Jesus Loves the Little Children?
An Exercise in the Use of Scripture

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"Let the children come"—these New Testament words from Mark 10:14, Matthew 19:14 and Luke 18:16 are among the most frequently cited Biblical texts.[1] Jesus' welcome of children reverberates across sermons, book titles, baby baptisms, Sunday School curriculum, stained glass windows, non-profit promotions, famous paintings, and a plethora of other places too numerous

[1] The three "blessing the children" texts in which Jesus orders the disciples to let the children come to him (Mark 10:13-16, Matthew 19:13-15, and Luke 18:15-17) are usually analyzed in connection to a second set of passages in which Jesus refers to children as a means to define "true greatness" (Matthew 18:1-6; Mark 9:33-37; and Luke 9:46-48).

to name. These references leave a deep and emotional impression on Christians of all sorts. Songs and pictures proclaiming Jesus' love for "all the children of the world" form personal memory and religious upbringing. Ministries grounded in these scriptures have benefited children in ways as innumerable as the references themselves. Here *pastoral use* and *personal experience of scripture* indelibly trump formal *biblical scholarship* on it.

This raises several biblical and pastoral questions. Let me start with the hardest: Did Jesus really love little children? I feel almost sacrilegious raising this, as if I am breaking a taboo by even suggesting Christians have exaggerated the truth. People use these passages to secure children's welfare. This is good. Why would anyone want to tamper with this? This use of scripture aligns with the best in human sensibility and the gospel itself, if one understands the gospel to mean God's solidarity with the vulnerable. But does it align with good biblical interpretation? If not, what should academic theologians and lay Christians do about this disjuncture? How do New Testament scholars understand these passages? Have Jesus' words been distorted? When is exaggeration of scriptural claim appropriate and when is it wrong? In a word, what is the proper theological use of these scriptures? This is the larger question behind my specific concern. Are there times when pastoral aims should trump biblical scholarship?

This essay argues that the scriptures on Jesus and children are more complicated than commonly assumed in Christian contexts. I investigate selected interpretations, looking first at a few readings that tend toward hyperbole (my own included), recent interpretations that strive for

moderation, and a few that offer a counter-narrative to common views. [2] I pay occasional attention throughout to how scholars talk about the practical and theological use of biblical research and conclude with final remarks on this question. Scriptural ambiguity need not temper child advocacy but it does warn against scriptural hyperbole or the exaggerated use of biblical claims for ideological purposes.

Temptation Toward Hyperbole

My concern about misuse of scripture on Jesus and children arose years ago but peaked at an international conference on children and religion in 2007. British theologian Adrian Thatcher presented a paper that began with a short section on "The Scriptures and Children" in which he draws a sharp contrast between the "teaching of Jesus" and the "treatment of children elsewhere in both testaments" (2010, p. 138). He lists passages from I Corinthians, I Timothy, I Peter, Ephesians, and Colossians that are condescending or negative toward children, making them inferiors in households headed by men, portraying childhood as a state out of which Christians should grow, or upholding celibacy over marriage. Then he turns to Hebrew Scriptures, pointing to Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac and Proverbs on the chastisement of children as authorizing and encouraging corporeal punishment and child abuse. He contrasts both the Hebrew tradition and

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[2] Scholarship on these passages is extensive and has grown in recent years with the heightened interest in childhood studies in religion. Space did not allow me to include authors and articles that were important for my thought in *Let the Children Come* (2006), such as Bailey (1995), Robbins (1983), and Francis (1996). For a helpful list of further sources, see Gundry-Volf (2001, p. 29) and Gundry (2008, p. 149). She also provides a useful list of research on the family and household in antiquity (2008, p. 164). For a summary of resources from the two decades prior to 1979, see Weber (1979).

the rest of the New Testament with the Synoptic gospels, referring briefly to Jesus' reception of children in Matthew 18 and children's belief in and recognition of Jesus in the temple in Matthew 21. This leads him to what seems like an obvious and unequivocal conclusion: "Jesus had a particular and intense love for children" (p. 138).

But do we really know this? In some respects, Thatcher's heart is in the right place. He questions the neglect of families, children, and women by a "patriarchal church run by men who have been removed" from such responsibilities (p. 141) and centuries of condescending submission of children grounded in the Household Codes. His opening scriptural material is actually just a run up to the real argument he wants to make (and that he has already made in a book [2007]) about the value of mutuality in families and its analogies with the Trinity. In other words, he leaves his provocative scriptural excursus aside fairly quickly and moves to the heart of his work—a debate about doctrine and families. This is not an entirely unusual pattern for many Christian theologians who draw on scripture.

There are problems with this strategy, however, as well as the tone and nature of Thatcher's assertions. Jesus' action is not only unique. He states point blank, "there is a chasm within the very Bible itself between the teaching *of Jesus* about children, and the teaching about children in the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament Household Codes" (2010, p. 137, his emphasis). Jesus, in fact, stands "over against the rest of the scriptures" and "over against (most of) the teachings of the tradition about children" (p. 137). The word *chasm* and the double use of *over against* suggest the complete disruption of continuity, an almost unimaginable breach or abyss, a message of extremes. In fact, the rhetoric throughout his exegesis is peppered with

superlatives. Jesus' teaching is "remarkable," "counter-cultural, radical, anti-hierarchical" (p. 138). What Jesus asked for has "probably never yet been adequately practiced in any earthly institution" (p. 138). He describes the story of Abraham and Isaac as "shocking," "frankly repulsive" (p. 139), and "truly gruesome" (p. 140), reducing to provocative adjectives a long history of complicated debate over the interpretation of this difficult text. He uses a few scriptures to characterize an entire tradition, portraying the willingness to sacrifice a child as undergirding Judaism and Islam ("yes, child sacrifice *was* practised in ancient Israel") in contrast to the love of children in Jesus (p. 140, his emphasis). Stressing the chasm between Jesus and the scriptures on which Jesus himself relied, removes Jesus from his context, overlooks the Jewish roots of his view of children and, ultimately, plays on deep-seated passions that have fueled anti-Semitism.

In essence, Thatcher wants to affect a conversion. This is singled in the title of the essay itself—"Beginning Again with Jesus." Like John the Baptist making a way in the wilderness, Thatcher proclaims, "Nothing short of repentance is required" (p. 137). He wants to redirect our hearts away from the institutional church because he believes it has misused the Bible and tradition to harm children in Christ's name. Valuing children requires "*turning away from much in the Bible and in the tradition*" (p. 137, his emphasis). People need to see the radical mandate before us. But is conversion to Jesus even necessary to his argument for mutuality as a way to understand both divinity and family? I do not think so.

Thatcher is not alone in this reading, however. If he were alone, I would not bother to write this essay. With the emergence of childhood studies in religion, many people have turned to

Jesus not as biblical scholars but as theologians interested in scripture as part of research on families and Christianity. Others (myself included) have used the Synoptic gospels to argue for giving children greater voice and attention. Thatcher is commendable in fact in his efforts to break new ground and reclaim families and children as a valid subject matter for theology. Proselytizing through scholarship is a common impulse and this is widespread in the use of the Synoptic accounts of Jesus' blessing of children. Thatcher is just more blunt. He makes clear a more general problematic pattern of overstating children's value for a Christian Jesus.

Take, for example, another article on Jesus and children by an adjunct faculty member at a Church of Christ college. The author does a word and text analysis, contrasting Luke's use of children to teach a lesson about social justice with Mark and Matthew's emphasis on child-likeness as indicative of a need for humility and simplicity. In the middle of the scriptural analysis is a section, "Children in the Ancient Near East" (Clark, 2002, pp. 240-245) in which the ancient world around Jesus becomes the foil. Using plenty of citations from scholarship on this period, the author contrasts today's sympathy for children with the lack of respect and abuse in the ancient world. "Examples of this view of children can be seen in Jewish literature. Children were not worth an adult's time" (p. 240). Children were "not protected under many Jewish laws" (p. 240). Even though Jews saw child sacrifice as an abomination, there are biblical passages (Jeremiah 32:35; 2 Kings 23:10) that indicate its practice in Israelite history (p. 241). The rest of the section describes in detail the "Near Eastern mind-set toward children" (p. 244) that equated children with slaves, animals, imbeciles, and women, and dismissed them as

irrational and immature. The section closes, of course, with the contrast of Jesus' acceptance of children as a condition to accepting him.

The strategy here parallels Thatcher's. Christians want to see something extraordinary, amazing, unique, startling, special, or as church historian Martin Marty says, "idiosyncratic" in Jesus (p. 78). In his own scriptural work in *The Mystery of the Child* (2007), Marty is more circumspect than Thatcher. All religions have their unique contributions. He does not intend "anything negative about Jews" by pointing out how unlikely such an invitation would be in a Jewish context that views the "maturing of the child" as dependent on learning the law (p. 77). But his reading of these passages leans toward the general pattern of Christian interpretation. He says, "in no known case in the classic literature of Greece and Rome was a child projected as a paradigm for adult behavior and intention" (p. 77). Because people have domesticated and sentimentalized Jesus' warning that failure to become like children makes us ineligible for God's realm, Marty also wants to awaken readers to the "shock" value of these words (p. 79). They are "'the most terrible ever heard by human ears,'" he contends, quoting the author of *The Diary of a Country Priest*. These terrible words "call for change" (p. 75).

So Marty draws the contrast and calls for conversion too. "Unless you change," he notes, could have been an epigraph to his book (p. 71). But distinct from Thatcher, he remembers that the audience he hopes to garner includes non-Christians. He does not even turn to Christian scripture without first acknowledging that one needs to find ways to "write about a [particular] faith community without alienating readers who do not share the tradition or community. Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or agnostic readers can profit from a Christian exploration, just as Christians can

learn from and welcome approaches from other faiths" (p. 70). In other words, traditions do not stand over against each other. His fuller treatment of these scriptures is one of the strongest chapters in his book. Most important, he calls for a conversion to *children* and *not* to *Jesus*, a slight but crucial difference. The call is to respond to the suffering of children over which "Christian have no monopoly" in contemporary society and about which all people should be concerned regardless of religious tradition (p. 73). To challenge the rampant reductive portraits of children as a set of problems to be solved, Christians and people outside Christianity must see the child's mystery anew.

Modifying Hyperbole about Jesus

I would not have interest in this pattern of hyperbole if I had not been tripping over it for nearly twenty years myself. And my mind has changed. In the 1990s in *Also a Mother*, I proclaim Jesus extraordinary in his actions toward children. "Nowhere else in scripture or mythic literature," I say, "are children invited in, affectionately embraced, and blessed" (1994, p. 168). I do no exegesis of this vast corpus. Whatever research led to this conclusion is hidden from view. Like Thatcher, I simply refer to Jesus expeditiously on my way to making a broader theological argument that children are neither products to be consumed nor private property to be managed. They are gifts—"about this, Jesus is clear" (p. 168). For support, I turn not to biblical scholarship but to Catholic literary author Mary Gordon who is herself likely influenced by cultural lore and church instruction. Her inclinations as author and mother provide what seems the most

trustworthy insight: Jesus, she observes, "seems genuinely to want the physical presence of children, their company" (1991, p. 247). That is all I say about Jesus in the first round.

I spend more time examining historical theology and biblical scholarship in *Let the Children Come* (2003) and reach more complicated conclusions. The idea of children as gift or blessing does not begin with Jesus, as pre-modern theologians themselves recognized. My favorite example here is Reformation theologian John Calvin (2003, pp. 102-104). Lifting up the man with many sons in Psalm 127 who is likened to the happy warrior with a quiver full of arrows, Calvin repeats a favorite phrase of his—the fruit of the womb is God's gift. He uses this Psalm to urge parents to care lovingly for their children: "Unless men regard their children as the gift of God, they are careless and reluctant in providing for their support" (Calvin, 1843-55, 1:96 and 5: 110-111; see also Pitkin, 2001, p. 171). In his reading of Psalm 8, he departs significantly from other classic theologians, such as Augustine and Luther. Its reference to "the mouths of babes and infants" singing God's praises does not refer allegorically to those young in faith. It is infants themselves who chant God's glory. Here and elsewhere, he uses Old and New Testament scripture to argue for viewing children as examples of faith, full participants in the covenant, and "invincible champions of God" (Calvin, cited by Pitkin 2001, p. 166).

This digression on Calvin is not to raise him up as exemplary in his biblical skills or to argue that he escaped anti-Semitism. He was using Hebrew literature for Christian purposes, not to promote or compliment Judaism. I turn to him simply to point out that there is a rich body of sacred literature with a wide variety of positions on children that some Christian scholars have conveniently ignored in order to praise Jesus all the more. As I argue in *Let the Children Come*,

"children had a decidedly different status" in Jewish society (2003, p. 99). Distinct from the surrounding Greco-Roman world, they were regarded as an essential part of God's blessing. This appears paradigmatically in the story of the gift of Isaac to a barren and aging Abraham and Sarah. Isaac assures God's covenant with Israel (Gen.17.17; 18.10-15). Scenes of delight over the birth of children are repeated in Hannah's song of thanksgiving at Samuel's birth (1 Sam. 2.1-10) and then echoed in the Magnificat, Mary's words of praise of God on Jesus' conception in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 1.46-55). The view of children as a saving gift has practical implications. In contrast to Greco-Roman society, Jews prohibited exposure and infanticide ordered by the *pater*. Children were not only a guarantee of the covenant. They were participants and recipients, included in religious observances and educated in the covenant. At the very heart of Jewish law is the commandment to teach the love of God "to your children and your children's children" steadfastly, diligently (Deut. 6: 2, 7).

This is the stream in which Jesus stands. In other words, in my second reading I see how much Jesus' blessing of children is less idiosyncratic and more in tune with the tradition that formed him. His actions toward children that seem so starkly unique make sense only within this context.

I am still tempted to draw sharp lines: "In the Synoptic Gospels the emphasis is not so much on what is transmitted to [children] as upon their honorary or gratuitous status. This is a small but important distinction" (2003, p. 99). I am influenced in part by New Testament scholar Judith Gundry-Volf. Significantly, both Marty and Thatcher begin with her and use her work for a similar purpose. Her essays have had influence partly because they appear in two major

anthologies (2001; 2008) as well as two recent journals devoted to children (1999; 2000). Reliance on her 2001 chapter by all three of us to argue for the exemplary regard of Christianity for children raises questions about her own position. Is she tempted toward hyperbole? How does her reading measure up?

I think Gundry-Volf overstates her case, at least in her early writings.[3] So it is no surprise that she is the one to whom people turn when doing the same. Thatcher begins his section on scripture with reference to her. Marty (2007, p. 77) also cites her and her reference to Willi Egger, another biblical scholar, to argue that Jesus turned a "typical Jewish formula" (Gundry-Volf, 2001, p. 39; Egger, 1990) for entering God's kingdom—following the Law—upside down by making the untutored child the epitome. When Marty declares that "For *only one of two times in the Bible*, the Gospel writer lets Jesus' anger show" in his rebuke of his disciples (p. 75), he is likely drawing on Gundry-Volf who also lifts up "one of only two references to Jesus' anger in the New Testament" as indicative of the importance of the passage (2001, p. 37). On the first page and throughout her chapter, she repeatedly uses the adjective *striking* to describe Jesus' actions. The demand to "receive the reign of God as a child" is "striking, for nowhere in Jewish literature are children put forward as models for adults." The "essence of piety in Judaism" rests on learning the law, something young children cannot accomplish (p. 39).[4] Even though the "New Testament picture is itself complex, . . . its most positive aspects are quite striking for the

[3] A book review argues that she still exaggerates Jesus' unique love of children in her recent work (Murphy, 2010).

[4] On this point, Gundry cites W. D. Davies and D. Allison (1991, 2: 759).

time" (p. 36). She concludes the chapter by urging readers to "recapture . . . the radicalness of Jesus' teaching on children" (p. 60).

To be fair, authors like myself stress Gundry-Volf's claims about the unusual nature of Jesus' actions and overlook her measured attempts to understand what she identifies as the "complex picture of children" in antiquity (2001, p. 36). Even in her early work she acknowledges that "New Testament scholarship has sometimes overestimated the low estimation and ill treatment of children in the first-century Mediterranean world" (p. 36)—partly to make Jesus look good, I would add. Children were both appreciated and devalued across diverse societies. She corrects John Dominic Crossan's characterization of children as "nobodies" in the Old Testament—"an overstatement because children were emphatically not" (p. 38). At the end of a section devoted to the "striking" nature of Mark's portrait of children as recipients of God's gift without merit of their own, she comments parenthetically that "no contrast between Jesus' teaching and Judaism is necessarily implied; rather Jesus identifies the *child within Judaism* . . . as the one who exemplifies how to enter the reign of God" (p. 40). Finally, in the conclusion she hints at what motivated her own approach. Her rough analysis of the use of New Testament scripture by classical theologians (in other chapters in the edited book to which she contributes) suggests that the Epistles and the idea of children's submission and obedience have had the most influence historically, a point Thatcher picks up. The "provocative teaching about children as recipients of divine insight and representatives of Jesus seems to have had the least *Wirkungsgeschichte*" (effective history) (59). Her chapter amends this. It is unique in its

comparative effort to appraise the different views of children within the New Testament as a whole as a resource for wider theological use.

Gundry[5] has refined her understanding with time. In a recent essay, she focuses on the Gospel of Mark, modifies prior claims, and addresses issues previously omitted (2008). Her scholarship is meticulous and thorough, one of the best readings of Mark and children available. Although the Jewish tradition has texts that represent children as disobedient, immature, and ignorant (Isaiah 3:4,12; Eccles. 10:16; 2 Kings 2:23-24), the general predilection toward children is notably positive (2008, p. 162). That a general love of children already existed in the surrounding culture is evident in passages where parents seek Jesus' healing for their children. And there are parallels between Jesus' actions and Jewish practice.

On this final point, Gundry moves into the body of the text (2008, p. 155) an observation she relegated to a footnote in her previous work (2001, p. 37) and gives it further commentary. Some scholars[6] draw a connection between people bringing children to Jesus and the Jewish custom of "bringing children to elders or scribes for blessing and prayer" following the Day of Atonement (*Soferim* 18.5). Although the later dating of this custom makes it an unlikely allusion in the gospel, Gundry includes in her recent work brief reference to J. Duncan Derrett's research that argues for important parallels between Jacob's blessing of Joseph's two sons Ephraim and Manasseh in Genesis 48 with Jesus' action (Derrett, 1983). Through Jacob's blessing, the young grandsons are adopted as heirs to God's promise and blessing.

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[5] She published her first essay under the name Gundry-Volf and the second essay under Gundry and I will follow this pattern in my own nomenclature.

[6] Gundry cites H. Weber (1979, p. 15) and J. Jeremias (1960, p. 49).

Derrett himself makes some notable observations. Comparisons between Jesus' action and Jacob's blessing in Gen. 48 were actually quite common in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century commentaries. They disappeared (mysteriously?—he does not explain) in the last century (p. 3). But "until one has meditated on Jacob's blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh," Derrett insists, "one has not equipped oneself to study Mk 10:13-16" (p. 3). Jacob's blessing is "of more than passing interest" (p. 6). It is the last in the line of blessings going back to Abraham and extending forward to all children and heirs of Israel. Jesus is only "adding his power to what was conveyed to the boys' [Ephraim and Manasseh] ancestors long ago" and *not* substituting his own blessing (p. 12). Contrary to common practice, Jacob gives his primary blessing not to Joseph's eldest but to his youngest in what seems like a refusal to recognize seniority or rank that Jesus also replicates. Jewish followers of Jesus could not help but see and hear his welcome of children through this lens. After Jacob, "Jews blessed boys, whether at circumcision or otherwise, in the form 'Let God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh!'" Derrett concludes, "[A]ny blessing of children would be equated mentally with this classical blessing formula, and any Jewish hearer of the gospel-passage would have been aware of it" (p. 13). Although in a footnote Gundry calls Derrett's reliance on later midrash "speculative" (2008, p. 155), Derrett insists his reading is "not in the least fanciful," resting instead on "ancient tradition" (p. 13).

Gundry also reaches several conclusions worth noting. Mark's portrait of Jesus' inclusion of children is part of his wider purpose of presenting Jesus as an appealing figure, charismatic and powerful enough to convince Gentile readers who would otherwise ridicule belief in the divinity of an obscure Jew from Galilee who died a repulsive death. Mark 10:13-16 is the

"climax" or "culmination" of his ministry with children (p. 154). In embracing and blessing them, he adopts them, takes them in and makes them his own family, fictive kin in the new reign of God. This reverses the expected order of society and underscores Jesus' eschatological message. When Jesus lifts up and blesses the children, he puts "the young before the old, the disabled before the able, and the poor before the rich," replacing a "conventional hierarchy" of wealth, power, and age with a hierarchy of need and vulnerability: "In his kingdom the most dependent have the highest priority" (p. 168). To say that followers must become like children to enter the kingdom revives a strain in the prophetic tradition that depicts Israel "as the smallest, as an infant or a child" and that predicates salvation on complete and radical dependence on God's divine mercy (p. 171). In Gundry's words, "Jesus brings this Old Testament prophetic tradition to a climax by asserting that *only* those who stand in the least palatable, most shameful and unenviable position of dependence on God, namely, that of a child, will enter the kingdom of God—and therefore *anyone* can enter" (p. 172, her emphasis).

Although we should object to Gundry's portrait of Jesus as the epitome of the prophetic tradition and the juxtaposition of children's entry into the kingdom and "*the works of the law*" (p. 174, her emphasis), she does recognize that Jesus' reception of children is a performance of mercy that is already displayed in Old Testament literature, not something entirely new. Jesus' action commanding his disciples to let the children come in Mark is a "*saving* gesture . . . with

eschatological overtones" (p. 157).[7] In other words, children come into God's blessing in the same way Israel comes (cf. Deut 7.7-8).

Alternative Readings

A clarion call for greater sensitivity in interpreting New Testament scripture over against the Jews comes from New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine whose teaching and writing has challenged anti-Jewish distortions among Christians, culminating in a book, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (2006). She is not the first to object to anti-Judaism in Christian theology and churches, a concern that has been around for several decades (see Ruether, 1974; Sandmel, 1978; Williamson, 1982). But she is an adamant and persistent voice, focuses specifically on interpretation of scripture, and is devoted to spreading the word beyond academy to Christian congregation and practice. Knowing her work made me more conscious about my own assumptions and heightened my concern about conversional tactics in interpreting scriptures of Jesus' blessing of the children.

Levine does not say much about Jesus and children in her book. But it is not hard to guess what she might say. She questions a common Christian interpretative strategy—If Jesus X, then Jews not-X. "If Jesus preaches good news to the poor, so the common impression goes, 'the Jews' must be preaching good news to the rich. . . . If Jesus speaks to or heals women, 'the Jews' must have set up a patriarchal society that makes the Taliban look progressive," and so forth

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[7] Although Gundry does not note this, in the same volume Old Testament scholar Jacqueline Lapsley shows that Isaiah also sees children as "signs and portents" of divine judgment and hope (2008, pp. 82-102).

(2006, p. 9). Interpreters of Jesus' blessing of children easily fall into line. If Jesus welcomes children, then "the Jews" must have neglected them. Levine insists that Christian scholars and laity see Jesus "within Judaism rather than as standing apart from it" (2006, p. 7). More than anything, people need to think about the impact of "problematic verses" (p. 117) and how a Jew might hear some of what sounds fine enough to Christians but actually excludes, stereotypes, or derides Jews. "Anti-Jewish and potentially anti-Jewish rhetoric goes unnoticed in so much Christian scholarship because the authors are not attuned to how their words sound to different ears" (p. 191). What is really odd is that academic theologians and lay Christians do not need to exaggerate or distort particular ideas to make what are otherwise worthy faith claims. "The church is quite a marvelous and inspirational institution," she comments. Its scholars do not need to "invent history" (2003, p. 332) to promote particular goods, such as the love of children.

Levine does take up the question of children when invited by biblical scholars David Balch and Carolyn Osiek to contribute a concluding chapter to a collection of essays shared at a conference on early Christian families (2003). Scholarly "re-creations of the early Christian views of children should be much more hesitant, especially concerning the first two centuries," Levine argues (2003, p. 332). She draws on examples used by Timothy Sedgwick, an ethicist who also responds to the conference papers (2003). Both mention two major books on families by ethicist Lisa Cahill and practical theologian Don Browning and his colleagues, myself included. Neither book is overtly anti-Jewish. In fact, both books represent an unusual interest in early Christian scriptures as an important resource for ethical and pastoral understanding. They

offer nuanced interpretations of this literature and balanced portraits of the complexities of contemporary families.

Nonetheless, anti-Jewish sentiment slips in. First-century Christianity "held 'a deeper respect for children,'" Browning et al. writes (2000, p. 131), than the surrounding Jewish community "where children 'are not generally regarded as having value in their own right,'" according to Cahill (Cahill, 2000, p. 30). Levine finds such portraits inconsistent with evidence of the love for children among Jewish parents (2003, p. 331). As she notes in her book, the gospels themselves show multiple instances in which Jewish people seek healing not for themselves but for their children, demonstrating a love and dedication to children within Jewish society (2006, p. 174). Moreover, one finds mixed attitudes toward children in both communities.

A second starker alternative reading of Jesus' blessing of children appears among scholars who have dared to suggest that Jesus himself may not have loved children quite as much as most Christians would like to assume. When people write on children and scripture, more often than not they look the other way when it comes to passages that undermine easy assumptions about Jesus' love of children.[8] Gundry-Volf is a good example. Twice, in footnotes rather than the main text of her 2001 chapter, she explains that attention to "Jesus' seemingly inimical stance toward children" lies beyond the scope of her essay. She reserves "for a later occasion" analysis of "Mark 10:29-30; 13:12; Luke 9:59-62; 12:51-53; and 14:26, where he

[8] In conversation, biblical scholar Jon Berquist suggests that authors who do not toe the party line on Jesus' love of children rarely get published. People "do not want to hear it."

requires disciples to 'leave' and 'hate' family members, including children, for the sake of following him" (2001, pp. 36-37; see also pp. 52-53).

To her credit, Gundry does return to these texts in her recent work, devoting a section to "Jesus' family" (2008, pp. 158-162). But even here she actively works to soften their blow by drawing them into comfortable alignment with Jesus' effort to create a new community of disciples. His adoption of children is "consistent," she argues, with his rejection of his own biological family (p. 158). Mark sees the welcome of children as the "supreme form" (p. 160) of this extension of kinship beyond biological families to a wider community of disciples. So, she says, "Mark presents Jesus as both *revitalizing the earthly family* and incorporating it into his own 'family'" (p. 160, my emphasis).

Is it accurate, however, to say Jesus *revitalized* the family? Two biblical scholars, David Sim (1994) and Stephen Barton (1992; 1995), suggest otherwise. They address these matters head on in essays and, in Barton's case, a book. Neither characterizes Jesus as anti-family or anti-children. But they do raise questions about the implications of his message for families and children. They offer a less optimistic reading than Gundry and an important counterbalance to those who proclaim Jesus' unusual love of children over against the culture that surrounded him.

Sim looks first at the demanding life of Jesus himself and then at the cost of discipleship exacted by following him before considering the consequences for wives and children of the disciples. Jesus lived a life of celibacy and self-imposed poverty. He was without permanent home, dependent on the charity of others, misunderstood by family, and offensive to many in the wider community who did not understand this "wandering charismatic" whose vocation takes

priority over commitments of kinship (Sim, 1994, p. 375).[9] And Jesus expected "no less" of his followers "than he demanded of himself" (p. 376). They also renounced attachments, possessions, and comforts, leaving family and employment to travel with him and adopting the same way of life—poverty, homelessness, and social disapproval. Many of us today might be disturbed by Jesus' demand in Matthew 8:21-22 and Luke 9:59-60a that a potential follower not turn back even to bury his own father. But it "is all the more shocking and offensive," Sim argues, in the historical and cultural context of Palestinian Jewish society that placed considerable emphasis on the economic and religious value of marriage, family, and children (p. 378). The decision to leave families to follow Jesus would almost certainly "have met with stern disapproval" and even "shock, disbelief, anxiety, anger" (p. 382).

Jesus and his disciples bore extreme consequences for their actions, including martyrdom. But what were the implications for the wives and children of the disciples? When Sim asks this, he knows he is treading on thin ice, bringing up a "neglected and in some ways uncomfortable subject" (p. 373). This subject has been "almost entirely ignored in the scholarly literature" partly because we do not have direct information about what happened to families of the disciples. But neglect also results from the "potentially disturbing" implications (p. 382). We do not want to think about this. And given the importance of Jesus' own mission, perhaps many of us wonder if it really matters what happened to the families in his wake. But Sim thinks full knowledge is valuable. Convinced that discomfort should "never deter honest, historical enquiry" (p. 382) and acknowledging his own guesswork, he plunges forward.

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[9] See Stanton, 1991; Theissen, 1978—scholars cited by Sim (1994, p. 375). For a study that explores the spacial disruption of Jesus' call to leave household and create a new place, see Moxnes (2003).

We have little definitive knowledge of the marital status and children of the disciples. But given the value of marriage, social expectations about having children, and guesswork about the age of the disciples, Sim speculates that most of them had wives and several children ranging in age from infancy to eleven. He also presumes that most women had little income of their own. To survive if abandoned, a woman and dependent children would likely have to leave their home and turn to male relatives even if it incurred dishonor, stigma, and resentment. Although it is possible that the disciples secured their families' welfare before departing, the accounts do not suggest this. Instead "as unattractive as the conclusion might be, it is more likely than not that in answering the call to follow Jesus the disciples . . . simply left them to their own devises" with little income, little control over family resources, and little recourse except to return to the parental home (Sim, 1994, p. 385).

In other words, there is a "darker side" to the call to follow Jesus and join his new family that Gundry and others prefer to overlook (Sim, 1994, p. 388). Despite its speculative nature, Sim's conclusion seems appropriate: women and children of the disciples paid their own cost of discipleship in economic hardship and social strain, however temporary. Or at least some women and children bore the brunt of Christian discipleship. To recognize this makes it harder for scholars such as Thatcher to juxtapose Jesus to Paul (and the Jews) and ignore Jesus' own situation as an unmarried man traveling with a group of disciples who had left their spouses, children, mothers, and fathers to follow him. So, in Sim's words, next time you praise Jesus and his disciples, "spare a thought for their wives and children" (p. 389).

Of course, conjecture about the wives and children of the disciples does not prove that Jesus did not "love all the little children of the world." But social, historical analysis of Jesus' ministry does suggest that he had his mind on less child-friendly agendas. In his book on family ties in Mark and Matthew, Barton agrees. He argues that the "discipleship of Jesus poses a threat to family and household ties, since it involves the disciple—every disciple—in a quite fundamental transfer of primary allegiance and commitment" (1995, p. 20; e.g., Matthew 10:35-37). By comparing and contrasting the two gospels, he shows that there are "good grounds for describing the ethos of both as counter-cultural and subversive of normal, household-based social patterns" (p. 21). Although neither gospel positions Jesus as antagonistic to wives and children or "hostile to families *per se*," it is fair to say that there is what Thomas Schmidt (1987, p. 118) calls a "'teleological devaluation' of natural kinship and household belonging." This devaluation "has to do specifically with missionary discipleship of Jesus as an alternative, transcendent focus of identify, allegiance and role" (p. 21). Such subordination of family and children to mission had strong precedent in biblical and Jewish traditions and would not have been a surprise to his followers. Matthew's divergence from Mark actually suggests that some of the "rift between followers of Jesus and their compatriots" had to do with Matthew's commitment to missionary discipleship and differences "at the level of ties of natural kinship" (p. 21).

In an essay, "Jesus—Friend of Little Children?," Barton reaches a conclusion that states concisely a point that seems obvious by now: "the claim that Jesus is 'the friend of little children' may be a theological and Christological *intuition of Christian faith* which is perhaps

only tenuously linked to the gospels' stories of Jesus's actual dealings with children or teaching about them" (1992, p. 30). He offers five sobering reasons for caution in scriptural interpretation of Jesus' blessing of children, the last two of which pertain most directly to my argument. First, the Bible reflects the limitations of its own social and historical context, including the patriarchal devaluation of women and children common at that time. Second, "like the Bible as a whole, the gospels were written by male adults for male adults." In a hierarchical world with its emphasis on duty and obedience, Jesus' outreach to children (or the sick or the poor) is actually "an act of *condescension*" (1992, p. 31, his emphasis). Third, two out of four gospels ignore Jesus as a child. In none does he refer in his teaching to his own childhood. Fourth and similar to Sim, there are the "uncomfortable facts about Jesus himself" (p. 31). He did not marry, had no children, saw his work as requiring a renunciation of family ties, asked his followers to subordinate their own families to his mission, and directed his teaching largely at adults, only addressing children in the crowds by default. "In sum, children *per se* were not at the heart of Jesus' message. What *was* central was the prophetic summons of *the people of Israel* to repentance and to a renewed obedience to the will of God" (p. 32, his emphasis). Fifth and finally, contemporary readers should not let our modern sensitivity to children and "sentimentalizing of childhood" bias our interpretation of a different time and place. It may be that scholars who have produced standard books on the subject, such as Hans-Ruedi Weber whom Gundry includes as a source, are "looking for something which is not there" (p. 33). Barton's own reading of these texts suggests that their focus is as much on childlikeness or the "metaphorical potential of the child and childhood . . . for trying to express the kind of *attitudes* and *relationships* demanded now in the

light of the breaking in of the kingdom of God with the coming of Jesus" (p. 39, his emphasis). In other words, for Jesus and the evangelists the child is more a metaphor than a reference to real children.

Gundry is right to say that Jesus is not rejecting the nuclear family as we have come to understand it in today's world. But it is uncertain whether he "revitalized" families or enhanced children's lives. To say Jesus' *blessing* of children and *rejection* of his own family are consistent, she has to ignore the social realities of actual children. Mark 10:13-16 may very well be the climax of Jesus' ministry with children but, as emerging biblical scholar A. James Murphy remarks, the gospel narratives continue; and "children appear less; Jesus and the disciples move on." Even though the "Synoptic authors *rhetorically* raise the social presence of children . . . to an unprecedented level," he observes, this "cannot mitigate the natural challenges of childhood in relation to the demands placed on disciples in the kingdom" (p. 4, his emphasis). Jesus models an itinerant life that would not have easily included children nor supported those committed to their primary care. He names children as among those people that followers should "hate" or leave behind "for my sake and for the sake of the good news" (Luke 14:26; Mark 10:29-30). If it is true, as many say today, that children's welfare depends on solid marriages and the social capital of strong families and communities, then the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels upsets such goods even as he reconstitutes a new kind of family.

The Bible in Pastoral Practice

So I have come to a curious answer to one of final questions with which I began: Theological and pastoral use of scripture sometimes overrides biblical scholarship. There is precedent, in other words, among Christian academics and laity alike for misreading Jesus. Such a misreading seems partly called for in the case of love of children. When a seminary student told me recently about a child in her congregation who exclaimed that "Jesus loves children *most of all*," I certainly did not tell the student about my article and encourage her to set the child straight. I was also not tempted in the least to correct a graduate student on campus who delivered a paper arguing that the song "Jesus Loves the Little Children" ("Red and Yellow, Black and White") had revolutionary consequences for black and white children in the segregated south. Does it really matter that historical and sociological studies reveal uncertainty about Jesus' message and its consequences for actual children in his midst?

Hyperbole about Jesus, however, can contribute to Christian triumphalism. Use of Jesus as advocate of children therefore should be done responsibly and with self-awareness about the complexity of scripture. Even though we find Jesus in all three Synoptic Gospels calling children to him, rebuking disciples for putting them off, and raising them up as models, he still may not have loved children as much as many people imagine. Qualifying Jesus' love of children is not as bad as it sounds. It need not dampen ardor for children as a Christian commitment that should guide ecclesial and social ministries. Those eager to promote children's welfare can do so without exaggerating Jesus' contribution. One of the problems with the Jesus monopoly on love of children is that Christians forget we have much to learn from other religious communities that

honor children. A more realistic or honest view of Jesus allows for a more honest view of Christianity, a more respectful view of Jesus' Jewish heritage, and a more generous attitude toward ourselves in our own ambivalence about children and the Christian life.

The question of how to use scripture well for theological ends deserves more attention.[10] Some scholars have considered the challenge of "troubling texts" or "texts of terror" (e.g., Trible). Ostensibly "good" texts are examined less frequently. The biblical scholars touched on in this paper use different approaches worth contrasting. Gundry is a biblical scholar with a theological bent. She does not study the historical Jesus but the Jesus of the Gospels or the way gospel authors interpret Jesus (the "theological Jesus" perhaps?). That is, as she clarifies in a footnote, she investigates the theological purpose of the gospel author, not the "historical reliability" of these texts. Verifying historical claims is "beyond the bounds" of her focus (2008, p. 144). If her pursuit of Mark's theology tends toward a supersessionist reading, then the tendency may already be operative in Mark's own narrative of salvation and it is harder to blame her for adopting it. But it is no wonder those who employ her work mistake her theological observations for historical reality and state flatfootedly that Jesus loved children. Gundry is only saying that Mark fashions a child-loving Jesus as part of his wider eschatological project. Or is this all she is saying? It is this fuzziness between history and theology and between her own explicit method and her deeper intentions that makes it hard for non-biblical scholars to make appropriate use of her findings.

[10] For a few general treatments of this question, see Ballard and Holmes, 2005; Fowl, 1997; Kelsey, 1975.

Non-biblical scholars fair better when we rely on biblical scholars who work at the intersection of history and theology. Levine, for example, urges interpreters to keep history and theology in closer proximity. To strip theology away from its "historical moorings," she argues, leaves it prey to a self-congratulatory "proclamation marked by co-optation, if not triumphalism" (2003, p. 327). Christians are tempted to read their scriptures over against the Jewish context, a "self-congratulatory view" that believes Jesus offers a "more progressive message than anything else" in antiquity, thereby ignoring the diversity within Jewish, Christian, and Greco-Roman societies. "Bad history creates bad theology and theology de-coupled from history sells short the proclamation of the communities that trace their origins in part to Scripture" (2003, p. 327). Historical study provides a "necessary corrective" to stereotype and ignorance (p. 329).

Balch and Osiek, editors of the conference volume to which Levine contributes a chapter, make some additional helpful comments on the value of history. As they note in their introduction, study of the archeology and material culture of early Christian families is "very recent" with Balch and Osiek's own earlier book (1997), "one of the first . . . attempts" (2003, p. xi). They convened an interdisciplinary group of classicists and historians of ancient Judaism and Christianity to bridge the gap among scholars of antiquity. Both groups shared interest in understanding the social historical infrastructures of early Christian families. Authors agree on several points: Material history and culture matter to textual interpretation; early Christian families are much more culturally diverse and complicated than commonly assumed; and scholarly interest in early families is connected to contemporary concerns, scholars bring such

concerns to their work, and yet an unavoidable gap persists between contemporary assumptions and early history. Knowing the "types of houses in which people lived, the public monuments they saw, the foods they ate, the way they mourned their dead" goes a long way in disrupting easy translations from scripture to today's world, as Levine remarks in her chapter. Close historical study forces us out of the "fantasy of first century Bible land" (2003, p. 328). People who make theological claims about children and family values and cite scripture as proof have a far more complicated early Christian world with which to contend than they realize. Fortunately fresh resources, such as recent books by O. M. Bakke (2005) and Cornelia Horn and John Martens (2009), have appeared to help in understanding this world.

People need to grasp historical complexities. But in the end, change or any kind of Christian action or response requires theological engagement. As Levine argues, on the specific question of anti-Judaism, for example, "The only resolution to the question of New Testament anti-Judaism cannot come from historians. The elimination of anti-Judaism must come from the theologians, from those members of the church who conclude that anti-Judaism is wrong and who insist on Christian sensitivity to the issue" (2006, p. 116). I would argue that this kind of theological orientation is necessary with other issues as well, such as advocacy for children. In his work on the New Testament and families, Barton also recommends combining historical research with what he calls a "theological-ecclesial reading" (1998, p. 130; see also Barton 1996). He uses a variety of methods—form-critical, redaction-critical, literary-critical, and sociological—and takes the additional step of interpreting the theological claims within the text. That is, he looks at how the text functions "*as scripture* by locating [his] work as interpreter in a

wider context of divine and human action" (1998, p. 135, emphasis in text). He also studies the transaction between scripture and its interpretative communities.

Much more could be said on pastoral theological use of scripture. But I want to conclude with a final observation that I note in *Let the Children Come*: The subject of children (perhaps like many topics) disrupts conventional academic divisions and demands a kind of interdisciplinary engagement and practical theology, regardless of a person's home discipline. The subject of children "challenges the generally accepted categories of study in theology—what has been called the 'theological encyclopedia'" (2003, p. xxviii) and "requires a movement across the conventionally separated disciplines. This movement includes moments of serious historical, biblical, and constructive theological exploration as part of a larger practical theological effort" (p. xxix). Both Sedgwick and Levine make a similar point. They appreciate the conversation between classists and historians of Christianity and Judaism in Balch and Osiek's book. But an equally important conversation needs to occur between historians of antiquity and constructive disciplines of ethics, doctrine, and pastoral practice that rely on these scriptures. As Sedgwick argues, a kind of "cross-disciplinary reading and, ideally, collaborative work" is necessary. Drawing on David Tracy, he says Christian leaders need an "analogical imagination" capable of moving "back and forth between historical construal of the past and theological-moral construal of Christian faith in the present" (p. 343; see Tracy 1981).

Such interchange is challenging. When scholars read beyond disciplinary boundaries, we quickly find ourselves in unfamiliar territory. We do not understand the intellectual politics of the sources we use. We overlook significant points that scholars internal to a discipline would not

miss. We struggle to keep up in our own fields. Scriptural work takes time. We do not have the time because we have important theological arguments to make. But we should be clear when this dynamic is in play, recognizing and admitting our limitations. And we need to work harder to comprehend the complexity of the scriptural tradition on which we draw.

Jesus' blessing of children has served as a kind of Rorschach test for personal and cultural desires. His relationship to children and families is more ambiguous than popular culture admits. There is a disjuncture between the literary and theological proclamation of scripture about children's value and the social, historical disruption of children's lives within the itinerant ministry of the disciples. Hyperbole about his love of children has potentially harmful as well as positive consequences. He stands within a Jewish context where children received a certain kind of respect and inclusion that many Christians overlook. There are, of course, times in pastoral ministry when discoveries of historical critical research on biblical texts finally do not matter. Christians can proclaim God's love for children even if Jesus' sometimes neglected them. Tempering our temptation to exalt Jesus' love of kids as uniquely Christian need not diminish appropriate use of scriptures in which Jesus welcomes children as a mean to promote their welfare.

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