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Move over, Bratz . . . here's Proverbs babe

Will children brought up with Cindy dolls and Action Man really take to Bible figurines, asks Amanda Foreman

What if our son starts swinging naked Jesus by his hair? We were presented with this dilemma after One2believe, an evangelical toy company, sent us a selection from its new range of biblical dolls. According to the company's own press material, its goal is to challenge the dominance of secular toys. With nothing more than double-joints and removable sandals, One2believe wants to rescue the young from the horrors of their toy box. Away with smutty Bratz and slutty Barbie and welcome to modest Mary.

The company knows it is up against a ferocious marketing machine. To illustrate the point, the official website has a Thunderbirds-like video of the Samson and Goliath dolls hurling themselves at each other, gladiator style. The website urges shoppers to "join the battle" by downloading posters and handing them out at church.

In real life, the tiny company has already experienced its Goliath moment. As of this week Amazon and the retailing giant Wal-Mart have sold out of all their talking Jesus dolls. But, I wondered, is getting the dolls under the Christmas tree only half the struggle? Will children whose aesthetic sense begins and ends with the size of plastic lips be swayed by more wholesome fare? Will they eschew bubble-gum pink polyester for tasteful sackcloth?

My three older children, Helena, Theo and Halcyon, aged 5, 3, and 2 respectively, have never been short of dolls. Disney, Cindy, Barbie, whatever, we have them. The children strip off their clothes, wash their hair, bury them in the sand, chew their feet, paint them; and, very occasionally, play with them in the way the manufacturers intended. Frankly, I couldn't see what they would get out of doing the same to biblical figures.

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Inside the parcel sent by One2believe was a large purple box. The sides were decorated with inspiring words: love, respect, sacrifice and so on. On the cover were three letters: P31. Why would you call your doll P31, I wondered. Was this a blow against vanity? Underneath the purple mystery box were two Barbie-sized dolls of Esther and

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Jesus, and below them were three nativity figurines of breathtaking ugliness. Mary looked as though she had bitten a chilli. Joseph appeared to have been crossed with a chimpanzee; and Baby Jesus was a dead-ringer for a character from a Fifties sitcom. None of my five children was born with that much hair, nor with a perfect side-parting.

Helena, the oldest, seemed to prove all my doubts. Ignoring the actual dolls, she climbed inside the empty box and played with the bubble wrap for the first half an hour. Here is the proof, I thought, One2believe will sink once it attempts to cross Bible Belt country. But then her attention was caught by the purple box and she pulled off the cover. P31 revealed herself to be an unremarkable blonde with a large cross emblazoned on her T-shirt and pink cowboy boots on her feet. Helena was in love.

While she rocked and caressed her precious baby, I discovered from the instruction cards that P31 refers to Proverbs 31; who shall find the virtuous woman? Helena was ecstatic and dubbed it her "purity doll", Purity for short. "Am I being pure?" she constantly asked me.

About an hour later, Theo and Halcyon woke from their naps and came into the kitchen. To prevent an unseemly tug-of-war, I immediately produced Jesus and Esther. It was a few minutes before I realised that Esther's head was accidentally facing backwards. Neither her clothes nor the contours of her body give much away.

By luck, Halcyon's pudgy fingers found the button on Esther's back and pressed it. "I am Esther," intoned the doll, in a soft, melodious voice. "People say I am as wise and brave as I am beautiful." The children gasped in amazement. All afternoon they tenderly crooned and squabbled over their charges. I was left thinking that One2believe can stop worrying about the battle of the toy box. My only thought is this: how long will it be before the makers introduce Mary and Esther accessories.

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