



## Review

**Marcia Bunge, Terence Fretheim, and Beverly Roberts Gaventa (editors),  
*The Child in the Bible*  
(Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008). 467 pages. \$30.00**

Reviewer: A. James Murphy

[amurphy@stu.iliff.edu](mailto:amurphy@stu.iliff.edu)

*The Child in the Bible* is a foundational work for the relatively new field of childhood studies in religion, particularly for biblical studies. This anthology, composed of eighteen separate essays and a useful introduction by general editor Marcia Bunge, explores the presence

of children throughout the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. Its purpose is to “provide a highly informed and focused study of biblical perspectives on children and childhood” (xviii). Several of the scriptural texts examined have long interested scholars and lay audiences for reasons that have had little bearing upon children. However, each contributor successfully foregrounds the presence of children or childhood, whether real or metaphorical, demonstrating their importance for interpreting stories or entire books.

Bunge’s introduction is important for several reasons. First, her footnotes are abundant with bibliographic material for any study of children and religion and also include notes about the recent focus on children in several professional societies. Second, Bunge lists themes and lines of inquiry that broadly served to guide contributors as they contemplated children. Third, she explains some of the “methodological challenges” unique to engaging in childhood studies. Fourth, she briefly delineates some of the central themes and conclusions found among the contributors.

After the introduction the book is divided into three parts. Part 1, which focuses on texts from the Hebrew Bible (OT), includes six articles: Terence E. Fretheim (co-editor), “‘God Was with the Boy’ (Genesis 21:20): Children in the Book of Genesis”; Claire R. Matthews McGinnis, “Exodus as a ‘Text of Terror’ for Children”; Patrick D. Miller, “That the Children May Know: Children in Deuteronomy”; William P. Brown, “To Discipline without Destruction: The Multifaceted Profile of the Child in Proverbs”; Jacqueline E. Lapsley, “‘Look! The Children and I Are as Signs and Portents in Israel’: Children in Isaiah”; and Brent A. Strawn, “‘Israel, My Child’: The Ethics of a Biblical Metaphor.” Part 2 focuses on the New Testament and includes

the following seven articles: Judith M. Gundry, “Children in the Gospel of Mark, with Special Attention to Jesus’ Blessing of the Children (Mark 10:13-16) and the Purpose of Mark”; John T. Carroll, “‘What Then Will This Child Become?’ Perspectives on Children in the Gospel of Luke”; Marianne Meye Thompson, “Children in the Gospel of John”; Joel B. Green, “‘Tell Me a Story’: Perspectives on Children from the Acts of the Apostles”; Beverly Roberts Gaventa (also a co-editor), “Finding a Place for Children in the Letters of Paul”; Reidar Aasgaard, “Like a Child: Paul’s Rhetorical Uses of Childhood”; and Margaret Y. MacDonald, “A Place of Belonging: Perspectives on Children from Colossians and Ephesians.” The final five articles in part 3 are thematic: W. Sibley Towner, “Children and the Image of God”; Esther M. Menn, “Child Characters in Biblical Narratives: The Young David (1 Samuel 16-17) and the Little Israelite Servant Girl (2 Kings 5:1-9)”; Keith J. White, “‘He Placed a Little Child in the Midst’: Jesus, the Kingdom, and Children”; David L. Bartlett, “Adoption in the Bible”; and Walter Brueggemann, “Vulnerable Children, Divine Passion, and Human Obligation.”

Attention cannot be devoted to every article here. It is my hope that by including comments on a few articles from each section, and some summary comments on the entire volume, the reader will gain a firm perspective on the contribution of this work.

In chapter one, Terence Fretheim examines the roles of children in Genesis in three sections: Genesis 1-11, 12-50, and a focused exploration of the Ishmael/Isaac narratives. Within Genesis 1-11, Fretheim argues the inclusion of children is implied in 1:26-27. They, too, are created in the image of God and therefore are endowed with dignity and worth (4). In Genesis 12-50, Fretheim shows that without the presence of children, God would be impotent to fulfill

his promises of inheritance and blessing (7). His examination of the children in the Ishmael/ Isaac narratives provides a thought-provoking analysis. Maintaining the thesis that all children are created in God's image, he reminds readers that God heard Ishmael too; God is said to have gone to him, to have provided for him, and that he was concerned that the boy thrive, all despite the fact that he is not a chosen child (12-13). The theme of child abuse in the Isaac boyhood narrative raises troublesome issues for modern readers. At one point, Fretheim asks, "Whatever Abraham's (and God's) intent, is it not likely that Isaac was traumatized by the threat of imminent and violent death at the hands of his father?" (20). Isaac does not accompany his father's return, although Abraham had so promised in 22:5, and this father and son never again converse in subsequent narratives. Whether historical or metaphorical, Fretheim argues that the negative effects on Isaac should not be ignored by readers.

Fretheim's article does not neglect difficult passages and themes surrounding children, such as the untold child victims of the Flood narrative and the divine favoritism, which leads to sibling conflicts (9-11). However, relegating this discussion to a subsection rather than integrating it into their respective sections seems to diminish the fact that the "image of God" implication of 1:26-27 is *inconsistently* applicable to children throughout most of Genesis. Despite this criticism, his article is insightful and sets a serious tone for the chapters that follow.

In chapter five, Jacqueline Lapsley shows that Isaiah is replete with images of children and childhood: Isaiah symbolically named his children, including Immanuel (7-8); rulers are denounced for their ill treatment of vulnerable orphans (1:17, 23; 10:2); Israel and Judah are metaphorically characterized as children of God (1:2-4; 49:14-15); and children signal the hope

of eschatological restoration (11:6-9; 65:17-23). Using a literary-theological approach, she argues that, collectively, children function as “the barometer of the health of the Israelites’ relationship with God,” when measured against their adherence, or lack thereof, to Torah (102). In fact, the rulers of Judah are judged according to its treatment of its own children, particularly orphans (86-88).

Turning to part 2, Judith M. Gundry argues, in part, that Mark’s Jesus teaches that even children share “full and equal participation in the eschatological reign of God” (143) and exemplify how to enter it (146). While children are exemplary recipients of the kingdom, she insightfully notes they exhibit no agency; they do “not even believe” in order to receive it (152-53). In her section “Children as Jesus’ Own,” she builds upon J. Duncan M. Derrett’s argument that Jesus’ embrace and blessing of the children (10:13-16) may be read as an adoption motif that casts Jesus in a “parental role” to bless them before he dies (cf. Gen 48; 155-56). Gundry attempts to situate Jesus within a broader Jewish history where children were valued (162), and she provides a concise survey of children in Mark. She also provides the reader with a terrific bibliographic gateway into childhood studies for the New Testament, including Jewish and Greco-Roman sources.

Yet Gundry’s article is not without problems. First, her reading of Mark adds to the theological construction of Jesus as extraordinarily unique in the first century. The assertion that Mark portrays Jesus as actually “revitalizing the family” (160, 162) seems an overly optimistic assessment. To claim this, she points to the restoration of sick, demonic, or dead children to their parents and to the eschatological significance of Jesus for families and children, while

downplaying suggestions of detachment and estrangement raised by Markan discipleship (1:16-20; 3:20-21, 31-35; 6:1-6a; 13:9-13). Does Mark necessarily imply that because a caregiver had faith his or her child would be restored, or that this faith made one disciples or members of Jesus' new eschatological family? Meanwhile, implications for the families and children of those who *followed* Jesus in Mark, including those of the disciples, appear sacrificed on the altar of theological necessity (e.g., 10:28-30). Second, in the wake of citing the rift between Jesus and his own biological family (3:20-21, 31-35), she asserts that he "explicitly does not" replace the one's "family of origin" with a new fictive family, but merely extends the notion of family to include the community of disciples (159, 160). Yet her discussion of this extension fails to explain how Jesus *has not* then rejected and replaced his own family of origin. Third, the practice of "abortion, exposure, and infanticide" among Greeks and Romans, juxtaposed with Hebrew passages extolling their benefits to parents, has become a typical method among biblical scholars used to suggest Greco-Roman cultures lacked compassion and concern for children (162). Thus Greco-Roman literature on children merely serves as a straw man that further constructs the uniqueness of Jesus, and to a lesser degree the Hebrew tradition. However, as a number of classical scholars have shown, there is compelling evidence of affection and sentimentality toward children and childhood in Greek and Roman sources.<sup>1</sup> Particularly, Beryl

---

<sup>1</sup> Gundry recognizes this sentimentality (158) and footnotes most of these sources. Still, it is puzzling to me why she does not present some of their more sentimental findings regarding children. Among others, see Suzanne Dixon, *Childhood, Class, and Kin in the Roman World* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Mark Golden, *Children and Childhood in Classical Athens* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Beryl Rawson, ed., *The Family in Ancient Rome: New Perspectives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); Rawson, ed. *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome* (Canberra: Humanities Research Centre, 1991); and Jennifer Niels and John H. Oakley, eds., *Coming of Age in Ancient Greece: Images of Childhood from the Classical Past* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

Rawson has shown that the presence of abortion and exposure cannot be used to dismiss Romans (or Greeks) as simply callous and less considerate of children than other cultures. In fact, such decisions were sometimes made out of concern to improve the chances of *desired* children.<sup>2</sup>

In chapter 11, Beverly Roberts Gaventa notes that references to “actual flesh-and-blood children who inhabit the Pauline communities are rare indeed” (234). Despite the paucity of reference, Gaventa argues that Paul situates family members, including children, within the household of God rather than that of the polis or as a self contained/sustaining household, in the modern North American sense (248). Gaventa believes we can safely assume the presence of children, freeborn or slave, among the households of believers whom he frequently greets (234-35). She correctly notes that Paul’s most direct discussion of actual children is in 1 Corinthians 7, but his concern here lies primarily with conflict among adults regarding marriage, not with children or childhood *per se* (236). Paul frequently uses the term “children” metaphorically to describe the believer’s status within the household of God. Sometimes Paul casts himself as the parent, while other times he situates himself as a sibling of his flocks under divine adoption. Allusions to real children are obscure in the undisputed Pauline letters. Yet Gaventa makes a compelling case that some of Paul’s theological arguments hold implications for children and adult obligations toward them.

Turning to the thematic chapters of part 3, Esther M. Menn (chapter 15) demonstrates that the “agency, insight, and presence [of children] determine the course and outcome of many stories,” whether they play major or seemingly insignificant roles in the narrative (325). She

---

<sup>2</sup> Rawson, “Adult-Child Relationships in Roman Society,” in *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome* (Beryl Rawson, ed.; Canberra: Humanities Research Centre, 1991), 9-11.

reminds readers of young David's courage in the face of adult dangers, despite his seeming insignificance as a small shepherd boy and youngest child. However, her insightful analysis of a little servant girl's fleeting appearance (2 Kings 5:1-19) shows how unexpectedly an inconsequential child can alter an entire series of narrative events (342-351).

In chapter 18, Walter Brueggemann argues that human adults must be "ferociously" committed to the care and justice of all children. He examines three texts (2 Samuel 17:8; Proverbs 17:12; Hosea 13:8) that portray God as a she-bear "ferocious[ly] and tenacious[ly]" protecting her offspring, arguing there is almost no better way for modern readers to conceptualize their relationship to children (400). Using scripture, he tries to demonstrate that God is passionately concerned for both children of the in-group (i.e., Israelite children in the OT/ HB) and "other children," the latter of which he supports with passages relating to orphans (Deut 10:17-18; Hosea 14:3; Ps 10:14, 17-18; 68:5; 146:9). Brueggemann carefully demonstrates that God cares for orphans. Yet, are these orphans best characterized as "other children"?

The orphan might be even more marginalized within the Israelite community than non-orphan children, but orphans are certainly not "other children" – i.e., children outside the covenant community. For example, in Deuteronomy widows, orphans, and strangers are clearly social statuses in and among the covenant community with certain protections in Torah.<sup>3</sup> A circumcised orphan remains an insider. The child of a foreign resident (i.e., the stranger) is to be loved because the Israelites were once foreign residents also (Deut 10:17-19). "Other children," I would argue, best describes children of bordering nations, the exploitation and enslavement of

---

<sup>3</sup> Enrique Nardoni, *Rise Up, O Judge: A Study of Justice in the Biblical World* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 80-86.



whom Torah sanctions (Deut 20:14) *and*, most certainly, Canaanite children, with whom the “promised land” is in direct contestation. The latter are to be exterminated from the land (Deut 20:16-17). The victims of the flood narrative also better represent “other children.” To be clear, Brueggemann’s vision for the treatment of children, ours and others, is one I [and most readers, I would assume] surely embrace. I simply do not believe a close reading of the OT/HB supports his argument as written.

Although I have highlighted only two articles from each section of the book, every chapter brings something particular to the emerging field of children in the biblical world. As an anthology, *The Child in the Bible* inaugurates the serious study of children and childhood within biblical studies. Arguments are clearly theological, and some contributors appear more willing than others to explore theologically problematic narratives involving children. Does unintentional Christian bias explain why certain problematic narratives are more recognized in the HB/OT than in the New Testament? This question, and some criticisms given, will be more relevant for some than others. *The Child in the Bible* was written with scholars, religious leaders, lay persons, and child advocacy groups in mind. Given its array of thought-provoking articles and extensive bibliography, it will doubtless leave readers better informed of the significance of children in the Bible.