Larry Stager (2001:36), "constituted the basic social unit in ancient Israel, as well as the most widely used literary metaphor." In the emphasis on Yahweh's role as father to his "firstborn son", Israel (Exodus 4:22), it therefore stands to reason that the anti-hero, Pharaoh, would by implication embody the opposite in social values: a disregard for the suffering of his dependents, including his firstborn son whom he is warned would inevitably die if he does not comply (Exodus 11:4-8). Pharaoh and Egypt thus come to stand for harshness and a "hardening of heart" in the face of Yahweh's self-depiction as concerned father to a newborn nation, his firstborn son. This father-son relationship is also the metaphor chosen for how Yahweh first reveals himself to Moses in Exodus 3:6: "I am the God of *thy father* …" [my emphasis]. Therefore, by contrast, Pharaoh as the antagonist is imbued with opposite qualities:

> At the scene by the Burning Bush, God shared with Moses His foreknowledge that the pharaoh would reject the call for the release of the Israelite slaves: "'I know that the King of Egypt will let you go only because of a greater might.'" The clear implication of these words is that the man is possessed of a ruthless and stubborn character, and is devoid of all compassion (Sarna 1986:63).

Yahweh's fatherly care in liberating the Israelite slaves from their hardship lies at the heart of this narrative and Pharaoh represents his moral opposite. The more atrocious the qualities assigned to Pharaoh, therefore, the more compassionate Yahweh becomes. Hence Nahum Sarna (1986:64) argues as to the nature of the expression "hardening of the heart" in relation to Pharaoh:

> Man's thoughts, his intellectual activity, the cognitive, conative, and affective aspects of his personality, are all regarded as issuing from the heart. The state of the heart defines, then, the essential character of the person. Its "hardening" connotes the willful [*sic*] suppression of the capacity for reflection, for self-examination, for unbiased judgments about good and evil. In short, the "hardening of the heart" becomes synonymous with the numbing of the soul, a condition of moral atrophy.

The underlying "symmetry" (Propp 1998:457) in this allows Pharaoh's opposite, Yahweh, then to be imbued with uniform morality of action and intention. And yet, it is Yahweh who in the story takes responsibility for Pharaoh's emotional stagnancy. The quandary in relating this story is therefore clear: how is the moral high ground for the Israelite deity maintained in children's Bibles given Yahweh's active participation in the engineering of Pharaoh's obstinate response resulting in the recurrent suffering of a guiltless nature and innocent humanity?

2.2   The plagues

The power politics in the story of the exodus is self evident. "The book of Exodus is pervaded by a head-to-head contest between Pharaoh and Yahweh," says McConville (2006:54),

> Israel is Yahweh's 'son', not Pharaoh's slave, and Yahweh will demand his son from Pharaoh if necessary at the cost of Pharaoh's own firstborn son. In doing so he will exert his true claim as opposed to Pharaoh's false claim, for the earth is Yahweh's, not Pharaoh's.

This "head-to-head contest" is depicted in the uneven power struggle of the plagues cycle in which Yahweh is an active and victorious participant and of which the death of the Egyptian firstborn and the exodus from Egypt is the culmination. Yahweh's participation in the narrative is emphasized throughout the entire cycle (Exodus 7-13) where, according to William Propp, Yahweh is depicted as "Universal Judge" who metes out punishment to humanity and nature irrespective of guilt, whereupon Propp (1998:346) comments: "It might seem strange or unfair that these, too, should suffer." The question is how this showdown of power is to be translated into a child appropriate rendering for purposes of privileging the goodness and justness of God's actions, and foregrounding his kindness and mercy in the liberation of Israel from Egypt.

In this context it is also important to qualify this discussion by emphasising certain qualities peculiar to the rendering of the biblical narrative to a child audience. Firstly, children's Bibles tend to conflate narratives such as the Genesis 1 and 2 renderings of the creation story. In relating the plagues narrative (cf. also Psalms 78 and 105), this may result in a lessening of the traditional number (ten) and a rearrangement of sequence. Leena Lane and Gillian Chapman's *The Kidz Bible* (2003:20-21), for example, lists only nine plagues, with locusts featuring as the third instead of the eighth plague. In their accompanying illustrations for, "The plagues of Egypt", only three plagues are depicted: frogs, locusts and the death of the firstborn. This reduction and rearrangement is not the result of any source-critical commentary on the part of the authors or a preferencing of J over P in the rendition of the number of plagues (cf. Van Seters 1994:77-112), but rather a common inclination in children's Bibles to

adjust and simplify in the paternalistic guise of rendering the adult source text appropriate and/or comprehensible to a child audience assumed to be naïve and less sophisticated than the adult reader.

The exclusion of sections of the source text, despite traditional claims to the canonical inviolability thereof, acts as important commentary on the norms that dictate the society for whom the children's Bibles are intended, as Gillian Lathey (2006:6) explains for children's literature in general:

> Differing cultural expectations of child readers give rise to censorship in the process of translation, particularly in the representation of violence and the scatological references in which children take such delight.

Ruth Bottigheimer (1996:54) notes a similar trend in children's Bibles, with the resultant excising of stories such as Daniel's vision, the Song of Solomon, Amnon's incest, David's adultery, and so forth. Overt displays of senseless violence, the portrayal of gender insensitivity and explicit sexual content (cf., for example, Genesis 38; Judges 11 and 19; 2 Kings 9; Matthew 2:13-18; and so forth) would therefore be considered inappropriate by contemporary society. In Lane and Chapman's (2003) rendering of the plagues, earlier mentioned, it is therefore not surprising to find Moses' slaying of the Egyptian (Exodus 2:11-15) censored and thus disassociated from the source text's sense of cause and effect that moves the main character, Moses, from Egypt to Midian and the burning bush where Yahweh appears to him. Instead, Moses' flight from Egypt is reconstituted in purely moral terms without any guilt assigned to Moses' reasons for flight. Again, Pharaoh is the foil. Moses' compassion — as parallel to that of Yahweh — for his people's suffering is all that remains of the story and this is heightened by the judgmental adjective, "cruel", attached to Pharaoh:

> When Moses grew up, he was upset to see how badly the cruel king treated his slaves. Moses ran away from the palace and became a shepherd in Midian (Lane 2003:20).

It therefore happens that the entire plagues narrative is sometimes censored from contemporary children's Bibles.[3] Thus, Julie Dietrich's *Tiny Baby Moses* (2005), for example, excludes the plague narrative and rendition of the Passover in its entirety to move directly from Moses' discovery by Pharaoh's daughter in the basket on the Nile, to the Red Sea. Yet again, the moral character of the plagues narrative is all that is retained. The paternal qualities embedded in the language of liberation of the remaining text, recall that which was excised:

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3   "What, after all, can be said about absence? Absences, however, speak eloquently of what may not be said or must not be said, and communities of sentiment can be located by outlining the periphery of a blank space on a cultural map," (Bottigheimer 1996:79).

> The princess let his mother care
> For Moses a while longer.
> Then in the palace he grew up –
> Safer ... wiser ... stronger.
> Saved by the Father's lasting love,
> God would call this boy some day
> To lead His people and serve God,
> To follow and obey (Dietrich 2005:n.p.).

The latter paragraph is accompanied by an illustration of Moses parting the sea, yet the "displacement" (cf. Levenson 1993:200-219) created by the messianic undertones of the accompanying text is unmistakable, hence prompting the adult reader of the text to explain for the benefit of the child audience both the drowning of the Egyptians at the Red Sea and the coming of the messiah as symbolically related. This also marks this version as strictly within the Christian interpretive tradition.[4]

Despite this popular trend to cut the problematic aspects from the story, the slaying of the firstborn does also survive in its brutal details in many modern children's Bibles (see, for example, Bruno & Reinsma 2007; Larsen 2003; and Smit & Smit 2003) in much the same way as other stalwarts of overt violence such as Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac and David's slaying of Goliath seem to buck the trend towards censorship. The reason for this most probably is to be found in the presence of children in a narrative otherwise devoted mainly to adults. But this, as mentioned before, leaves the author/translator of the children's Bible in a quandary as to the interpretation of Yahweh's seemingly unjust actions with regard to the innocent. How this quandary is approached offers telling insights into the social values and religious identity of the adult interpreters of this text for contemporary children.

2.3   The "terrible sentence of death" (McConville 2006:50) presented to children

In his comprehensive study of God and violence against children in the Old Testament, Andreas Michel (2003) classifies the Exodus 11:4-5 account of the death of the Egyptian firstborn as an example of "children as sacrifice of the gods" (Michel 2003:44-46; cf. also Levenson 1993). This has to be tied in with the recurrent theme of the firstborn: the death of the Egyptian firstborn is

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4   For a description of the development of Jewish children's Bibles in the large American market, see Penny Schine Gold's *Making the Bible Modern: Children's bibles and Jewish education in Twentieth-Century America* (2004), especially the chapter on the interchange between books intended for Christian and those intended for primarily Jewish child audiences (Schine Gold 2004:179-204).

balanced by the redemption of the Israelite firstborn by means of the Passover ritual. Exodus 4:22-23 also clearly represents a narrative anticipation to the tragedy to follow. It may even be considered an eye-for-an-eye justification where the pharaoh's slaughter of the Israelite firstborn acts as "symmetrical" (Propp 1998:457) justification for the subsequent devastation wrought on innocent children by the tenth plague.

The children's Bible author most often prefer the less onerous understatement and emphasis on a moral lesson to be had from what is an obvious character flaw in the anti-hero: Pharaoh's display of disobedience to God. In the thematically arranged *My Bedtime Bible: 365 Devotions for Children* (Larsen 1995), for example, the plagues narrative is ignored, except the mention of the final plague. The story begins:

> Everyone has rules to obey. When adults drive they must obey the rules of the road. There are rules at school and work. God gave some rules to the Israelites. If they obeyed the rules, they would be kept safe (Larsen 1995:55).

Then the consequences of the plague are fully placed at the door of the pharaoh, as God's concern for his people is foregrounded in a fashion that makes the pharaoh appear inexplicably unreasonable in his unwillingness to let the Israelites go. This in the face of what is presented to the reader as a very reasonable request in the absence of any mention of the nine horrific plagues or Yahweh's direct agency in the final plague:

> God wanted the Israelites to leave Egypt. He tried many ways to make the Egyptian king let the slaves leave. The king always said, "No!" The most terrible thing was going to happen now. The oldest child in every home would die. God told the Israelites how to protect themselves from this terrible thing. They did exactly what God told them to do and their children were all safe (Larsen 1995:55).

In this version God as agent is removed from the story and divested of any direct responsibility for the death of the firstborn. He is only responsible for the safety (a positive, father-like characteristic) of the Israelites. A distinct difference is therefore detectable between the multifaceted representation of God in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and the sanitized, one dimensional portrayal of God in children's Bibles. Penny Schine Gold (2004:137) observes the same for Jewish children's Bibles in referring to the exodus narrative, thereby confirming that contemporary social context, rather than the source text or the story, drives the interpretation of the narrative for children's Bibles:

> It is not just the causative action of God that is bothersome, but how he behaves — the "unworthy aspects" of God … Thus, in addition to the diminishment of God's sphere of action, our children's authors also alter

> the manner in which His behavior is portrayed. The modern audience
> is uncomfortable with behaviors of God that seemed harsh, arbitrary, or
> cruel. This discomfort at God's problematic behaviour was assuaged by
> deletion, transformation, or explanation … If God's morality was out of
> step with modern standards, it needed to be changed.

And children's Bible authors, in the name of making the text accessible, educational and palatable to a child audience, have thus been allowed great latitude in manipulation and interpretation of the otherwise inviolable canon:

> One way of describing what happens to the portrayal of God in these
> children's versions is that God's character is evened out, made uniform
> or consistent. Rather than the complicated image of God in the Tanakh
> [Hebrew Bible/Old Testament] — both just and merciful, angry and for-
> giving — the simpler children's version stresses just one side of God,
> that of protection, mercy, and forgiveness (Schine Gold 2004:141).

As mentioned previously, the death of the firstborn often survives in children's bibles even if the plagues narrative disappears or is vastly reduced because, in the adult version, this plague is the catalyst for the pharaoh's capitulation and Israel's exodus. The death of the firstborn, especially the death of the pharaoh's heir, therefore does sometimes remain and is often also depicted in the accompanying illustration. With little mention in the text, the depiction of the scene in the accompanying illustration tends to cloak the dead child in anonymity — the face is often turned away or devoid of any expression — the focus is placed on the outpouring of grief of the parent (most often a male figure identifiable as the pharaoh). Hence emphasizing, ironically, God's father-like concern for his people by depicting the antithesis: the violent outcome of a father's (Pharaoh's) unconcern for the welfare of his progeny.

This anthropocentric kinship inherent to the portrayal of the relationship between God and Israel is also central to Old Testament narrative. It comfortably ties in with Christian tradition's first introduction of the deity to children as loving father, responding to and largely mimicking the sense of intimacy and parental-child bonding that takes place at bedtime when children's Bible stories are traditionally read by parents to small children. The familiar bedtime ritual is most often one of the first introductions of the young child to the parents' religious persuasion and is therefore cognitively significant in the child's actualization of religion and religious observance. This is furthermore emphasized by the implied identification between the child audience and the characters in the stories told. In this respect the Old Testament proves fertile ground as it is thematically rich in narrative material and portrays a diversity of child characters with whom children may potentially be brought to identify (cf. Bunge 2008:xxii-xxvi). It is therefore particularly disconcerting when the Bible relates the death of such children and more so if God, the loving father-figure of childhood, and

representative of goodness and justice,[5] is portrayed as the agent of death. Hence the understandable alternative tendency of contemporary children's Bible authors to exorcise this kind of story completely from the exodus narrative. Often leading to disruption of narrative, contradiction and inconsistency in the story movement and leaving only traces of the original story fossilized in moral-ethical expressions of feeling assigned to characters or explanations of action unaccompanied by the motivation offered in the original storyline.

This approach may prove an easy but not unproblematic solution to the ethics of relating stories with violent content and contradictory ethics to children. Especially in light of recent studies in children's cognitive development (cf. Barrett, Richert & Driesenga 2001) that seems to indicate that children by the age of five are already able to comfortably manage inconsistency in their conceptualization of God *vis-à-vis* human authority figures such as parents. Furthermore, the myth of the need for a uniform presentation and impression of God especially in "listening to and remembering stories" may also be flawed, as Barret & Keil (2006:138) have indicated for university students:

> … it appears that the concept of God used in the context of listening to and remembering stories is not the same as the concept of God that is claimed in a more abstract, theological setting.

Barret and Keil's work (2006) seems to imply that people, irrespective of age, assign anthropomorphic characteristics to God in the context of listening to narratives implying that the metaphor of God as loving father may be cognitively able to override any inconsistency in the narrative that may contradict it. As Barrett and Keil (2006:142) explains:

> … the cognitive development literature has almost unanimously supported the notion that God concepts undergo a concrete to abstract shift from early childhood to adolescence. One study has even noted a shift from anthropomorphic to symbolic representations of God depending upon the level of mental impairment. The present studies raise some doubts about these purported shifts. At least concepts of God used in processing narratives appear to be concrete and anthropomorphic even in young adult college students. Rather than practical concepts of God becoming more abstract with age, perhaps children learn better skills for inhibiting this concept in favour of a more theologically correct one.

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5   Carolyn Larsen's thematically arranged *My Bedtime Bible: 365 devotions for children* (1995), provides a good example of the kind of attributes, most often parental in nature, typically assigned to God by the children's Bible author: "God gives good gifts"; "God is the most powerful"; "God is our helper"; "God is our protector"; "God is love"; and so forth.

It may therefore prove completely unnecessary and even counterproductive to purge the exodus story for children from much of the violent material therein portrayed in an effort to sanitize the God-image transferred to children. Counterproductive because, if the purpose of children's Bibles is partly to introduce children to the adult version in a child appropriate format, then presenting the narrative inconsistently may offer a slanted first, and often lasting, impression of the adult version of the biblical narrative.

3. CONCLUSION

Penny Schine Gold (2004:133) observes a "reduced presence" and "changed nature of God" *vis-à-vis* the Hebrew "adult" version for Jewish children's Bibles. This is true for Christian children's Bibles as well and easily detected in the exodus narrative. The one dimensional, goodly, representation of God's character strongly emphasizes his paternal qualities in the biblical narratives as corollary to how a contemporaneous child audience is required by its tradition to identify with God — and by extension, his or her parents. This fashioning of God as father-figure is especially strong in the Christian tradition of children's Bibles. But it is also inherently troubling because of the foreshadowing of such a relationship's tragic consequences in the New Testament. Because, as Jon Levenson (1993:220) explains,

> As Jesus supplants Isaac in Paul's theology, and the Church, the Jews, so does God supplant Abraham in the role of father who did not withhold his own son from death itself …

In the exodus narrative, children's Bible authors dealt with the discomfort in this subliminal, but sometimes overt, foreshadowing by emphasizing a one dimensionally reformed version of God. This is done by becoming less specific (fewer plagues, no reason other than pharaoh's stubbornness for the liberation of the Israelites, etc.); explaining it away; or by deleting the story in its entirety. Yet, this often results in discontinuity in the motivation of characters in the narrative in the absence of large sections of the adult version. It is also problematic in the ingenuous assumption of the children's Bible author's judgment as to what is appropriate for a child audience with resultant free reign awarded to the discretion of the author as biblical exegete, with no interpretive checks and balances, in the presentation of God to the contemporary child audience.

This attempt at "reforming" God may also prove counterproductive to the intended purpose of the children's Bible as didactic instrument. Recent work on religion and cognition seems to indicate that inconsistencies in cognition of god-concepts may even act as memory aids and is easily accommodated by children as young as four or five years of age, thus resulting in what Barrett (2006:90) refers to as a "natural receptivity to religious concepts". In sanitizing

the character and agency of God in the exodus event, the contemporary author of the children's bible may therefore achieve the opposite to what is intended by underestimating the cognitive abilities of the child reader:

> … findings suggest that around 5 years of age, children possess the prerequisites to make advanced, distinctive, attributions of mental states to non-natural agents (Kelemen 2006:104).

These children are able to distinguish between natural (humans) and non-natural (gods) agents and comfortably assign capacities and even contradictory behaviour to each according to cognitive category.

It thus becomes clear that, despite the demands of contemporary society for a sanitizing of disjunctive and morally unanswerable inconsistencies in the characters of the biblical narrative, children as young as five may be well able to recognize and categorize such inconsistencies within a complex religious framework. It seems therefore that, despite a long history of content following context (Bottigheimer 1996:71) for children's Bibles, Ruth Bottigheimer's "complex theology" and the representation of God as a "fearsome and problematic model for parenthood" (1996:71) need not be excised from the narrative in its entirety in order to make the transmission of moral ethical behaviour meaningful to children.

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