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Ingunn Aadland

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Casting Biblical narratives

Gendered power hierarchies and cultural imagination in scandinavian children's bibles

Ingunn Aadland

Children's bibles present a selection of Biblical stories, as the Bible, through text and illustrations – in the guise of fun, teaching, and moral warning. In this, they reflect the conviction that the Bible is essential, useful, and even entertaining. At the same time, cultural imagination continuously gives shape to Biblical stories. In this way, the children's Bible is a materialisation of the valuation and cultural memory of the Bible – and in this way it makes sense to call it a cultural bible. This article examines the Danish bestseller Møllehave's *Børnebibelen* (1996/2016), and two Norwegian books: *Bibelfortellinger* (2011) and *Tidslinjen* (2016) with particular regard to gendered power structures. How are women cast in the current Scandinavian cultural bible? There are common tendencies in the ways in which cultural memory casts Biblical women: Women are deemed less important than their male counterparts, they are easily associated with sexual misconduct, and they tend to be discredited in various ways. Representation relies upon cultural assumptions. Ultimately, the cultural Bible produces docile bodies. It puts the Biblical woman in her place, and she becomes a reduced other.

Introduction

Children's bibles present the Bible in a form adjusted to a specific audience: children. Various editorial choices regarding format, genre, and illustrations, are made for entertaining, teaching, and nurturing belief.

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Ultimately, the storyteller creates a coherent narrative and gives it a moral structure. The text thus discloses not just a storyteller, but also the inherent values within the tradition to which he or she belongs. This article examines how contemporary Scandinavian Biblical interpretations represent Biblical women – for children.

Despite several attempts to highlight and rediscover Biblical women in academic and popular scientific titles,¹ the female protagonists in the Bible are often deemed less dramatic or less interesting. That is, unless their stories are related to sexual misconduct. The marginalisation of women in children's bibles is not necessarily an inheritance from antiquity, nor is it a direct result of the interwoven patriarchy of the Biblical text themselves. The Biblical narratives in children's bibles are equally an expression of contemporary culture. They reflect a long tradition, yet are sorted and filtered through aspects of our culture. For example, Jeremy Punt has demonstrated how Afrikaans children's bibles reflected and reinforced Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa during Apartheid.² Punt's study is part of the anthology *Text, Image, and Otherness in Children's Bibles: What is in the Picture?* (Stichele and Pyper). In the introduction, the editors, Vander Stichele and Pyper, summarise: "writers and illustrators of children's bibles consciously and unconsciously draw on and reinforce the identity politics of the social groups within which they work, lending them the authority of the Bible".³ Put in Bottigheimer's words: "They convey social views in the guise of religious truth", and they are "Bible stories that mingle sacred text with secular values".⁴

Where does that lead regarding the ideas about women that children's bibles convey? A children's bible manifests the active memory of the Bible within the culture in which it is produced. I have analysed one Danish book, Møllehave's *Børnebibelen* (1996/2016), and two Norwegian books: *Bibelfortellinger* (2011) and *Tidslinjen* (2016). While *Børnebibelen* is a bestseller translated into Swedish, the two Norwegian books are published only in Norway. All three books capture different moments of Biblical reception. Seen together, I claim that they reflect a dominant tradition of transmission. Hence, my overarching question is as follows: How are women cast in representative examples of the current Scandinavian cultural bible?

The collective memory of the Bible is surprising in its neglect of women. In a children's bible, text and illustrations work together. My method is to analyse text and images with particular regard to gendered power structures. Feminist theory and its attention to body, identity, and stigma, is part of my lens and informs my analysis.⁵ This study investigates and identifies the inherent cultural devaluation of women, and reflects on the ways in which the memory of the Bible works in our culture.

Collective memory and children's bibles in a Scandinavian context

The transmission of the Bible in children's bibles reflects cultural memory, so what is memorable in Scandinavian culture?

There is a group of stories that constitutes the core tradition and that we can call "the cultural canon" of the Bible.⁶ Cultural values are embodied within this Biblical canon in the selection of stories and in how they are remembered. In Scandinavia, the church – and in particular, the Lutheran tradition – has shaped this canon. So have international publishers who produce Bible adaptations for children. Scandinavian publishers look to one another, but Norway looks to Denmark and Sweden more than the other way around.⁷ It is my opinion that one cannot understand the Norwegian context without taking the Scandinavian context into consideration. In this study, I examine Norwegian and Danish publications. It should be noted that Møllehave's *Børnebibelen*, a bestseller in Denmark, has been translated into Swedish (Verbum: 2006) to fulfil the Swedish tradition of distributing children's bibles to six-year-olds (Dalevi, 2007:13, 283). Møllehave's work is cherished outside Denmark, and has influenced the perception of the Bible in Scandinavia at large.⁸

Aleida Assmann's study on cultural memory provides a theoretical framework for talking about the transmission of Biblical stories. As with individual memory, cultural memory is selective.⁹ Some Biblical narratives are remembered, and others are forgotten. Some stories are strategically remembered because they reflect values that are esteemed in the present, while others are forgotten actively because they are found repulsive, or passively, simply because they have fallen out of "the frames of attention, valuation, and use".¹⁰ Hence, the limitations of memory give priority to stories that are valued.

The prevalence of selected passages from Luke 15 conveys an example of how memory works. Luke 15 contains three parables: the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. The plan for catechism in the Church of Norway suggests only two of these: the lost sheep and the prodigal son.¹¹ Children's bibles show a similar trend.¹² The woman searching for her lost coin (Luke 15:8-10) is not as memorable as the other two stories, and is not part of the active canon. It is, however, still there in Luke 15, and in the archive. One may ask why a female searching for a coin is deemed less instructive or entertaining than the shepherd looking for his animal or the father waiting for his son?

The titles Biblical stories are given often point to their main protagonists and events or the animals associated with them, such as “Daniel in the Lions’ Den”, “Jonah and the Big Fish”, or “Noah and the Animals in the Ark”.¹³ These titles reveal an attempt to make the stories attractive to the audience. At the same time, they denote an opinion of the story’s essence and what one appreciates within them. In Møllehave’s *Børnebibelen* (1996/2016), male characters dominate. Among the forty-six total story titles, only two female names appear: Eve and Mary (Jesus’ mother). The selection of stories embodies a cultural canon, and this “canon” conveys more than just a list. Equally important is the way these stories are interpreted and shaped in cultural memory. What is appreciated in them? I argue that this core, and its shaping, constitutes cultural knowledge of the Bible. This knowledge directs the storytelling in children’s bibles, as well as the catechism and preaching of the church.

There has been an increased interest in the Bible’s reception in politics and culture among Biblical scholars. Yvonne Sherwood uses the term “liberal Bible” to denote the interpretative traditions which support liberal views.¹⁴ In western political discourse, the Bible appears to be drafted into the service of liberal democracy.¹⁵ Thus rhetorical and political discourse creates a liberal Bible. In line with this, James Crossley, among others, has used the term “cultural Bible” to denote the role of the Bible in culture as a literary classic.¹⁶ Crossley speaks of function; I also speak of content. I use the term “cultural Bible” to denote *the Bible* as perceived in our culture and accordingly reproduced in Biblical adaptations. These representations reflect an awareness of what the Bible is. They are made in the Bible’s image, but they also continually, being a working memory, construct our culture’s idea of the Bible. The cultural bible is only partially a product of the church’s theological discourse, but it undoubtedly shapes it. Thus, the cultural Bible, acting as working memory, embodies both the cultivation and preservation of an inherited tradition.¹⁷

Astrid Ramsfjell notes how Biblical adaptations for children both mirror and legitimate social structures and morals of their cultural context.¹⁸ She also notes how the “pre-text”, meaning the creators’ knowledge of the Bible, predates their work.¹⁹ In many ways, the “pre-text” overlaps with what I call the cultural Bible. Yet, there is a nuance. Ramsfjell uses the idea to refer to both the Bible as an available text source and the network of variations that exist.²⁰ The cultural Bible is not the same as the text source. The cultural Bible is a shared

conceptualisation of the Bible in the collective memory. By labelling the tradition “cultural Bible”, I seek to create an awareness of the tradition, which is often mistaken for the text itself.²¹ Moreover, cultural values do not only shape children’s bibles, but also shape the collective memory that incorporates knowledge of the Bible.

My interest lies in the way the Bible is preserved in collective memory and produces a cultural Bible. It is the cultural Bible that is materialised in children’s bibles. I use the term cultural Bible in a broad sense and as a dynamic concept to refer to the Bible in collective memory. One could arguably refer to multiple “cultural bibles”, nevertheless, when it comes to the reception of Biblical women, there appear to be several general tendencies. For this reason, I refer to it as the Scandinavian “cultural Bible”.

Methodology and theoretical lens: the “normate” body: gender and disability

The Scandinavian cultural Bible exists within its collective memory. How do the frames of attention and valuation work in the transmission of Biblical women?

I am reading through a particular lens, and have intersecting perspectives in mind. Social power structures relate to the body, and cultural imagination thus attaches meanings to particular bodies. In many children’s bibles, Jesus is taller, healthier, even cleaner, and more good-looking than the other disciples. He has the ideal body, and he also embodies knowledge, power and goodness. Jesus, as a healthy male, represents good and the “normate”.

The impulse to associate physical appearance with morality has persisted throughout the centuries. The ancient pseudoscience of physiognomy developed techniques for reading the body’s external parts to decipher the state of the internal parts.²² Aristotle equated females with mutilated males, and their physical weakness corresponded to their moral qualities.²³ Ancient conceptions of the normate and disability intersect with ideas about gender.²⁴ Solevåg describes it in the following way: “The construction of disability as weakness and lack thus overlaps with the construction of women as men’s weaker, less able counterparts.”²⁵

According to Garland-Thomson, the discursive equation of femaleness with disability is still common.²⁶ She suggests including bodily configurations and functioning that we call “disabled” in “all feminist

examinations of culture and representation".²⁷ The awareness of cultural hierarchies that assign completeness to some and deficiency to others should impact our critical reading of contemporary children's bibles. Children's bibles are a fusion of past and present, reflecting current social structures and values. If Jesus embodies the ideal in children's bibles, what do males and females represent? How do contemporary retellings deal with women's social roles in Antiquity?

In this study, I compare Biblical adaptations with the Biblical text to detect common tendencies in the ways in which Biblical texts are transmitted in text and illustrations. Each case is followed with a view to intertextuality, which means that other books provide a literary context for the discussion. Three books produced in a Scandinavian context serve as a starting point: *Børnebibelen* (Bibelselskabets Forlag: 1996/2016), *Bibelfortællinger* (IKO-Forlaget: 2011) and *Tidslinjen* (Verbum: 2016). The material includes Norwegian and Danish titles, yet I operate within the larger Scandinavian context, which I call the "Scandinavian" cultural Bible. In a previous study, I analysed books published in Norwegian only.²⁸ It is my opinion that one cannot understand the Norwegian context without the Scandinavian context in view. This is especially true for the Norwegian situation, yet the appreciation of *Børnebibelen* in Sweden confirms that children's bibles cross borders. The book was published in Swedish as *Bibeln i berättelser og bilder* (Verbum: 2006), and adjusted to its new context.²⁹ Its Danish re-edition, published in 2016 with new illustrations, also demonstrates its popularity and relevance.

In *Børnebibelen* and *Tidslinjen*, each narrative comes with an illustration. Additionally, in *Tidslinjen*, there is an extensive illustrated timeline, which is also used separately from the book. All three contain a large selection of Biblical narratives. They are text-rich and relatively close to the Biblical text. Nevertheless, their Biblical stories reflect cultural imagination and values embedded in humour, fact, morals, etc.

Text and illustrations in children's bibles reveal power dynamics. Within the Jesus narrative, the friends and enemies of Jesus have more or less one role: to make him shine. But there are other hierarchies within the casting of Biblical narratives. I use the awareness of cultural hierarchies that assign completeness to some and deficiency to others as a tool. The concept of the "normate" body provides a category to detect value systems and power dynamics. In the following analysis, I focus on how these children's bibles cast the Jesus narrative and how they present the women within it. My guiding questions are: What

parts of the story are valued? What do titles, illustrations, and the recounted narrative tell? Several factors signal the social status of the body, and posture, clothes, and impairments are essential. My guiding questions to reading illustrations are: How are bodies positioned according to their surroundings? What are their postures, and how are they clothed?

Analysis: power hierarchies in the collective memory

The women in Jesus's company are othered or reduced according to the "normate" ideal in three ways: They are marginalised (invisible women), they become associated with sin (visible women), and they are presented as docile and mutilated bodies (othered women). In the following, I will present these tendencies as they occur in the Scandinavian cultural Bible. In each part, I have taken one of the children's bibles as a starting point, yet I place them in dialogue with each other and various other recent books.

1. Invisible women: the marginalised voices in Jesus' company

In the cultural Bible, women risk being cast out of the stories. Children's bibles are in line with the Bible itself in prioritising male protagonists. Jesus and the twelve disciples are all males. The Gospels, as biographies, have Jesus as the main subject.³⁰ Yet, the New Testament does mention women in Jesus' company. Luke recounts that Jesus comes to dine with Mary and Martha. The Gospel of John underlines their close friendship. All synoptic gospels mention that women, who had been in Jesus' company since Galilee, remain close to the events throughout the passion narrative. These are named differently, but Luke 8 (outside the passion narrative) names Mary, called Magdalene; Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza; and Susanna. All gospels report that Mary Magdalene, either alone or with Joanna or "the other Mary", were at the grave.³¹ In children's bibles, the role of women is downplayed. The females in the background of the passion narrative are forgotten, and female roles become diminished.

Børnebibelen is my main reference for the first tendency: the marginalisation of women. Johannes Møllehave's immensely popular *Børnebibelen* was first published in 1996. The re-edition from 2016 is beautifully illustrated, and stories are first narrated, then summarised in poetic lines at the end. The book includes Biblical women, but in stories in which women arguably play a dominant part, *Børnebibelen*

omits the female perspective, and thus the role of the female characters is reduced. The presentation of Mary and Martha in the story “Lazarus, Come out!” (“Lazarus, kom herud!”) is one example.³²

The Gospel of John takes great care to present all of them, emphasizing Mary as the one who anointed Jesus. The introductory passage ends with a note on Jesus’ love of the three of them (John 11:1-5), yet *Børnebibelen* does not seem to be aware of or interested in Jesus’s love for Mary and Martha. The story starts with a brief presentation of Martha and Mary as “sisters [who] Jesus sometimes visited”, thus alluding to Luke 10 and the story of the sisters there:

Jesus sometimes visited two sisters, Martha and Mary. They lived in a village, Bethany, and had a brother named Lazarus. Lazarus became ill, and Martha and Mary sent a message to Jesus. When he heard about their sick brother, who was also his dear friend, he said: “His illness will not lead to death. He is ill so that God’s glory may reveal itself upon him. Our friend Lazarus is asleep – but I will go to wake him up.”³³

The narrator of *Børnebibelen* has a humorous and pedagogical voice. The retelling of the story in *Børnebibelen* pays attention to Jesus’ love for Lazarus and repeats that Lazarus was Jesus’ friend. Møllehave remains close to the Biblical text, but is selective. The story includes the dialogues and Martha’s confession, yet unlike Lazarus, Mary and Martha are not counted as friends, nor is it mentioned that Jesus loves them. The story about this Mary begins and ends with the Lazarus story in *Børnebibelen*, and there is no mention of her or any other woman anointing Jesus in the preface of the passion narrative.

Although there are exceptions, the tendency to forget or downplay Mary and Martha in this story is a general trend in other children’s books. Admittedly, John 11 is wordy and contains long sections of dialogue. A children’s book must shorten the story and naturally focus on the main events: The death and resurrection of Lazarus. The shorter versions reveal how memory makes selections. This is a passive form of forgetting, as it appears to be a non-intentional act of neglecting or leaving something behind.³⁴ One example is the Norwegian *Bibelen for minstemann* (Hermon: 2012), which is a co-production. In this case, the illustrations are not original, but a Norwegian author rewrites the text. The story is recounted in two lines:

Jesus had many friends. One of them was named Lazarus. Lazarus became very ill and died. When Jesus came to the city, his friends and family were in grief.³⁵

Another Norwegian book, *Saman med Jesus* (IKO-Forlaget: 2016), does the same.³⁶ This book tells the story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10), which means that the two are not forgotten, as such. Nevertheless, in the account of John 11:1-44, which makes up ten short lines, they are remembered as Lazarus' sisters, not as Jesus' friends.

Jesus and Lazarus are good friends. One day Lazarus becomes very ill. Lazarus' sisters ask Jesus to come. They believe Jesus can help.³⁷

The two women are part of the illustrations, but narrators struggle to imagine them as Jesus' friends. Hence their role is reduced to being "Lazarus sisters". The same tendency applies in shorter as well as in text-rich versions. Jesus' love for Martha and Mary is not part of the working memory. Lazarus is placed in the frame of our attention, whereas Mary and Martha have fallen out of it.

2. Visible women: female embodiment of sin

While some women end up in the archive, others are actively remembered: the sinful women. In two different Norwegian children's bibles from 2017, both intended for young readers, there is one identical title: "Jesus Forgives". The title is not connected with the same story in the respective books: *Saman med Jesus* contains the forgiven woman (Luke 7:36-50) and *Tidslinjen*, the woman who committed adultery (John 8). Both stories are about forgiveness, and both feature the humble sinner as a female.

The memory of the two anonymous women, the forgiven woman (Luke 7:36-50) and the woman who committed adultery (John 8), repress the memory of the other women of the gospels, turning them all into sinners. Those who are familiar with the Biblical stories know that Mark and Matthew have a story about a wealthy woman anointing Jesus' head before his death (Mark 14:3-9; Matt 26:6-13), whereas Luke has a repentant woman anointing Jesus' feet, drying them with her hair (Luke 7). The Gospel of John has Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, anointing Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair, foreshadowing Jesus own act as servant, washing the disciples' feet (John 12:1-8). The four stories overlap and blend in cultural memory. The

account of John 11 in Desmond Tutus's *Guds barn* (original title: *Children of God*) (Bibelselskapet/IKO-Forlaget: 2011) shows how this can work.³⁸ According to John 13:2, "Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair". In the Biblical adaptation, one reads: "Then, a woman came in. She had long, black hair and carried a bottle of expensive perfume".³⁹ The focus is turned from the costly perfume (cf. John 13) to Mary's bodily, feminine appearance. Moreover, in omitting her name, her identity is changed from Mary into being "a woman". The story appears to embody a harmonisation of all the stories of women anointing Jesus. In this process, the narrator, operating within his culture's frame of attention, imagines Mary as the stereotypical Biblical woman: a female body.

Bibelfortelleren is my main reference for the second tendency: The association with sin. The two anonymous women (Luke 7 and John 8) are given priority in *Bibelfortelleren* (Gunleiksrud, IKO-Forlaget: 2011). *Bibelfortelleren* is a comprehensive book (with more than four hundred pages) prepared for a young adult audience. The book remains close to the Biblical text, yet restructures the stories' succession, creating one grand narrative that integrates and emphasises female protagonists, such as Susanna, Ruth, and women in Jesus' surroundings, such as Mary and Martha.⁴⁰

One chapter, "The Woman who was Forgiven", is mainly a retelling of Luke 7 (verse 36 and onwards). In Luke, this woman is referred to as "a sinner" (ἁματωλός) (v. 37 and 39). The Norwegian Bible translation (from 2011) reads: "a woman who lived a sinful life". In *Bibelfortelleren* (2011), this woman is first presented as "a prostitute". Also, the Pharisee's thoughts (v. 39) are rendered: "she is a whore, a sinful woman".⁴¹ These are additions to the Biblical text, yet in line with tradition.⁴² More surprising, however, is the inclusion of Luke 8:1-3 in the same chapter, which mentions Mary Magdalene, Johanna, and Susanna as resourceful women sponsoring Jesus and the twelve. In *Bibelfortelleren*, this note is conjoined with "The Woman who was Forgiven" as an appendix to the story. *Bibelfortelleren* only mentions Mary Magdalene. Thus, this narrative arrangement makes one think of the tradition that made Mary Magdalene a prostitute.⁴³

The woman caught having committed adultery (John 8) turns up in the preface to *Passover*.⁴⁴ The chapter title "Jesus in Jerusalem" frames two sayings from Mark 12: the widow's offering and the question of tax, followed by the woman caught having committed adultery. In *Bibelfortelleren*, the latter event prompts Judas to look for an opportunity to

betray Jesus (Mark 14:10). The chapter also includes “The Parable of the Good and Bad Bridesmaids” (Matt 25) and lastly, Jesus’ saying: “I am the True Vine” (John 15).⁴⁵ The stories are “taken” from the preface of the passion narrative, either the sequence in Mark 12–14 or the partially parallel text in Matthew 24–26, and are associated with Jesus’ final stay in Jerusalem. All but one: the unique story from John 8. So how did this story end up in this context?

In John’s gospel, one could arguably say that the passion narrative starts with Mary anointing Jesus’ feet (John 12). Similarly, Mark 14 and Matt 26 report of an anonymous woman anointing Jesus with expensive ointment. Neither Mary nor the unnamed woman are described in terms of sinfulness. Yet both provoke the disciples, due to the waste of money, and are followed by the transitional note that Judas decided to betray Jesus (cf. Mark 14:1; Matt 26:14). The same transition is found here in *Bibelfortelleren*; only the adulterous woman’s story becomes the provocative scene.

Let us again turn to Møllehave’s Biblical women. As already noted, *Børnebibelen* does not recount any of the anointment stories. The Lazarus chapter is subsequently followed by four sub-chapters, which retell the passion narrative: “Jesus Enters Jerusalem”, “The Last Supper”, “Crucifixion”, and “Resurrection”. Møllehave’s harmonisation of the passion narrative includes the grieving Mary Magdalene and Mary witnessing the resurrected Jesus (cf. John 20; Matt 28).⁴⁶ *Børnebibelen* otherwise systematically omits all mention of female followers. There is only one exception. In the introduction to “Jesus’ Crucifixion”, the narrator explains how Jesus ended up being accused:

based on their law, the Pharisees accused Jesus: He had healed sick people on the Sabbath and violated the law, he had dined together with people breaking the law, tax collectors, sinners, women who sold love for money, lepers ...⁴⁷

Moreover, still introducing the passion narrative, *Børnebibelen* mentions the story of John 8:

They had not forgotten that he once when they wanted to stone a woman who had lived with men that she was not married to, had said ...⁴⁸

Børnebibelen notes that Jesus had women in his company, yet does not include the female sponsors of Jesus named by Luke, nor does it include

Mary (or the anonymous wealthy woman) who anoints Jesus in the preface of the passion narrative. By leaving out female sponsors and followers and remembering women as prostitutes, he replaces these women in his record. In the cultural evolution of the stories, these are the ones who qualify.⁴⁹

Can it be coincidental that the adulterous woman (John 8) appears in the same narrative context (Jesus' final visit to Jerusalem) in both *Børnebibelen* and *Bibelfortelleren*? Has cultural memory replaced the story of the woman anointing Jesus with Jesus forgiving an adulterous woman? There are various possible explanations for this blend. Stories that present God's merciful forgiveness are valued, which means that these stories stick in our memory. Commentaries also tend to speak of the different anointment stories as one, yet in different versions, which implies that Mary, who anoints the feet of Jesus, and the repentant woman in Luke 7 are one and the same. *Bibelfortelleren* contains both Luke's and John's anointment stories, yet blends all of them. The woman in Luke 7, who anoints Jesus' feet, is given prominence and has a chapter of her own, subsuming Mary Magdalene.⁵⁰ The John account, placed at the entry into Jerusalem, borrows one variance from Matthew and Mark, having Mary anointing Jesus' head instead of his feet.⁵¹ In Jerusalem, the unnamed woman in Mark and Matthew is replaced with John 8.⁵² *Bibelfortelleren* thus prioritises women in Jesus company, yet somehow manages to represent them as sinners.

3. *Othered women: docile and mutilated bodies*

Children's bibles tend to underrepresent women, and among those remembered, sinful women are overrepresented. There is yet another factor that discredits Biblical women: The tendency to present them as inferior to their male counterparts. This can be explicit, as in the following note that introduces the story "Abraham Receives a Visitor" ("Abraham får besøg"):

Among the old Jews, it was vital for a man to become a father – and preferably father to a son, who could bring his bloodline further. Indeed, Jewish men still have the morning prayer: "I thank you, God, that I am not a woman!"⁵³

The narrative target of the discrediting note is the Jewish community, which has the effect of othering both Jews and women. At other times, women are discredited in subtler ways.

Female sinners are illustrated kneeling, often with their heads low (e.g. *Saman med Jesus; Tidslinjen*).⁵⁴ Their body posture signals social status. People in prayer before their deity or in despair before their master will often assume this position. Hence, women tend to be placed in a humble position as a part of their female identity. Humble postures are not necessarily discrediting, they nonetheless give the body a lower status.⁵⁵ Stigma theory provides helpful categories to trace the production of “others”.⁵⁶ According to my analysis, women are discredited or “othered” in diverse ways: They are presented as being less rational and more emotional than men. Moreover, women’s bodies are presented as being humble and docile.

Tidslinjen’s illustrations are my main reference for the third tendency: docile and mutilated bodies. *Tidslinjen* presents itself as a Biblical chronology, divided into the Old and the New Testament.⁵⁷ Every story is represented as an illustration on a small-scale timeline, which is included on the book cover. There is also a large-scale timeline for didactic purposes in the catechism of the church. The chronology starts with creation, followed by Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. It ends at a banquet, where Jesus is surrounded by a new Adam and Eve, children, a wolf, and a lamb. The illustrations are cartoon-like, and males and females are generally depicted with big eyes and mouths and with symmetrical faces (according to beauty ideals). At the same time, text and illustrations reveal power hierarchies which define the “normate” and the other. In this way, *Tidslinjen* conveys a social framing of the body.

Among the selected stories, we find two chapter headings with named female characters: Rebecca and Ruth. But if we look closer at Jesus’ ministry, the women in the stories are few: The woman who committed adultery (John 8) is, as we have seen, prominent. Other women are Jairus’ daughter and her mother (Mark 5). As the heading indicates, Jairus is the main protagonist, although the whole family is central in the narrated story and its illustration. There is no anointment story, and women are in general at the margins of the passion narrative. They show up out of nowhere at the resurrection, without names. Women are not mentioned in the account of Pentecost, either. The illustrations underline female invisibility: There are no images in which one can see a female face with both eyes opened, from Jesus’ ministry to Pentecost. The forgiven woman (John 8) wears a pink dress next to Jesus’ white clothes. She is kneeling with her face towards the ground. Her hand covers her face entirely. Jairus’ daughter and her mother have their eyes closed, whereas Jairus himself is looking at his daughter. The women in the crowd listening to Jesus’ teaching (Matt 5-7) are

depicted with no faces at all. They are reduced to geometric shapes (Matt 5-7). The women at the grave are illustrated with their backs turned, but most interesting of all is the illustration of Pentecost.

The image shows eleven people gathered in a house, one woman is standing in front, and several others, males and females, are standing next to the house.⁵⁸ All have a burning flame above their head, yet there is one difference: Females have their eyes closed, whereas all surrounding males (short-haired with beard) have their eyes wide open.

The images in *Tidslinjen* reveal gendered power relations. The hierarchy assigns completeness to the male body and deficiency to the female. In the creation narrative and the heavenly banquet, female faces are partly covered compared to their male counterparts: The female glances at Adam, while Adam looks right at the addressees. In the heavenly banquet, Jesus is the centre, looking out of the picture, while everyone around him looks at him. Yet, the males still have two eyes. Females have one or none at all.⁵⁹ This tendency to portray females with only one eye, or no eyes at all, next to seeing males, dominates in *Tidslinjen*. In "The New Testament", Mary (Jesus' mother) is the only female with a whole face. Seeing is a loaded metaphor in the Bible. The eye is the light of the soul, and "seeing" means knowing. "Understanding" as "seeing" is also a conventional metaphor.⁶⁰ Hence, the lack of "sight" signals that females are less rational than males. In close connection with this, the metonymy concept, face for the person, is active in our culture. We perceive the person as a face.⁶¹ A person with no face has no identity, and therefore no agency.

There are also other ways to signal inferiority: body and body posture. The illustration of Rebecca, one of the few images in *Tidslinjen* with females only, shows traces of a similar power hierarchy. Rebecca is kneeling next to the well, which presents her as a docile body. Rebecca at the well is an iconic moment. In Gustav Dorés' *Billedbibel*, Rebecca stands tall next to the humble servant who is commissioned to find Isaac a proper wife.⁶² In *Tidslinjen*, Rebecca is on her knees, thus assuming the lowly position of a servant. It is notable that males surrounding Jesus are generally standing, though Jesus is taller than they are. The healing narratives present a tall and robust Jesus next to the lame and blind. There thus appears to be a scale on which Jesus ranges above other males, and males above females.

Just as the lame man is moved away from the ideal form next to Jesus, the female body is othered next to males.⁶³ "Disabled" functions as an attributed identity. In this way, gender and disability intersect in *Tidslinjen*, and there are parallels between meanings attributed to female bodies

and those assigned to disabled bodies. Disability operates within the text as a tool to discredit the female body, and in *Tidslinjen*, it attaches the meaning of being irrational and emotional to females.

As noted, Mary is an exception: the only two-eyed woman in the New Testament. The illustration of the nativity scene depicts her sitting by the crib. Joseph stands next to her, holding his arm over her shoulder. If we take the text into account, there is a corresponding power hierarchy. The narrator makes Joseph the leading actor, whereas Mary's role is connected to her body: "Mary's tummy was big and heavy, she was about to give birth. Joseph helped her all that he could". The narrator lets Joseph speak: "We need to get inside somewhere", Joseph says. "She cannot give birth outside tonight". Mary's agency is revealed in one sentence only: "That night, the baby was born. He screamed the first scream, and fell asleep, satisfied, at Mary's breast. She put him in a crib."⁶⁴ In a concluding note, the narrator states: "And Joseph put his robe around her and the baby."⁶⁵ It is noteworthy that the act of wrapping the baby is thus transferred from Mary to Joseph (cf. Luke 2:7). The exception to the rule is no exception in the end. Illustrations signal agency and value. *Tidslinjen* presents beautiful women, yet the general trend to depict them as one-eyed or humble women cast them as deviant from or inferior to men.

Summarising: women and cultural imagination

We have now, through *Børnebibelen*, *Bibelfortelleren*, and *Tidslinjen*, seen how Biblical stories are remembered and how women are cast in them.

Børnebibelen makes no effort to balance female/male stories, and in the stories in which women play a part, they are deemed less interesting, both theologically and dramatically. The more recent books, *Bibelfortelleren* and *Tidslinjen*, include several women in line with cultural awareness about including females. Yet, *Bibelfortelleren*, which highlights female characters, does not attempt to downplay the Madonna/whore archetype. It appears to be easier to have female protagonists in adaptations of the Old Testament. *Tidslinjen* includes Rebecca and Ruth, yet leaves out the New Testament women: sisters Mary and Martha, and Mary Magdalene. The Biblical women do not fit "the frames of attention", and their value and use are related to their female bodies, which are inferior to males.

Cultural memory works in selection processes. Some women are forgotten, while others play a part in the Biblical drama. These women tend to have a bodily presence, and their bodies are inferior to their male

counterparts. Thus, even though two of the books attempt to revise the Biblical canon by including female protagonists, all three still marginalise the role of women. The cultural filter does not allow authors and illustrators to fully recognise female characters' potential, nor is it sensitive to their tradition's marginalising tendency.

Gendered power relations? Female and male bodies

Children's bibles contain abstract value systems that structure elements into ideal and inferior, good and bad. The moral is not necessarily expressed through a narrative voice, but it is still there within the narrative structures, in their casting, in text and illustration. The moment of transmission, captured in this analysis, shows gendered power relations. The depictions of sinful women become icons of sin, which creates stigma. Women who are not associated with immoral behaviour still risk being presented in ways that reduce their agency or power: In *Tidslinjen*, Miriam has one eye, and Rebecca is kneeling.

Our culture and its value system are constantly changing, and so is our cultural Bible.⁶⁶ It takes time to shape a cultural canon. The cultural Bible, as a classic, functions as a space in which value systems are upheld and legitimated. Hence, there is circularity. Modern interpreters who transmit "the Bible" might very well struggle with the Biblical tradition, yet their struggles may also be accompanied by a sense of piety or respect for that same tradition.⁶⁷ Every adaptation manipulates the pre-text by shortening, expanding, or modifying it somehow. Yet, most transmitters will have a notion of a line that cannot be crossed, where the Bible is no longer the Bible. *Bibelfortellinger* and *Tidslinjen* attempt to revise the cultural canon by adding diversity, yet they are stuck in the value system of the same tradition and end up upholding a tradition of transmission that (compared to the actual Biblical text) reinforces a devaluation of Biblical females. So, where is that line, and who defines it?

Loyalty towards the text appears to follow cultural norms and ideals. Despite the cultural awareness of gender criticism, one continues to pass on the ancient patriarchal contempt toward women. The three children's bibles are adjusted to make the text fit their respective contexts, yet the inferiority of Biblical women is well-integrated in their traditions. In fact, it appears to reflect their tradition, as much as the Bible itself.

In the New Testament, the "blind and deaf" is a literary trope. Illness functions as a metaphor, and people with disabilities are narrative protheses. Biblical women convey a more dynamic category: Some are

autonomous and empowered; others are poor and inferior. The two categories, the female body and the disabled body, tend to merge in children's bibles. Hence, the female body is assigned with meaning: inferiority.⁶⁸ The idea that females are inferior to males is surprisingly interwoven in our cultural Bible. I have no reason to assume that it is intended, yet it comes to the fore in these Bible adaptations. The cultural Bible triggers a sense of piety that conserves not only ancient ideas but also previous generations' ideas about gender. The result is that children's bibles convey gendered stereotypes that fit neither male nor female readers of today.

Representation relies upon cultural assumptions. What we see is that "Stereotypes in life become tropes in textual representation."⁶⁹ Ultimately, the cultural bible produces docile bodies. It puts the Biblical woman in her place, and she becomes a reduced other.

Ingunn Aadland
MF Norwegian School of Theology
0302 Oslo
Norway
ingunn.aadland@mf.no

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Notes

1. E.g. Veiteberg, *Bibelens kvinner* and Wahlberg, *Jesus*.
2. Punt, "The Other," 73-97.
3. Stichele and Pyper, *Text, Image, and Otherness*, 4.
4. Bottigheimer, *The Bible for Children*, 206, 218.
5. Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*. See also Goffman, *Stigma*.
6. Dalevi refers to this as an unreflected, traditional children's bible canon ("en oreflektet, traditionell barnebibelkanon"; Dalevi, *Barnsyn, gudsbild och Jesusbild*, 69). Similarly, Saxegaard calls it a "children's bible canon". See Saxegaard, "Når Gud angreier - nesten," 77-90.
7. Children's bibles in Norway are often translations from Scandinavian productions, such as Andersson, *Bibel for barn* and Eggehorn, *En venn fra himmelen*.
8. E.g. Møllehave, *Barnas bibel på vers og rim*.
9. Assman, "Canon and Archive," 97. See also Larsen, "Børnebibelen som kulturelt erindringssted."
10. Assman, "Canon and Archive," 98.
11. Kirkerådet, *Gud gir - Vi deler*, 46-47.

12. *Børnebibelen* includes them all, but the lost coin is recounted with brevity compared to the prodigal son. The total omission of the parable of the lost coin in books that include the other two, is an international trend; see e.g. Kieffer, *Les paraboles de Jésus*, Berghof, *The Bible Story Book*, and the recent Swedish children's bible, Dalevi, *Barnens bästa bibel*, 188-195.
13. In a survey made in Norwegian day cares with a Christian basis, pedagogues refer to Biblical stories in this way. See Aadland, "Nestekjærlighetsbibelen".
14. Sherwood, *Biblical Blaspheming*, 321.
15. Sherwood, "Bush's Bible," 47-58.
16. See Crossley, *Harnessing Chaos*, 10-11; Crossley, "The End," 49; Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible*.
17. Innovations are always somehow related to tradition. See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 270-290.
18. Ramsfjell, *Barnet i teksten*, 95.
19. Ramsfjell borrows and develops further the concept from Stephens and McCallum's *Retelling Stories, Framing Literature*, 4.
20. Contemporary Biblical books are "retellings" of a Biblical story, as they can be traced to a specific text source, yet they are also "reversions" in that they embody a network of variations that build on and relate to each other (Ramsfjell, *Barnet i teksten*, 115).
21. As Ramsfjell concludes: Children's bibles relate as much to the tradition as to the text itself (Ramsfjell, *Barnet i teksten*, 115).
22. Solevåg, *Negotiating the Disabled Body*, 36.
23. "The ideal female body is abnormal compared to the universal standard of the male body," Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 28.
24. The intersectional perspectives take into account the complexity of the relationship between society, culture, and body. On intersectionality, see Kartzow, *Destabilizing the Margins* and "Asking the Other Question," 364-389.
25. Solevåg, "Hysterical Women?" 321.
26. Either to denigrate or to defend them. See Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 19.
27. "Applying feminist theory to disability analysis infuses it with feminism's insistence on the relationship between the meanings attributed to bodies by cultural representations and the consequences of those meanings in the world". Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 19-21.
28. Aadland, "Kvinna i den kulturelle bibelen".
29. Dalevi, 34, 158, 211. E.g. where the original has the "mild father," the Swedish adjusts to "mild father and mother". Dalevi, *Gud som haver?* 158.
30. Bond, *The First Biography*, 2.
31. Brock, *Mary Magdalene*.
32. Møllehave, *Børnebibelen*, 225-229.
33. 225 (my translation).
34. Assmann, "Canon and Archive," 98.
35. 33 (my translation).
36. I was employed at IKO Church Educational Centre from 2016-2022 and involved as a consultant in the final phase of this book.
37. 48 (my translation).
38. Tutu's Children's bible did not originate in Norway, and does not represent the Scandinavian cultural Bible as such, yet it was appreciated as a Children's bible in Norway. The Norwegian production (IKO-Forlaget and Bibelselskapet, 2011 and 2016) sold more than 9000 copies in Norwegian, which is a large amount in a Norwegian context.

39. Tutu, *Guds barn*, 104–105 (my translation).
40. Of the 42 stories from the New Testament, three titles indicate female protagonists: “The Samaritan Woman”, “The Woman who was Forgiven” and “Mary, Martha and Lazarus”. Except for one “angel” and “children”, the other 37 all indicate males.
41. Gunleiksrud, *Bibelfortellinger*, 357.
42. See commentaries on Luke 7:37, e.g. Nolland, suggesting that “sinner” is a euphemism for “prostitute”. Nolland, *Luke*, 353.
43. Tradition has identified the woman in Luke 7 with Mary Magdalene (cf. Gregory the Great, 981 AD). See the illustration of a woman anointing Jesus’ feet in a devotional book from 1325–50 (*Andachtsbüchlein aus der Sammlung Bouhier*). The related text identifies her as Mary Magdalene (cf. Montpellier, BU Médecine, H 396, f. 021v). To restore her reputation, the Catholic church has made a statement that Mary Magdalene was not a prostitute. See Beavis and Gilmour, “Mary Magdalene,” 329–330.
44. Gunleiksrud, *Bibelfortellinger*, 390.
45. The next chapter title is “The Eucharist Meal” (Gunleiksrud, *Bibelfortellinger*, 394).
46. Mary Magdalene is not introduced before this day. It is worth noting that names such as Simon of Cyrene (246), Joseph of Arimathea (251), Cleopas (256) are included. Thus it is not the style in *Børnebiblen* to leave out details. It is the female characters, however, who are marginalised from the story.
47. 243 (my translation).
48. 243 (my translation).
49. Note that Schüssler Fiorenza in the chapter “Jesus Movement as Renewal Movement within Judaism” lists Jesus’ table community: “the poor, sinners, the tax collectors, and prostitutes,” (*Memory of Her*, 121). Yet, Matthew, the only gospel that refers to πόρνη (“prostitute”), does so in collocation with tax-collectors, as an example of those who believed John, and therefore will enter into the Kingdom of God (Matt 21:31–32). She also states, “The tradition, especially in Luke, shows the tendency to identify prostitutes with sinners”. Yet Luke 7:34 and 15:1 only mention “tax collectors and sinners”. Schüssler Fiorenza refers to the phrase “tax collectors, sinners, and prostitutes”, yet this phrase does not exist in the New Testament (Schüssler Fiorenza, *Memory of Her*, 127). Her trilogy appears to be a blend of Luke (e.g. 7:34 and 15:1) and Matt 21.
50. 357.
51. 385.
52. 390.
53. “ ... Hos de gamle jøder var det meget vigtig for en mand at blive far – og aller helst far til en søn, som forte mandens slægt videre. Ja, jødiske mænd har stadig en morgenbøn, som lyder sådan: ‘Jeg takker dig Gud, fordi jeg ikke blev en kvinde!’” (*Møllehave, Børnebibelen*, 35).
54. See *Saman med Jesus*, 29 and *Tidslinjen*, 118.
55. Our language is filled will orientational metaphors that reveal foundational concepts: “High status is up, low status is down”. Moreover “Good is up, bad is down” and “Rational is up, emotional is down” (Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live by*, 14–21).
56. Garland-Thomson, 31.
57. *Tidslinjen* includes 52 stories from the Bible. Titles with female protagonists are: “Rebecca” and “Ruth”, “Jairus” Daughter” and “The women at the Grave”.
58. One of them has long hair, no beard, and pink clothes. This is probably Mary, the mother of Jesus, cf. Acts 1:15.

59. The snake points in Eve's direction, but her face is partially hidden. She is drawn from the side, as she glances at Adam. Thus, Eve's gaze directs our attention to Adam. The same dynamic is found in the final illustration, in which Adam and Eve are surrounded by children and animals in a banquet. Eve glances at Adam, while Adam looks right at the addressees. The same profile is given to the children – the girls have their eyes closed, while boys have a wide, open gaze.
60. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live by*, 48.
61. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live by*, 37.
62. Gustave Doré, *Bibelen i Billeder*, 18.
63. "Disabilities are imagined to be random transformations that move the body away from ideal forms," and "where feminisation prompts the gaze, disability prompts the stare". (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 28).
64. 100 (my translation).
65. 104 (my translation).
66. This study originated before the more recent Swedish children's Bible, *Bärens bibel* (2020), in which diversity is key to the illustrations, both with regard to colour and gender. A quick glance at the content list shows great similarity with *Tidslinjen*, yet the number of Biblical women has increased. The story about the woman who committed adultery (John 8) is there, but she is accompanied by Mary and Martha (Luke 10).
67. Educators in Norwegian day cares with a Christian basis reflect this conflict. See Aadland, "Nestekjærlighetsbibelen".
68. Goffman identifies three types of physical and behavioural characteristics from which stigmas are usually constructed by a given social unit (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 32). The tendency in children's bibles fit all three categories: physical disability, individual behaviour (e.g. certain sexual habits), and gender.
69. Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 11.

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