19th Century British Women Telling Bible Stories:

An Exploration of the Story of the Fall

Abstract

This paper will explore how the story of Adam and Eve was written by 19th century British women in children's Bible story collections. Making use of approximately 20 children's Bible story collections published during this time, this paper will first contextualize children's Bible stories and women as authors in 19th century Britain before discussing typical changes and interpretive decisions made to different parts of the story. A series of four case studies will discuss how specific publications both fit and differ from the norm discussed in the previous section. This project finds that women publishing the story of Adam and Eve interpreted and simplified it for a juvenile audience in ways that allowed them to teach children about the consequences of sin, encourage obedience, explain how evil came into the world, or as a preparatory devise to explain the need for Jesus' salvation.

1. Introduction

are well-known, and many of them are very hard to find information on. The women who wrote these publications were mostly Protestant and by far, Anglican. The findings in this paper will

unique interpretations of this story found in the case study texts. Second, women's roles in 19th century British society contextualize the authors of these texts and lastly, a brief history of published children's Bible stories and religious children's literature in 19th century Britain will help to situate the case study texts within their historical literary context.

2.1 Traditional Interpretations of the Fall in the 19th Century

For most of Christian history, the prevailing interpretation of the Fall has held that Eve bears the brunt of the blame for the Fall and was created as lesser than Adam, but where did this interpretation come from? Traditional interpretations hold that Eve (and thus all women) are subordinate to Adam (and thus all men) because she was created after Adam and out of his side, and her weaker nature caused her to sin first. Yet, many feminist theologians and interpreters of the story have argued that the text itself does not portray Eve as anything less than equal to Adam.[5] Here, I will point to three ways in which androcentric interpretations of the story permeated Christian history through to the 19th century and beyond.

First, androcentric interpretations rest on the story in some ways, but are reinforced by God's punishment of Eve in Genesis 3:16 which proclaims that "thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee."[6] Mieke Bal has argued that this is the only patriarchal line in the story, and that Genesis 2-3 maintains an otherwise neutral stance on Eve's status. By painting the entire story with the brush of this curse, Bal argues that androcentric interpreters of this story commit a retrospective fallacy. That is, they project Eve's character at the end of the story upon her earlier character and use it to justify her lesser status in creation.[7]

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[5] Scholarly examples include: Phyllis Trible, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Phyllis Bird, Mieke Bal, etc.

[6] This paper will use the Authorized King James Version as it was the version most commonly used in 19th century Britain. For a history of the King James Bible and the different versions, please see D. Norton, *A Textual History of The King James Bible*

Religious tract literature was written in the years following the Napoleonic Wars, and Evangelical authors drew on religious ideas and fought the Enlightenment rationalism that inspired the French Revolution. In opposition to the rational moralists who believed that education should reflect the idea of reason as the source of goodness, Evangelical tract writers of which many of the authors here were members, believed that children's education should serve religious purposes. As Sarah Trimmer wrote in her *Essay Upon Christian Education*, "Even Geography, Writing and Arithmetic may be made, in some measure, subservient to religious instruction."[26] The genre of religious tracts was popular until 1840, when secular morals emerged instead of the overt religious lessons. Women writing religious literature often requested to have their work published as tracts, because it made it available to the poorer children who they tried to reach out to.

Women though, and especially those in the middle and upper classes, were held to certain ideals in 19th century Britain. The ideology of separate spheres held that women and men operated in different spheres of influence and natural ability. Men were assigned to the public sphere where they worked for pay and were involved in politics, while women were relegated to the private sphere where they raised children and were seen as delicate "angels of the house."[27] Moreover, the Cult of True Womanhood/Domesticity offered a fourfold ideal for women to have a good marriage: be pious, submissive and domestic/maternal.[28] The women who published children's Bible stories and religious literature were often from the upper and middle classes. In many cases, this can be proven with bibliographies of the authors, but in the cases where no information could be found, it is assumed since the authors knew how to write (and thus were educated) and had the connections and access to have something published. Women in the upper classes were held to the

[26] Quoted by Nancy Cutt in *Ministering Angels*, 18.
[27] Kathryn Gleedle, *British Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 59.
[28] Linda Ambrose, "Women and the Public Order," *HIST 3166: History of Women in Canada*, Laurentian University, Sudbury ON, 1 Oct. 2013.

ideals of true womanhood or the ideology of separate spheres more strongly than their working-class counterparts who may not have had a choice to work. Thus, most of the authors here worked from within the constrains put on their sex in order to publish these texts.

One of the constraints placed on women, especially in the upper classes, was that it was deemed unacceptable to participate in paid labour, except in certain circumstances. An educated woman of the middle classes could become a governess or a schoolteacher and the lucky few of the upper classes became ladies in waiting to royalty.[29] Becoming a writer was a precarious position, as it put one's ideas out into the public sphere. Some women became novelists such as the well-known Brontë sisters, but religious literature, and especially children's religious literature was one of the safest ways to publish. The reason for this is because this genre largely operated within the acceptable realm of women's lives. The writing worked within the confines of motherly religious education and promoted a good moral upbringing. Even still, many female authors published under pseudonyms or under their husband's names, or claimed never to have taken pay for their work to lessen their public visibility. For example, the wealthy upper-class author Charlotte Maria Tucker published under the pseudonym A.L.O.E. (A Lady of England) and donated all the proceeds for her writing to charities.[30]

Kathryn Gleedle, a scholar on women in the 19th century, acknowledges the difficulties in being a female writer, asserting that, "Even the most successful female writers had to pick their way through a complex maze of gendered assumptions."[31] This is most evident in the prefaces to women's publications in which they humbly introduce their work. It is not uncommon to read a preface in which the author asserts that it was not their intention to earn money, but they felt that

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[29] Gleedle, *British Women in the Nineteenth Century*, 54.
[30] Kimberley Reynolds, "Tucker, Charlotte Maria (1821-1893)." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University press, 2004.
[31] Gleedle, *British Women in the Nineteenth Century*, 55.

challenge her role. This is a generalisation, but there was also less freedom or room for resistance to gendered ideals in children's stories since they had to be simplified for children.

3. The Typical Story of the Fall

As David Shaw stated in an article on contemporary children's Bibles, "Assessing children's Bibles is not child's play."[38] The changes made to the story of Adam and Eve are important for two reasons: they reveal what the author thought was important about the story and impart those values onto their audience. This section discusses the typical ways that 19th century British authors chose to write about different parts of the Fall with some reference to American

Matthew Henry's commentaries in Family Bibles published well into the 19th century, he too believed that Adam and Eve were created on the sixth day.[48]

3.2 Quoting from the King James Version

The authenticity of a simplified version of Bible stories was a concern for many authors in this genre. Sarah Trimmer in her *Abridgement of Scripture History* chose to quote the entire story from the King James Version of Genesis to avoid changing the story in any way.[49] The *Bible* also announces that it avoids the use of "isolated fragments of the story" or "language dissimilar to the actual Bible" by quoting Bible stories in their entirety. [50] These two publications are anomalies though, and most authors narrate the story while choosing to leave the quotes by God, the serpent, Adam and Eve intact. Especially when giving dialogue to God's character, most authors did not tamper with the words and quoted them directly. Authors did this consciously, as Mary A. Lathbury stated in the introduction to *Bible Heroes: Stories from the Bible* that "in all quoted speech I have used the exact words of the authorized version of the Scriptures."[51] Mrs. G.E. Morton also asserts that her version of the stories ar

3.3 The Creation of Adam and Eve

In most narratives, Adam and Eve are created separately, but in some publications, mostly for very young children, Adam and Eve are described as created at the same time. An example of this can be found in , in which the story takes place as a dialogue between "Little Daniel" and his mother. The author, Lucy Sarah Atkins Wilson, glosses over Adam and Eve's creation, answering Daniel's question about who the first people with a simple sentence introducing Adam and Eve as the first man and woman.[53] In Favell Lee Mortimer's *Scripture Facts,* Adam and Eve are also described as created out of dust in the same sentence.[54]

Typically, authors take the time to explain that Adam was created out of dust, and Eve out of Adam's rib or side. Some authors relate the story to their audience by describing the pair as the first parents.[55] In one American publication, Adam and Eve are described as the first family, accompanied by an image of them (Figure 1) with their children and the caption, "Eve oft-en [*sic*] told the chil-dren [*sic*] of their dear first home in the fair garden."[56] What makes this more interesting is that this same image is used in various other children's Bible stories, but normally accompanies the story of Cain and Abel. This version of the story leaves the audience with the impression that Adam and Eve had children before leaving the garden.

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[53] Wilson, *and Girls,* 1-2.
[54] Favell Lee Mortimer, *Scripture Facts in Simple Language: or Hear a Little and There a Little*, (New York: American Tract Society, n.d.), 11.
[55] Charlotte M. Yonge, *designed for the 52 Sundays in the Year,* (Washington: W.E. Scull, 1898), 23.
[56] Sic. Harriet T. Comstock, *Bible Heroes Retold in Words of One Syllable,* (New York: A.L. Burt, 1900), 2.

Figure 1 Harriet T. Comstock's *Bible Hero's Retold In Words of One Syllable.*
Photo by author, publication courtesy of the Douglas Library, Queen's University.

Some authors choose to dwell on Adam's creation. In the *Infant Bible Reader*, Mrs.

this order is often changed. First, the tree of life is often omitted altogether, probably because it would be too confusing for young children to learn the difference between the two trees.[62] Second, the tree of knowledge and evil is normally mentioned after Adam and Eve have both been created.[63] It might have been irrelevant to the authors that Eve did not exist when the command was given, and this change might have been inherited or done to simplify the story.

Although Genesis simply calls the serpent a serpent, almost every children's version

serpent. The curse is mentioned in some narratives and given prominence in Mortimer's version of the story, but most authors omit both the serpent's curse as well as the individual curses for Adam and Eve.

There are a variety of ways in which the punishments are dealt in children's versions of the story. In many versions, Adam and Eve are simply banished from the garden without mention of their individual curses, but in some versions, individual curses and Eve's curse to be ruled by Adam are included. Especially in the publications for younger children, any trace of this curse is excluded from the story in favour of a punishment for both Adam and Eve. Thus, traditional interpretations of the story which blame Eve for the fall are not always present if the pair are blamed and banished from the garden equally. Here are a couple examples of how the punishment is described by different authors:

Lady Mayne, in *An Introduction to the Reading of the Holy Bible*

> So he [God] directly turned them out of that fine Place, and sent them to wander about in a wile Country overgrown with Weeds and Briars, where they could get nothing to eat but what they dug and ploughed and laboured hard for. There they grew old, and fickly, and died.[76]

Sarah Lucy Atkins Wilson in

> God would not let them stay in the sweet garden, but he sent and angel with a sword of fire-and he drove them out."[78]

Mrs. G.E. Morton in *From the Beginning*

> God was angry with them all, but he was angry most of all with the wicked serpent. He said to him, 'Because you have done this, you are cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; and you shall eat dust all your life.'
>
> And to Eve God said, 'Because you have done this you shall often be weak and ill. You shall have a great deal of sorrow, and Adam shall rule over you.'
>
> And to Adam God said, 'Because you have done this, and have eaten of the tree which I commanded you, You shall not eat of it: cursed is the ground for your sake; you shall eat your bread in sorrow all the days of your life. And the ground shall bring forth thorns and thistles' and you shall be obliged to work hard, and to be often very tired. And you shall both die at last; for you were made of dust, and you shall return to dust again.'[79]

Sarah Trimmer in *Lessons; Containing a General Outline of the aietmmer in*

that this was considered to theologically dense for young children, and thus, mention of her individual curse and her faults were not always important to different authors.

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too much is like the sin Eve committed when she desired the fruit to make her wise. Here Tucker uses the story of the Fall to warn against the love of learning too much.

Emily Dibdin clearly lists the lessons one should learn from Adam and Eve's Fall at the end of her chapter on the story. She asserts that one should learn to a) avoid sinning, b) obey God, and c) know how loving God was to send Jesus.[82] Although the lessons themselves are slightly different, most teach in some way that sin is wrong and that there are consequences for it. Lucy Barton's *Bible Letters for Children* (Case Study 4.3 in this project), is also a great example of how the story can be used to teach moral lessons.

The story of Adam and Eve was often used as a preparatory device for talking about Jesus. It was common to see Jesus and Mary as the recapitulated versions of Adam and Eve during the 19th century and many authors set up their telling of the Fall in order to explain the necessity of Jesus' resurrection. Many authors point to this in their version of the Fall and even include Jesus in the story of Adam and Eve. In Morton's version of the story, she adds that God made a promise to Adam and Eve when they were expelled from the garden, stating that, "In spite of their disobedience, he tenderly loved them [Adam and Eve] still, and he planned a way by which all their sins might be pardoned, and they might enter heaven at last. What way was that? It was through the precious blood of Jesus."[83] Morton concludes the story with an additional two paragraphs about Jesus' sacrifice and how it pardons the sins of Adam, Eve and those of her audience. Concluding the story by alluding to Jesus, or including him in the story was very common. Overall, the purpose for including the story of Adam and Eve in Bible story collections was diverse.

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[82] Dibdin, *Outline Lessons on Women of the Bible*, 2.
[83] Morton, *From the Beginning*, 31-2.

3.9 Images in the Story of Adam and Eve

Of the selection of British publications used here, only a couple included images. Many of these publications existed at one time or another as religious tracts which were published as cheaply as possible, thus images may have been to expensive to reproduce. In addition, many of the children's Bible storybooks studied here use vocabulary too difficult to read for the intended audience, and thus were meant to

4. Case Studies

This section comprises of four descriptions of individual versions of the story of Adam and Eve by four different authors. Favell Lee Mortimer's account of the story shows some of the typical interpretive changes made by authors of this story lessen the severity of the Fall by shifting the

Mortimer is most famous for her first publication, *Peep a Day* or *A Series of the Earliest Religious Instruction the Infant Mind is Capable of Receiving*. First published in 1833,[85] her grandniece Rosalind Constable said that it "sold over a million copies in its original edition and was translated into thirty-eight languages" by the Religious Tract Society.[86] The book became so famous that it was largely plagiarized by the American Annie R. White in her 1896 publication, *Easy Steps for Little Feet from Genesis to Revelation.*[87] The book re-tells Bible stories for children with footnotes to corresponding Bible verses. Mortimer's publishing success in *Peep a* Day was followed by other publications done in the same style: *Line Upon Line*

story more lighthearted than some of its more conservative counterparts. Mortimer uses plural nouns when discussing Adam and Eve's Fall

Another interesting interpretive decision that Mortimer makes is to emphasize the serpent's punishment and portray it as more serious than Adam and Eve's. Most authors only give the serpent a role in the story as tempting Eve, but Mortimer goes further by making him share the blame as well. In her version of the story, Mortimer identifies the serpent as the "wicked angel

are lessened for both Adam and Eve in favour of looking forward to Jesus. This also makes the story more appropriate for children as Adam and Eve will not be sad forever. Mortimer's use of atonement theology and placement of Jesus into the story is not uncommon in children's Bible stories, but her bringing him into the story three separate times is unusual. Certainly, Jesus is not a part of the narrative in Genesis. Instead, it appears that Mortimer uses him to prepare her readers for the coming story of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Overall, in combining the gendered curses, shifting the blame to the serpent, and looking forward to Jesus, Mortimer's version of the Fall draws some of the attention away from the severe consequences of sin. However, many of the interpretive decisions Mortimer makes which lessen the consequences of the Fall on both Adam and Eve are also the result of her simplification of the story. In the preface to *Peep a Day,* Mortimer makes an analogy between teaching children about the Bible and a mother teaching their child about their father who is away. Mortimer states that the mother would "guard against producing confusion, by entering into complicated details; while she would love to dwell upon the most minute incidents that would arrest infantine attention."[96] Thus, Mortimer's interpretive decisions which appear to lessen the severity of the Fall are probably done to simplify the story.

In addition, Mortimer does not deny the consequences of the Fall for her audience but simply lessens them. In the preface to the book, Mortimer discusses how children should be taught about the Bible and exhorts that "Our minds are so much darkened by sin, that when we would ascertain our duty concerning spiritual things, we shall often find assistance by examining what we should do in an earthly matter of an analogous kind."[97] This does little to lessen the consequences of the Fall but instead focusses on what one should do to teach children in the Fallen

[96] Mortimer, *The Peep a Day,* ix.
[97] Mortimer, *The Peep a Day,* viii.

state. The research question for this project is about whether female authors challenged or reinforced traditional beliefs about gender in their publications for children. Mortimer does not challenge 19th century gender ideals, but inherits and reinforces them. While she may not blame Eve explicitly for the Fall, she maintains the ideology of separate spheres by describing Eve as crying and emotional while Adam is "hot and tired" after the Fall.[98] She also conforms to the notion that women are the primary religious educators by directing her book towards mothers and teachers who wish to teach children about the Bible.[99]

4.2 Lucy Barton (1808-1898)

Lucy Barton was the daughter of middle-class Quaker parents Lucy Jesup and Bernard Barton. Lucy's mother died giving birth to her after which her father became her caretaker and mentor. Bernard was a poet, bank clerk,

punishment, he laid the blame on Eve".[101] This explanation does two things: it makes Adam appear guilty of additional sin by blaming Eve, and allows Barton to teach a lesson about making excuses for sin.

Like many other authors,

the sins of Adam and Eve by stating that "We are all naturally prone to do evil; thus we are partakers of Adam's sin [Original Sin]: but our Heavenly Father so loved the world, that He promised Adam before he died, the He would send upon the earth his Son Christ Jesus."[107] Barton connects the story of the Fall to Jesus and uses this connection to teach children that their sins will be pardoned.

Clearly, Barton used the story of Adam and Eve as a gateway to discuss simplified morals and theological ideas with children by narrating the story rather quickly, dwelling on the lessons that she imparts to her audience. Barton's treatment of the story both reproduces traditional interpretations and challenges them. She adheres to the notion of Original Sin which is traditionally related to androcentric interpretations of the story, while simultaneously challenging her audience not to blame Eve for the Fall. In her own life, Barton adhered to some of the ideals placed on her sex, and this is evident in how she asked her father to write introductions to many of her books, including this one. In his preface to *Bible Letters for Children*

death.[112] In 1867, Tucker published *House Beautiful* or *The Bible Museum* (Figure 2) in which she describes objects from the Bible so children could learn about the Christian faith. In her entry on the "Forbidden Fruit," Tucker focusses on Eve's temptation and compares it to how children are tempted in their own lives. Tucker's version of the Fall is interesting because it shows some of the different ways that female authors told the story of the Fall. Where Tucker uses objects as her way to tell Bible stories, other authors wrote books about animals of the Bible, heroes of the Bible, and rhymes that sum up stories from the Bible. The creativity with which the authors of religious literature enticed young audiences to become interested or re-interested in familiar stories is quite impressive.

Tucker clearly demonstrates that all sin, regardless of gender, has consequences and her writing reveals a somewhat traditional interpretation of the Fall and the influence of Original Sin. Tucker claims that, "Sin stands not alone by itself: as the seed is contained in the fruit, so one transgression is the parent of many."[115] Here Tucker asserts traditional beliefs about the Fall and in doing so, this text may lend itself to blaming Eve for sinning first.

Tucker does challenge her readers not to blame Eve for the Fall, but also reiterates some traditional understandings of the Fall. Tucker came from a wealthy family and her father believed strongly in the ideology of separate spheres, keeping his daughters from spending much time outside of the home and family. She also maintained the ideals for women during this time period. She spent her life caring for her family and doing charity work and donated her earnings to charity. She also dedicated herself to Evangelism and became a missionary in her later years. Interestingly, Tucker had to petition her parents for the permission to visit the workhouses that she volunteered with, showing that she did challenge gender norms.[116] Hailing from this background, Tucker's interpretation of the story is fairly traditional, even if Eve is given more grace in her text than in androcentric interpretations.

4.4 Charlotte Mary Yonge (1823-1901)

Charlotte Mary Yonge was born on August 11, 1823 near Winchester, Hampshire and died not far away in Elderfield on March 24, 1901. Her mother, Frances Mary Bargus, educated Yonge at home, bringing in a French and Spanish tutor to supplement her education. Her father, William Crawley Yonge, was a magistrate and had a lasting influence on Yonge. In addition to teaching

guidance of a mature Christian male authority."[117] In this way, the seven-year-old Charlotte Yonge was encouraged to begin teaching lessons at the local Sunday School that her father had started and continued with this for the rest of her life. According to her biographer, Elizabeth Jay, Yonge's upbringing was "cloistered" and she "remained emotionally dependant upon his [her father's] approval" throughout her life.[118]

While Yonge was primarily a novelist, she also wrote some books for children. In 1875, she published which included first, second and third readings of different Bible stories including the Fall. That same year, she published a collection of children's Bible stories called *Disciples*. In this publication, Yonge shows her moralistic way or writing for children, and includes some interesting additions to the story which stand out from the set of children's Bible stories discussed here. Specifically, Yonge chooses to add a section after Adam and Eve's creation and before the Fall about the sea and tides. She also chooses to call the serpent an evil spirit, refraining from identifying the serpent as Satan as so many children's authors did.

In the introduction to the book, "Aunt Charlotte" is described as going to visit her sister who had three children, Clara, William and "little Anna."[121] "Aunt Charlotte" told them stories from the Bible on Sunday which the children enjoyed so much that she published them in a book for other children to enjoy. The book is organized into 52 sections, one for each Sunday of the year. Inside each section is a collection of three stories which Yonge tol(S)-6(u)e1TJ/T6 1 Tf6 0 0 6 [illegible]

discussing Eve's temptation and sin, she makes many of the same changes as other authors. She discusses the Fall in plural terms which describe both Adam and Eve, does not mention the separate curses, adds Jesus to the story to lessen the severity of the Fall and otherwise does not make any remarks which reveal her opinion of Eve of women. For example, when discussing how Adam and Eve were banished from the garden, Yonge tells the story as many others do, stating, "Then God was angry with them, and put them out of the garden, and let them be weak and sickly, and die at last. It is a sad thing for them and for us."[129] It is only in her questions after the story where her opinions are shown. Instead of asking what was done to punish Adam and Eve for the Fall, Yonge asks, "What was done to punish her [Eve]?" and "What sad things did the bad spirit bring on her?"[130]

Yonge's version of the story thus shows how it can be hard in a children's story to reveal one's entire stance on gender relations as the author may only hint at their opinions. Yonge's version of Eve's temptation and Fall itself is quite typical, while her questions following the story do not follow the same pattern of pluralizing the Fall and the punishment and focus on Eve. Overall, it can be seen the Yonge's curious version of the story is interesting because it shows how different authors embellished the tale and that it can be difficult to learn one's entire stance on a topic from a children's story, even one as telling as the Fall.

5. Conclusion

The story of Adam and Eve in children's Bible storybooks reveal the presuppositions regarding gender that female authors in the 19th century had. Coming from the upper and middle-classes Britain, these women typically adhered to the ideology of separate spheres and simplified the story of the Fall for a variety of purposes to teach children different moral lessons or educate

[129] Yonge, , 28.
[130] Yonge, , 28.

them about how to live a good Christian life. Rarely did the reinforce or challenge traditional interpretations of the story which blame Eve for the fall, but they often inherited these assumptions which creep into their versions of the story in minor ways. Overall, their intentions in writing this story had little to do with gender and a lot more to do with correct education and upbringing of young Christian children. What is surprising is the sheer variety of ways this story is changed from the original. Even when the authors attempt to stay true to the biblical version and state that in their preface, their own interpretations find their way into the story through every minor change. What becomes obvious is that every re-

Abbreviations

OC Osbourne Collection of children's literature at the Lillian H. Smith Branch of the Toronto Public Library, Toronto, ON

CLQ Children's Literature Collection at W.D. Jordan Rare Books and Special Collections, Douglas Library, Queen's University, Kingston, ON

BCQ Bible Collection at W.D. Jordan Rare Books and Special Collections, Douglas Library, Queen's University, Kingston, ON

MT Marion Taylor's personal collection of women's writings on the Bible at Wycliffe College, Toronto, ON

Weston, Mrs. D. C. *Old Testament Stories about The Men and Women of the Bible.* New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, n.d. MT.

White, Mrs. Annie R. *Beautiful Story-Land of the Bible Written in Simple Language for Instruction, Entertainment and Religious Culture of the Home, School and Sunday-School.* Philadelphia: John E. Potter & Co., n.d. MT.

-----. *Bible Story-Land for the Home, School and Sunday-School. A Book for All Classes.* L. W. Walter, n.d. MT.

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