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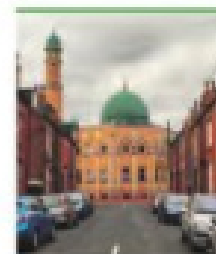
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From bedtime tale to life's work

Suzanne Lier's Bibles combine academic theology and art, and they appeal to children. She talked to Sarah Meyrick

FOR the German writer Suzanne Lier, her multi-volume Journey Through the Old Testament (Reise durch das Alte Testament) series has become her life's work.

"It is my own biography, in a way," she says. "I had a religious upbringing, and it was very important, especially for my father, to give us a religious upbringing. But that still left me with many questions."

The books are described as "family storybooks", and retell the Old Testament for both children and adults. Narrative text sits alongside reproductions of masterpieces of art. There is a simple explanation for children, with a more scholarly commentary for adults.

The author offers insights from current academic theology, with a particular emphasis on the Jewish understanding of the scriptures. The intention is to introduce the texts in an intelligible way, book by book, and to provide sufficient theological background to encourage meaningful discussion.

In the past decade, she has published three hefty volumes (The Five Books of Moses; Stories about Kings, Judges and Prophets; and The Books of the Prophets), the first two of which she translated into English. There are further volumes in progress.

Part of the aim of the series is to reclaim what she prefers to call the First Testament. "There is a deeply rooted prejudice held by nearly everyone: the Old Testament, the first part of the Christian Bible, can be ignored," she writes in the introduction to the first volume. This is the equivalent of looking at the last page of the story first.

"The wonderful 'music' of the one Christian Bible can only start play-



Noah's Ark (1846) by Edward Hicks

don't want to minimise the really wonderful children's Bibles that there are, of course, but children will discard them, and then the danger is that everything that has to do with religion is also discounted. You need to have a Bible that children can grow into, not that they grow out of."

The idea came to her that there was a gap in the market. "My first idea was to write just one book, with the New Testament in it," she said. But this wasn't enough. "I wanted a straightforward guidebook, book by book, to the whole Bible, from beginning to end."

"I was amazed and surprised. I realised there were so many texts, stories, and all sorts of literary genres that I could not possibly put them in one book. And I thought, 'It's too bad if no one really reads them. They will be lost after a while, because who do you know who gets through the trouble to read this spiky Old Testament?'"

"So, I just thought, 'I want to know, myself, but, at the same time, maybe I can do a favour for other people who think the same.'"

Lier is not a theologian; she started her working life as a journalist before taking a break to bring up her family. "I do have a different way of maybe approaching the Bible, because I studied English and philosophy; so it's a different way of look-

ing when the Old Testament serves as the sounding board for the New," she writes. "We should not deprive our children of these profound stories about God and the people who sought to discover him."

SO, how did it all begin? The books are the fulfilment of a long-held dream, she says, dating back to when she used to read to her five children (now in their twenties and thirties) at bedtime. She wanted to be able to share Bible stories in language that they could understand, but that did not leave them feeling cheated when they became adults. She could not find a children's Bible that did the job.

"I wasn't satisfied with the wording. Sometimes, it seemed to be awkward, and not really clear what they were saying," she said. She also

realised the gaps in her own knowledge. "I started reading the stories, and I realised I don't know much myself. How do the stories all connect?"

Her husband came home one day with a picture Bible with artworks. "When you read to children, what you find is that they are glued to the illustrations," she says.

She tells the story of one of her sons who wept when she showed him Hieronymus Bosch's Christ Carrying the Cross. "I was telling him the story about it, and he was just crying. So I thought, 'Wow, what a power!' I saw how the pictures would move [the children], and how we could talk about them."

The pictures had "an immense influence" on how the stories were received — something that, she thinks, is neglected by theologians. "Pictures are more direct than texts. They can touch us immediately," she argues. "This is why they are so important, in particular for our children. It makes a great difference which kind of pictures they see when we read Bible stories to them."

"Pictures remain with us our entire lives. No well-intentioned graphic artist for children can capture the divine mystery: it becomes flat all too quickly, and changes the feelings we have connected to the illustrated biblical text in a negative way. Only classical art in its unfathomable

depth can be a worthy partner of the Bible."

She believes that this is the key to providing something long-lasting. "I

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You need to have a Bible that children can grow into, not that they grow out of

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Bedtime

Continued from previous page

ing at things," she says. That said, she began the project only after attending lectures in biblical literature, theology, and art history at Bonn University, about ten miles from her home in Bad Honnef.

"It's not what you call an MA or a doctorate, or whatever," she says. "My readers have to put up with that. But I read all these different books, and I try to be scientifically very precise."

She has been well supported by academics at Bonn University. She takes a historical/critical approach, describing her theology as mainstream. But, although a Roman Catholic, she is critical of the part played by the Vatican. "We do have the problem of the Church being involved in biblical interpretation. We have the magisterium in Rome, which I think is ridiculous."

She quotes one of her professors, a specialist on Isaiah. "He was translating a new version of Isaiah. Chapter 7 includes the verse about a virgin bearing a child. The Hebrew is amma, which means a woman. And he said: 'You know, I wrote "virgin" from the beginning because I knew Rome would insist on it.'

"It's really sad, actually. They say that tradition is so important, but I think you have to accept scholarship along the way. If scholarship finds out that there are many sources to the Pentateuch, for example, you have to accept it. The Catholic scholars had a big problem with that."

LIER intends the paintings to serve as a bridge to encourage children in their understanding. One of her



Abraham's Offering (c.1638) by Jan Lievens

EACH volume has taken her about four years. (Volume I was published in 2013, Volume II in 2017, Volume III in 2021.) "I like to be precise; so I just took my time," she says.

She set up her own publishing house (Verlag Bibel & Kunst) to bring the project to fruition, having been told by publishers that it was not commercially viable, given the costs of production. "It's an idealistic project," she says. The logo is the burning bush, because "it burns without being consumed, and it shows the paradoxical nature of God being close. . . You can't capture him, but, at the same time, the fire warms you, and he's near".

The books are available from Lier's website, and are in some bookshops. They are not cheap, at between €28 and €34.90 per volume, or €80 for the set of three; there is, however, a less expensive pdf option.

The response to the German version has been encouraging. She tells the story of a retired teacher who took the trouble to phone her and thank her for her analysis.

"He said, 'You know, I'm old, and I have some heart trouble; so please go quickly on the second volume.' That was really nice, because he kept calling me right until he died."

She thinks that her target audience may be grandparents rather than parents, because grandparents have the time to spare. "I get the best reactions from them. They're more into culture maybe, or they know more. They've been to more museums, and so they appreciate it."

The English-language versions have been harder to sell, which is why she has hesitated about translating the third volume.

"I tried very hard to market the books in America and Britain and Australia. In Germany, I somehow know how to do it." Brexit hasn't helped, since postage has become so much more expensive.

"I would like to continue translating it, but what I need is some English readers to encourage me," she says.

For now, she is continuing work on the outstanding books of the Old Testament. Then there's the Apocrypha, and possibly the New Testament — all of which, she says, depends on how life works out.

"I would like to stick to the four years [per volume]. I don't know what will happen in my life. My mother is 95, and she has dementia. But I'm sure I will keep on, because I like doing it."

She hopes that her books will help people on their faith journey. "I would love to have people tell me where it helps them to renew their faith — to find a way to come back to a discovery of faith, because faith is something that enriches your life so much. It can keep you alive, and it can give you a foothold in life. And it can help you to live in such a wonderful way."

"It's a shame that many people nowadays turn away from the Church. If I can help someone not do that, that would be great."

The project is an attempt to combine faith with reason via scholarship, she says. "I want to help parents, too, to help them understand and give them the arguments to defend their faith. This is the intellectual side."

"And then I'd like to initiate a life-long search for God."

"I heard Pope Francis say once that, if you have all the answers, God is not with you. He's right. It's a way of walking, of learning, of searching."

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lecturers at Bonn University taught her that you needed to stand for at least one hour in front of every painting. "Just imagine looking at a picture so much. It slows down time. It can start to stick to you, and that will last for a long time, if it's a good one," she says.

She likes to think that parents will take their children to a museum to visit a painting that they've seen in her one of her books — something, she says, that children love.

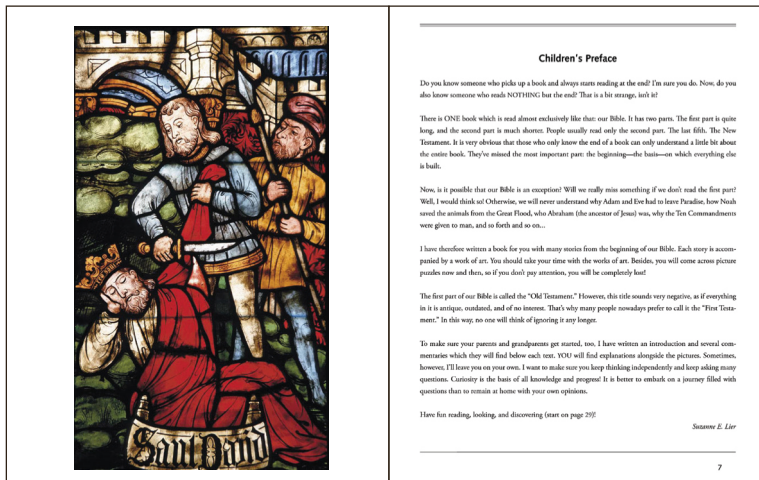
Lier has taken a great deal of care in the choices of paintings: for example, avoiding any depictions of God as an old man with a beard. "I don't want to transport this cliché to the children."

The art really matters to her, because art and faith are both ways into transcendence. "You can discover your own humanity that way."

So I don't want to give the impression that it's all about scholarship."

She gives as an example Genesis 22, when Abraham prepares to sacrifice Isaac. "It's such a difficult story," she says. "Of course, you have the Rembrandt and many other paintings, and what do they show? They show Abraham about to slaughter his son. . . but that doesn't really capture the story. There's another idea, and that's what I put in my book: Jan Lievens [in Abraham's Offering] has Abraham and Isaac embracing each other afterwards, at the end of the trial."

While the first idea "traumatizes" the reader, the second "nourishes your soul with hope and comfort. And it captures what the story is actually about, and the story is about trusting God."



A spread from one of the volumes, showing David sparing Saul's life