

“A Bible as Small as a Mustard Seed”: The Child’s Bible of a Lady of Cincinnati
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A vast collection of rare and significant books, Houston Baptist University’s Dunham Bible Museum is any bibliophile’s dream. Simply walking through the exhibit, one notices the enveloping nature of the history reposing there. Moving through the exhibit, the eyes alight on a cluster of books. There lies *The Children’s Bible*, miniscule and nearly overlooked. It measures 2 1/4 inches by 1 7/8 inches and is 192 pages long. (Dalton 58) Withered with age and care, its yellowed pages are lined with miniscule text and powerful illustrations. Nearby a placard rests, displaying critical information concerning the tiny tome. It offers a possible solution to the Bible’s perplexing author, “a Lady of Cincinnati,” as Harriet Beecher Stowe, abolitionist and author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and dates the book to 1834. While much about this minute masterpiece remains a mystery, its historical background provides a clue to disentangling the enigma. This paper will endeavor to show that *The Child’s Bible* is a product of two major movements in nineteenth-century America: the Second Great Awakening and the Industrial Revolution.

At the time of the publication of *The Child’s Bible*, America had just emerged from the Second Great Awakening (1800s-1820s). Religious fervor was inflated, and the Age of Benevolence had begun, placing importance on the evils of slavery, the necessity of educational improvement, and the essentiality of a devout life. These ideals coursed through American society and did not escape notice. One individual who was especially intrigued with the American way of life was Alexis De Tocqueville, a young Frenchman who had been sent to

observe America's prison system. In a substantial book, he observed, among other things, the Sunday ritual of an American:

...Having returned home [from church], he does not hurry back to his business ledgers. He opens the Holy Scriptures and discovers the sublime or touching depictions of the greatness and goodness of the Creator, the infinite magnificence of God's handiwork, the lofty destiny reserved for man, his duties, and his claims to everlasting life. Thus it is that from time to time the American hides away to some degree from himself and, snatching a momentary respite from those trivial passions which agitate his life and the fleeting concerns which invade his thoughts, he suddenly bursts into the ideal world where all is great, pure, and eternal." (De Tocqueville 630)

As De Tocqueville relates this scene, the reader senses his surprise. Earlier, De Tocqueville describes Americans as restless and unsatisfied amid prosperity, yet every Sunday the American metamorphoses, focusing on God. The Second Great Awakening imbued American culture with renewed religious enthusiasm with regard to education, piety, and abolishing slavery.

Drawing on themes of learning and holiness, it is clear how *The Child's Bible* correlates to the Second Great Awakening. Desiring to "train up a child in the way he should go," parents influenced by the Second Great Awakening naturally desired to educate their children in Scripture, which made items such as *The Child's Bible* desirable. (English Standard Version, Proverbs 22:6) The teachings of children's Bibles in America are of particular interest to Professor Russell W. Dalton. He specifically discusses *The Child's Bible* and considers the theme of judgment in the story of Noah and the flood; he writes, "The book's retelling of the story of Noah recounts how the wicked people were drowned and Noah was saved... The book... raises the prospect of the flood of God's wrath being meted out in the present day, but also adds the theme of God's protection." (Dalton 58) *The Child's Bible* and other similar books were used as an introduction to the Bible and a method for teaching Biblical principles to

children. The Awakening caused America to focus on God, bringing about the education and lifestyle reform of which *The Child's Bible* is an example.

The second significant movement that produced *The Child's Bible* was the American Industrial Revolution. Characterized by ingenious inventions and efficient, inexpensive production, the Industrial Revolution took America by storm. Although there is some debate, the Revolution is generally recognized as occurring from the 1790s to the 1830s, during which innovative souls like Whitney, Bell, Morse, and Fulton spurred the Revolution onwards.

The Industrial Revolution affected the wider distribution of readable material due to reduced prices. Eli Whitney's role in the Revolution, beyond that of the cotton gin, often goes unappreciated. He introduced the "American System," shaping the outlook of America's mechanical transformation. In *A History of America*, Johnson relates the main thrust of Whitney's system: "Whitney realized that for America to overtake Britain in manufactures it was necessary to bypass the craftsman with a work force of easily trained, semi-skilled men recruited from the waves of immigrants." (Johnson 309) Up until this point, labor prices soared, and craftsmanship was a luxury. Driving the price ever higher was the leakage from the skilled labor pool, since laborers, with their wages, could afford ample land in as little as three years of work. The "American System" resolved this problem by harnessing the unskilled laborer and streamlining the mechanics, affecting a consequential decline of prices. In fact, between the 1770s and 1820, the price of cotton yarn had decreased by 90 percent. (Johnson 308) In a like manner, the cost of producing books decreased due to advances in both printing and binding, allowing, for the first time, the middle-class to purchase books.

Along with the declining price of books, came the popularization of the thumb Bible, a miniaturized synopsis of the Bible. The first known thumb Bible, *Agnus Dei*, was available in

London in 1601; at this time, books were bound either in leather with metal clasps or in boards, which made them a luxury item. The thumb Bible's miniscule size was attractive for two reasons. First, it was engaging. Steven Millhauser suggests in his article, "A The Fascination of the Miniature", "the very fact of smallness demands in us an increased attention." (Millhauser 132) The miniature Bible was a novelty item, amusing because of its size. Second, the reduced sized paralleled cost. The modest price attracted buyers for many reasons, but it seems that the thumb Bible was especially geared toward children as an introduction to the Bible and used as school prizes or toys. The nineteenth-century editions of thumb Bibles are a product of the Industrial Revolution, widely available, inexpensive, and popular because of relentless mechanical advance. (Currie)

While The Child's Bible is not the most recherché item in the Dunham Bible Museum collection, its everyday significance is compelling. It irrevocably intertwines the two most significant cultural movements of nineteenth-century America, i.e. the Industrial Revolution and the Second Great Awakening. Overwhelmingly oxymoronic, this pocket-sized opus contains, within its two-inch cover, both the inexorable growth of American technology and the blazing zeal of many Americans for the truth and goodness of a sovereign God.

Works Cited

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