The Child and Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew

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The second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew is well known and notable for several reasons. First, it contains one of the two infancy stories of Jesus in the New Testament; the other is in the Gospel of Luke. Matthew's version opens with the Magi seeking to find the newborn "king of the Jews." Second, based upon information which Herod's learns from the Magi, he decides to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem who are two years old or younger, in an effort to kill Jesus. A third notable part of this chapter is what is often referred to as the "flight to Egypt,"

in which Joseph takes Jesus and his mother to Egypt for safety. When scholars discuss Matthew 2 in particular, several themes often come to the fore. First, Matthew draws distinct parallels between the story of Jesus and Moses.[1] Second, Joseph's dreams in Matthew 2 recall the dreams of Joseph in Genesis.[2] Third, commentators often discuss Herod and the potential historicity of the murder of the children in Bethlehem.[3] Fourth, the Hebrew Bible quotations function to demonstrate that Jesus' life was consistent with God's will as it is outlined in the scripture.[4] Finally, Matthew 2 foreshadows several themes that arise later in the Gospel.[5]

These themes and motifs are certainly important to the story in Matthew 2. Yet commentators often focus upon them to the exclusion of the main character of the narrative, Jesus. Their concerns also often revolve around the male, adult characters – Herod, the magi, and Joseph. Attention to these characters often eclipse the one who is the catalyst for their actions, the child Jesus. Commentators have noted connections between Matthew 2 and the

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[1] Dale Allison, "Matthew," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 850; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew,* International Critical Commentary 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 227, 253; Harrington argues that the Moses typology structures the passage (Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew,* Sacra Pagina 1 [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991], 46).

[2] Allison, 849.

[3] Richard T. France, "Herod and the Children in Bethlehem," *Novum Testamentum* 21/2 (April 1979): 98-120; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-3,* Word Biblical Commentary 33A (Nashville: Nelson Reference and Electronic, 1995), 37.

[4] Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 70.

[5] Allison, 849; Davies and Allison, 254; Hagner 25, 27; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7,* Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 115.

passion of the adult Jesus.[6] But few connect the child Jesus in Matthew 2 to the adult Jesus' teachings about children in Matthew 18:1-5. Jesus as child is simply not a theme of primary concern for many who study this text.

Even Matthew, one could argue, seems relatively unconcerned with his main character. After the opening verse of the chapter, Jesus is not mentioned again by name until 3:13. He is referred to only as "the child." Yet this way of referring to Jesus has it own impact on the reader and links this chapter to Jesus' teaching about children in 18:1-5 in ways in which naming Jesus may not. When read from a feminist reader-response perspective, in conversation with women whose primary ministry is with children, new light is shed on this chapter from how the phrase "the child" impacts the reader to the relationship between "the child" and the Hebrew Bible quotations.[7] Indeed, "the child" plays a key role in several of the themes and motifs described above, a point which is often overlooked by commentators. Drawing upon this feminist contextualization of the passage, I will then demonstrate how "the child" in Matthew 2 is linked literarily and thematically to "the child" in Matthew 18:1-5.

The Child in Matthew 2

In chapter 1, Matthew places Jesus firmly within the story of God's people Israel and establishes him as the Messiah, the divinely begotten son of God. In contrast, chapter 2 describes a vulnerable and humble human child, dependent upon God and his adoptive father

[6] Davies and Allison, 254.

[7] I am locating myself methodologically here with the reading practices that take women's experience seriously. See Luise Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity* (Louisville: Westminister John Knox, 1995), 61-65.

Joseph for safety. Matthew draws the reader's attention to the vulnerable nature of this newly born one, by omitting his name and referring to him only as "the child" throughout the Gospel's second chapter. In contrast to chapter 1, in which Jesus is named five times – at the opening and closing of the genealogy (1:1, 16); in the annunciation (1:18); and when the angel tells Joseph what the child's name will be and the announcement that he will be named Jesus (1:21, 25) – chapter 2 uses the name "Jesus" only once, in the first verse. The first words of the chapter are a genitive absolute construction, τοῦ δὲ Ἰησοῦ γεννηθέντος (*tou de Jesu gennethentos*, "after Jesus was born"), allowing Matthew to name "Jesus" first in the chapter. The phrase also links the following material with that which has preceded it.[8] It is the last time Matthew will use the name "Jesus" until 3:13, when Jesus comes to John for baptism. Another common epithet for Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, "son" (υἱὸς) is only found once in this chapter as well (2:15).

Instead of being called by name or being referred to as the son, the hero of the Gospel narrative is designated as "the child," τό παιδίον (*to paidion*), throughout Matthew 2 a total of nine times.[9] Four times "the child" is used alone (2:8, 9, 13, and 20) and five times it is used together with his mother (2:11, 13, 14, 20, 21). In the instances in which Mary, or more commonly "his mother" is included, Jesus is always identified first.[10] Even when the mother is

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[8] Davies and Allison, 225.

[9] The NRSV uses "child" nine times and "child's" once in Matthew 2, however the first use of "child" in the English is not translating τό παιδίον (*to paidion*), but rather τεχθεὶς (*textheis*), a participle meaning "the child who was born."

[10] According to Davies and Allison this construction, "the child with this mother," functions in two additional ways: (1) it keeps Joseph out of the picture, reinforcing 1:16-25 which indicates Jesus has no human father, and (2) the child and his mother may remind the reader of Ex. 4:20, since 4:19 is the basis for 2:20 furthering the Moses typology.

present in the narrative, she is secondary to her child keeping him as the focus of the attention. Indeed, "the child" is the focus of the chapter and is the one around whom the action revolves.[11] The child, who according to the Magi, has been born "king of the Jews" is contrasted with Herod, the reigning "king of the Jews," who is also named nine times in the chapter.[12] The contrast could not be sharper: a murderous client ruler of the Roman Empire residing in Jerusalem is threatened by an infant from an insignificant village.

Re-Contextualizing Matthew 2

While much is written about Herod and his actions, commentators often overlook the child, the infant who grows into the man about whom the Gospel is told. Seeking to bridge the gap between the world of the academy and the world of the church for whom these texts are scripture, I invited a group of women who are involved in children's ministries to discuss this passage with me.[13] Our first impression of Matthew 2 was that the storytelling lacks any degree

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[11] For a discussion of how a non-active, non-vocal character can be consider a main character in the story, see Sharon Betsworth, *The Reign of God is Such as These: A Socio-Literary Analysis of Daughters in the Gospel of Mark* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2010), 109-110.

[12] Joseph, by contrast, is only named twice in the chapter and referenced two more times as the subject of the verb ἐγερθείς (*egertheis*, "he got up") in 2:13, 14 and 2:19, 21.

[13] The group consisted of eight women. Ann Hochman and Chris McDougal share the position of Director of Children's Ministries at St. Stephens United Methodist Church in Norman, Oklahoma. Trina Bose North, a United Methodist pastor who has worked with youth, is currently a stay-at-home mom. Teranne Williams is the associate director of Project Transformation, a summer literacy program of the United Methodist Church for underserved children in the urban areas of Oklahoma. Erin Floyd, Shannon Rodenberg, Brianne Tobey, and Emily Valles are students at Oklahoma City University. They are all currently working with children and youth or have done so in the past. I am grateful for the time the group spent with me discussing this passage, and though I am not able to cite each one separately, the following section draws heavily upon our conversation.

of emotion. Only two characters display any emotion: Herod, who is described as "troubled" when he hears of the child (2:3) and becomes "exceedingly angry" when he realizes he has been duped by the Magi (2:16), and the Magi, who "rejoice with exceedingly great joy" when they find the child (2:10). No affective reaction is depicted over what one would expect to be very emotional events: the birth of a child and the murder of as many as twenty infants in a single village.[14] We struggled with the matter-of-fact manner in which the narrative was recounted. I pointed out to the group that Matthew is careful not to imply that God was responsible for the killing of the baby boys, by avoiding causal language in the scriptural fulfillment quotation.[15] In addition, as readers, we have the right to resist the narrator's implication that God does not care as much for those children, as God cares for and protects Jesus.

We also examined the role of Mary in the unfolding story. Like Jesus, she is passive and is only the object of the actions of others.[16] She is depicted a very isolated manner, distanced from any other women. Unlike Luke's nativity story in which Mary joins with Elizabeth to celebrate her pregnancy (Luke 1:39-56), Matthew depicts Mary as a woman alone. We wanted to know how the community reacted to her pregnancy. How did they react to her fleeing with a baby to Egypt? Was she able to find a community there? How did the other parents in Bethlehem react to the murder of their babies? The text does not answer any of these questions.

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[14] For a calculation of how many infants may have been killed, see Hagner, 37, and France, 114.

[15] Matthew avoids using a strong purpose conjunctive such as ἵνα (*hina*, "in order that") or ὅπως (*hopos*, "so that") as in 2:5, 15, and 23. Cf. Hagner, 37.

[16] In 2:11, "Mary" is the object of the preposition, but in all other cases (2:13, 14, 20, 21), "his mother" is grammatically the direct object.

As we turned to discuss "the child," we recognized that the omission of Jesus' name and the use of "the child" to describe him affected how this group of readers identified with him and the characterization that Matthew continues to develop of him in chapter 2. On one hand, the epithet "the child," has an objectifying effect. There is a sense in which Jesus is simply "a kid" being "shuttled around like a football."[17] Twice an angel of the Lord tells Joseph to "take the child" (2:13, 20). Joseph obeys each time: "Then he got up and took the child" (2:14, 21). We also noted an emotional distance that the term "child" evokes. For some of these readers, "the child" dissociated them from story. It added aloofness to the narrative. Even the angel, who gave Jesus his name, calls him "the child." In this way, Matthew's use of "the child" may in fact diminish the importance of Jesus in this chapter in favor of the one who is named as many times as "the child" is, specifically, Herod. Yet the reigning "king of the Jews" is depicted as conniving and homicidal, demonstrating the need for a king who will rule justly. It may be hard for the reader to imagine that this "child" could be that king.

On the other hand, the use of "the child" also enabled us as readers to identify more fully with Jesus in the story than if he had been named. When asked with whom they identify in a Gospel story, women do not often claim to identify with Jesus.[18] However, our group readily identified with "the child" and attributed a variety of characteristics to him. The child in the story is one of low status. Both the fact that the child is an infant and the use of παίδον (*to paidion*) in this story, which is semantically related to παίς (*pais*) and is often used to designate

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[17] This phrase is from group member Chris McDougal.

[18] A.-J. Levine, "Jesus, Women, and Family Values" (Willson Lecture Series, Oklahoma City University, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, September 24, 2009).

a slave, convey the sense of one who lacks choice and is powerless. The child is very vulnerable in this story and very much in need of the care provided by his parents. We may not have associated these attributes with Jesus if his name were used in this narrative.

As discussed above, often the role of the quotations from the Hebrew Bible in Matthew is to demonstrate that Jesus' life was consistent with God's will as it is outlined in the scriptures. Yet we were also able to see how Matthew uses the scriptural quotations to continue constructing the identity of Jesus.[19] Again, by not using his name, we as readers were able to create our own understanding and image of Jesus, rather than filling in the blanks with preconceived notions that the name "Jesus" may evoke. The quotation in Matthew 2:6 from Micah suggests that this child will become a leader, a shepherd of God's people, Israel. The passage in 2:15 from Hosea emphasizes the child's special relationship to God; he is God's own son. The passage in 2:18 from Jeremiah links the child to the despair of the exile followed by the joy of the return.[20] It is as if the child is a "blank slate" upon whom all of these attributes are written adding to the identity Matthew has already constructed in chapter 1, as he builds his case for why Jesus is the Messiah.[21]

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[19] Cf. Hagner, 23, and Harrington, 46, who argue that chapter 2 is primarily concerned with from where Jesus comes while chapter 1 is concerned with who he is.

[20] Davies and Allison (262) point out that here Matthew seems to follow the Hebrew of the passage "Out of Egypt I have called my son," rather than the Septuagint, "Out of Egypt I have summoned my children" (τέκνα). In the Jeremiah passage, Matthew again favors the Hebrew over the Septuagint, but this time uses τέκνα ("children") as opposed to the Septuagint's υἱοι ("sons"). Matthew apparently wants in this chapter to reserve "son" for Jesus and only when it is coming from the mouth of God (269).

[21] This phrase comes from our discussion. Chris McDougal remarked that "this tiny little blank slate is all of these things."

Our final considerations about the narrative did not have to do with what Matthew was doing with the story as much as what we could do with it in our contexts of children's ministries. How could we teach about "the child" in this passage to children? We agreed that the lesson, however constructed, needed to be age appropriate. One simply would not discuss the killing of babies with very young children. Depending upon the age of the children, however, the importance of the child shown through the measures taken to protect him and the way those in the story care for the child could be significant themes for a lesson. For example, how Joseph cares for Jesus and seeks to keep him and his mother safe could be an angle to discuss with children. Children who have only one parent, or who are adopted, may find hope and feel a sense of importance from the fact that Joseph adopts Jesus and cares for him. For children who do not experience the loving care of parents, God is always present, seeking to keep Jesus safe.

"The Child" in Matthew 18:1-5

With these understandings of Matthew 2 in mind, I will now consider how "the child" in this chapter relates to "the child" and children in Matthew 18:1-5. Jesus' teachings in the Gospel of Matthew are replete with references to children and a variety of words in Greek are used to describe or identify children. The word used most commonly for children in the first Gospel is παιδίον (*paidion*, "little child," the diminutive of παῖς). It is used eighteen times, only five of which are the plural.[22] The majority of the time, παιδίον is in the singular in Matthew's Gospel. It is found nine times in Matthew 2 and all refer to Jesus.[23] The remaining three times in which

[22] Matthew 11:16, 14:21, 15:38, 18:3, 19:13.

[23] Matthew 2:8, 9, 11, 13 (twice), 14, 20, 21.

παιδίον is used in the singular are in 18:1-5 in response to the disciple's question, "who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus calls a child and sets the child among them declaring that they must change and become like children in order to enter the reign of heaven. Then Jesus declares, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (Matt. 18:4-5, NRSV).

In sum, Matthew employs variety of words to speak about children in the Gospel, including παιδίον in both the singular and plural. The singular of παιδίον is used only in chapter 2 in reference to Jesus and in chapter 18 as Jesus discusses the child in relationship to the reign of heaven. It is clear from this word choice that Matthew is drawing a connection between the child, Jesus, and the child who is greatest in the reign of heaven.[24] Thus, just as chapter 2 foreshadows events that Matthew depicts later in the Gospel,[25] so too does "the child" in Matthew 2 anticipate Jesus' teaching with a child as the premier example of membership in the reign of heaven. This relationship evolves in three ways: first, the child in 2:1-23 informs the role of children in the Gospel from chapters 3-17; second, the child in chapter 2 provides the characteristics of the child the disciples are asked to emulate in 18:1-5; and three, chapter 2

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[24] Cf. Keith J. White argues that since Jesus himself does not link his birth and the little child in 18:1-5, the two stories should not be conflated. Instead he prefers an "open anagogical relation between the two" (" 'He Placed a Little Child in the Midst': Jesus, the Reign and Children," in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008], 258-9). However, while it is true that Jesus does not make the connection, Matthew certainly does.

[25] The title "king of the Jews" and the gathering of the religious leaders anticipates the passion narrative (2:2-4; 27:11-14; Davies and Allison, 254.) In addition, there are secret plans (2:7; 26:4-5) and Jesus death is sought (2:16, 26:4; Allison, 849.)

illustrates Jesus' teaching in 18:5, "whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

First, the child in chapter 2 clearly defines what it is to be a child in Matthew's narrative world. That child is vulnerable to the whims of ruling powers, is threatened with death, and is completely dependent upon others, namely Joseph, who is directed by God, for his safety. The similarities between the story of the infant Jesus and that of the infant Moses reinforce this characterization. Moses was also vulnerable to the whims of the ruler Pharaoh, threatened with death, and protected by his mother and an adoptive parent, Pharaoh's daughter. Thus, a child in Matthew's narrative world is one who is vulnerable, threatened with death, and completely dependent upon others, including God.

This depiction is illustrated in the stories of the three children whom Jesus heals: the daughter of the leader of the synagogue has died (9:18-26); the daughter of the Canaanite is vulnerable to the ravishes of the demon (15:21-28); and the epileptic boy "suffers terribly" from his affliction (17:14-20). In each case, the child is completely dependent upon her or his parent, who is unable to help, and in turn depends upon Jesus, God's agent, to heal the affliction. So Jesus, the one who was once the vulnerable, threatened, and dependent child, is now the adult savior, who heals the vulnerable and afflicted children.

Jesus' healing of children and teaching about children also anticipates his passion as well. Although Jesus has the power to heal and do miracles in the Gospel, he himself will model the kind of vulnerability that his infancy demonstrates and his later teachings describe. Interspersed with Jesus' teachings about children are his three predictions of his impending suffering and

death. The tables again turn: the one who has healed the vulnerable and afflicted children becomes the one who is vulnerable to the ruling powers, threatened with death, and reliant upon God.

Second, the characteristics of the child in chapter 2 are those that the disciples are supposed to imitate in their life of discipleship. From 18:1—19:20, children become a central image for the disciples, the adults who are following Jesus, regarding what members of God's reign are to be. However, 19:13 makes it clear that the disciples have not understood Jesus' teachings about children. The disciple's lack of clarity about Jesus' teaching is understandable. On one hand, the Hebrew Bible teaches that children are a sign of divine blessing (Gen. 13:16, 15:1-16; Ps. 127:3-5, 128:3-6). They embody "the hope of the family, or the people, for a meaningful future."[26] Yet the Hebrew Bible also advocates harsh discipline for children (Prov. 3:11-12; 13:24; 22:15; also in the Apocrypha, Sirach 30). In the broader Greco-Roman context of the first century, children were the least socially, politically, and economically. They were considered "weak, irrational, ignorant [and] unpredictable" and were valued primarily for their later contributions to society as adults.[27] While most families certainly cared for their children, in many areas of the Empire exposure of newborns was commonplace, especially among girls and children born disabled.[28] Many children died as infants or young children from a variety of

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[26] John T. Carroll, "Children in the Bible," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 45 (2001): 124; See also Joseph A. Grassi, "Child, Children," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:904.

[27] Carter, 80.

[28] Seneca, *On Anger,* 1.15.2; Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 100.

causes.[29] The disciples equate wealth and prestige with being saved. They did not grasp that God's saving presence in the reign of heaven could be equated in any way with children. Jesus tells his disciples to be like the child he has called (just as he called them) and placed before them. As Jesus sets the child before them, he is setting before them the example of his own life. They are to be vulnerable as he was, threatened with death as he was, and to be reliant on God as he was. In short, his disciples are to become like the child he was and also like the vulnerable and threatened adult he will become. This is the humility they are to embody as his followers.

Finally, the second chapter of Matthew's Gospel illustrates Jesus' teaching in 18:5 that welcoming the child equals welcoming him. The Greek word δέχομαι (*dexomai*), which the NRSV translates as "welcome," can also mean "receive" or "accept." It can have the connotation of "greet" or "worship" as well.[30] Herod, in seeking the life of the child, clearly does not receive or accept the child/Jesus. The magi, on the other hand, do worship him and thus welcome or receive the child/Jesus. The disciples do not understand Jesus' teaching about children as illustrated in 19:13. They do not accept or receive the parents bringing their children to Jesus, but instead rebuke them. This may lead the reader to wonder if the disciples accept the child/Jesus either.

In conclusion, Matthew skillfully sets up his Gospel narrative in the opening chapters of the book. Among the themes that he presents is that of the child. This almost anonymous

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[29] Sarah B. Pomeroy, "Reflections on Plutarch, *Consolation to his Wife*," in *Plutarch's Advice to the Bride and Groom and A Consolation to His Wife: English Translations, Commentary, Interpretive Essays and Bibliography*, ed. Sarah B. Pomeroy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 80.

[30] H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon,* s.v. δέχομαι.

youngster is vulnerable, threatened with death, and yet protected by parents and God. This depiction of a child would ring true for Matthew's first century hearers as it did for the 21st century women who read this text with me. We saw how Matthew then takes this portrait of the child to structure Jesus' healing of children and to instruct his disciples in the ways of the reign. Those who would follow Jesus are asked to be humble like the child – vulnerable, threatened, and dependent upon others and God. Indeed, for the Gospel of Matthew, to become like the child is to become like Jesus.