



Experiencing the Kingdom as a Little Child: A Rereading of Mark 10:13-16

JAMES L. BAILEY

*Wartburg Theological Seminary
Dubuque, Iowa*

THE TASK OF INTERPRETING THE BIBLE NEVER ENDS. ALTHOUGH THE SCRIPTURES do not change, our interpretation and appropriation of them do. Often Christians have to rethink their understanding of a specific text or set of texts. For me this has occurred with regard to Mark 10:13-16, the familiar scene that depicts Jesus' reception of the little children brought to him despite his disciples' objection.

When I was a theological student in the 1960s, the standard English-language commentary on the Gospel of Mark was that of Vincent Taylor. In introducing Mark 10:13-16 Taylor declared that Jesus announced God's reign coming as a gift and "as an experience into which, if they have the receptiveness of a child, man [sic] may enter here and now."¹ For him "the receptiveness of a child" was the key for understanding the analogy between the phrase "as a little child" and receiving the kingdom of God. Another British scholar, D. E. Nineham, suggested a similar interpretation when he wrote: "The point of the comparison is not so much the innocence and humility [or obedience] of children; it is rather the fact that children are unselfconscious, receptive, and content to be dependent upon others' care and bounty."² In both cases, the commentators focused on the characteristic or characteristics of children as the key to the meaning of the passage.

¹Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1955) 421-422.

²D. E. Nineham, *Saint Mark* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963) 268.

JAMES L. BAILEY is a seminary professor of New Testament.

In the last decade, however, many commentators have changed the interpretive tune about the phrase “as a little child” in Mark 10:15. They argue that Mark 10:13-16 must be seen in light of Mark 9:33-37 and that both of these references to a child build not primarily on assumed characteristics of children but rather on their social status in the first-century world. Ched Myers³ has argued this interpretation most explicitly, concluding that: (1) Jesus’ saying in Mark 10:15 is not built on any idealistic notion of children; (2) rather the child in Mark 10:13-16 and 9:36-37 represents another category of those marginalized and dominated (like women, the poor, and the unclean); (3) the child was, in fact, the “least” in familial and societal structures; (4) children were easily dominated and exploited because of their vulnerability, dependent as they were on adults; (5) Jesus is thus inviting his disciples into a new reality of community and family, where the “least” becomes the model for discipleship; and (6) this means that the disciple takes up the powerlessness and vulnerability of the child.

I. READING MARK 10:13-16 AS PART OF THE WHOLE MARKAN GOSPEL

The shift in interpretation represented by Myers assumes a literary reading of Mark that seeks to be sensitive to the rhetorical interplay of texts in the entire narrative. So, for example, Mark 10:13-16 cannot be read in isolation from its larger literary context (8:22-10:52) and especially 9:33-37. Mark 8:22-10:52, most contemporary interpreters now agree, highlights Jesus’ exchanges with his disciples regarding his own forthcoming suffering and what is involved in following him. The Markan irony is pronounced since Jesus’ disciples appear blind and deaf to this teaching. Undoubtedly Mark’s depiction of the disciples as dense and resistant to Jesus’ instruction is a rhetorical strategy to challenge the hearers of the Christian communities being addressed.

1. *Mark 9:30-37*

Mark 9:30-37 is crucial in the larger sequence of narrative episodes. After Jesus repeats his announcement of approaching rejection and death, followed by resurrection (cf. 9:30-31 with 8:31-33), the Markan narrator informs the readers, “But they [the disciples] did not understand what he [Jesus] was saying and were afraid to ask him” (9:32). Then follows the first scene in which Jesus associates discipleship with a little child.

- 33 And they came into Capernaum.
And when he was in the house he began asking them,
“What were you arguing about on the way?”
- 34 But they were keeping silent,
because they had argued with one another on the way who was the greatest.
- 35 And after sitting down he called the twelve and said to them,
“Whoever wants to be first shall be last of all and servant of all.”

³Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988) 266-271.

- 36 And after receiving a child (παῖδιον) he placed it in their midst
and after taking it in his arms [embracing the child] he said to them,
37 "Whoever receives one of such children in my name receives me;
and whoever receives me receives not me but the one who sent me."⁴

This episode illustrates ironically not only the disciples' failure to understand Jesus' announcement in 9:31 but also their self-incriminating behavior. Set within a Capernaum household (the primary domain for children), Jesus' question in 9:33 exposes the topic under debate "on the way."⁵ In 9:34 the disciples' silence seems anything but innocent, particularly when we immediately learn the reason for their silence: they were debating who was the greatest! Jesus' saying in 9:35, subsequently reinforced and expanded in 10:43-44, offers servanthood as the corrective to contentious debates about greatness among disciples. But also notable is the next element in this story. The issue raised in the first part is now answered through what Vernon Robbins labels "a demonstrative action."⁶ The paradox "Whoever wants to be first shall be last of all and servant of all" is incarnated when Jesus' places a child "in their midst" and then takes the child into his embrace. Jesus' poignant action introduces the child as the "least one" in family and society who needs to be "received," all intended as a pointed answer to the self-aggrandizing thoughts of the disciples. This demonstrative action finds its astonishing interpretation in Jesus' final saying, which makes some sense of Jesus' paradoxical saying in 9:35. According to Robert Fowler, "the paradox of 9:35 is interpreted metaphorically in 9:36-37, especially in 9:37 (a 'child' figures 'Jesus,' who in turn figures the one who 'sent' him)."⁷ Or to quote him again, "According to this shocking new standard, embracing a child is like embracing God (9:37)."⁸

2. Mark 10:13-16

Now to return to Mark 10:13-16. The pronouncement story reads as follows:

- 13 And they were bringing to him little children (παῖδιά)
in order that he [Jesus] might touch them;
and the disciples rebuked [or "scolded" or "denounced"] them.
14 But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them,
"Allow the little children (παῖδιά) to come to me,
do not continue stopping them,
because of such ones is the kingdom of God.
15 Truly I say to you,
whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child (παῖδιον),

⁴This translation of Mark 9:33-37 follows the NRSV except where a more literal rendering of the Greek seems warranted.

⁵Mark's repeated use of "on the way" in this section of his narrative (see 8:27; 9:33-34; 10:32,52) creates a phrase with symbolic import: "on the way" is tantamount to the way of discipleship which leads potentially to the cross.

⁶See Vernon K. Robbins, "Pronouncement Stories and Jesus' Blessing of the Children: A Rhetorical Approach," *Semeia* 29 (1983) 62-70.

⁷Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 189.

⁸*Ibid.*, 72.

will never enter it.”

16 And when he took them into his arms [embraced them],
he blessed [them] by laying his hands on them.⁹

This focus story unfolds in a three-part sequence: the opening part sets the stage for Jesus’ speech and action (10:13); the central part includes two sayings of Jesus prompted by his strong displeasure with his disciples (10:14-15); and the final part stresses Jesus’ action (10:16).

Already in the opening part, two items are quickly introduced that depict a conflict. On the one hand, some people were bringing little children to Jesus. Although the narrative is vague about the identity of the ones who bring the children (in the Greek it is simply “*they* were bringing”), it is clear about their purpose for doing so—“in order that he might touch them.” Less clear is the intended effect of Jesus’ touching. Is it for a blessing, or, as earlier in the Markan narrative (5:41-42 and 9:26-27), for healing? On the other hand, the narrative relates the disciples’ overhasty rebuke as a contrapuntal action. The people were bringing little children to Jesus, but the disciples expressed strong disapproval of what they were doing. At this point readers of the earlier Markan narrative remember that in 9:33-37 Jesus embraced a little child and unambiguously announced, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me receives not me but the one who sent me.” The disciples have obviously not learned the lesson of discipleship which involves welcoming the “least ones.” Indeed, they willfully oppose what accords with Jesus’ conception of God’s reign (see 8:33). This portrayal of the disciples contributes to Mark’s larger picture of their blindness and deafness (see 8:17-21).

The opening part sets the stage for Jesus’ strong emotional reaction and two emphatic sayings. In 10:14 the narrative describes Jesus as becoming indignant (or, as the Greek word suggests, “becoming incensed at what is wrong”) when he saw the disciples rudely rebuking the people bringing little children. This leads to two sayings of Jesus. The first one in 10:14 is specifically addressed to what the disciples have just done. Jesus’ saying includes an initial positive exhortation that makes clear what the disciples are to do (“allow the little children to come to me”), next a prohibition that indicates what they are to cease doing (“do not continue stopping them!”), and lastly the reason for both (“*because* of such ones is the kingdom of God”). Now for the first time Jesus directly associates the kingdom of God with little children.

Connecting the kingdom of God and children prepares for Jesus’ second saying that is solemnly introduced with the words “Truly I say to all of you.” This second saying is more general¹⁰ and shares linguistic elements with Jesus’ saying in

⁹Again my translation of this text follows the NRSV except where a more literal rendering of the Greek seems illuminating.

¹⁰Robbins, “Pronouncement Stories,” 56, classifies 10:15 as a “maxim” and following Aristotle’s definition, notes the two basic characteristics of a maxim: it is a saying that is general and one that concerns itself with human actions.

9:37. Both begin with Greek words that are translated “whoever,” both use the Greek word “receive,” both are concerned with a little child. Moreover, both serve as the final and culminating saying in their narrative episodes. Even more importantly, Jesus’ saying in 10:15 completes the logic begun in his earlier saying. Receiving a little child in Jesus’ name, according to 9:37, is equated with receiving Jesus himself and even God (“the one who sent me”). The theological claim appears similar to that of Matt 25:31-46 – by practicing hospitality and care for the least and most vulnerable human being, one receives Jesus who on God’s behalf is in solidarity with this “least one.” Mark 10:15 furthers the logic by inviting the follower of Jesus to enter the sphere of Jesus and God by entering the place and plight of a little child, one quite vulnerable and totally dependent on benevolent care and protection of adults. Earlier in the Markan narrative, Jesus’ disciples experienced the kingdom’s vulnerability when they were “sent out” in mission where they were dependent on the hospitality of others (see 6:7-13).

Mark 10:13-16 ends by describing Jesus’ action: after taking the little children into his arms, he blessed them by placing his hands on them. His action embodies the dynamic of God’s kingdom: welcoming and blessing the children epitomizes God’s gracious reception of the vulnerable and needy. In summary, then, this story offers readers the kingdom of God both as gift and task. On the one hand, “receiving the kingdom *as a little child*” implies the welcome and blessing of Jesus for us as we recognize ourselves to be as vulnerable and needy as a little child. Inclusion in God’s kingdom is sheer gift. Yet, on the other hand, the kingdom also invites responsible action on our part. By embracing a little vulnerable child we are welcoming Jesus (and thus God) and receiving the kingdom. Fowler supports this second aspect by rendering the first segment of Jesus’ saying in the following manner: “*Receive the Kingdom of God when it approaches in the form of a child.*”¹¹

II. THE PRESENTATION OF THESE STORIES IN LUKE AND MATTHEW

Before drawing implications from the Markan texts for today’s church, it is important to note how the other evangelists present the two stories under investigation.

1. *Luke 9:46-48 and 18:15-17*

As in Mark, the first episode directly follows Jesus’ second passion prediction. Luke 9:46-48 unfolds in a simple three-step pattern: first, there is a narrative description of the problem (“an argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest”); second, Jesus’ demonstrative action in response is described (“but Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side”); and third, Jesus’ speech is quoted that includes an astonishing claim (“whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me”) and its rationale (“for the least among all of you is the greatest”).

¹¹Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*, 173.

In the Lukan rendering of this story, the disciples' argument is out in the open and does not need to be uncovered by Jesus' question. Jesus' action involves his taking a child and placing the child *alongside himself*—a demonstration of his solidarity with the little child. Jesus' culminating pronouncement is provided a rationale, allowing Luke to begin and end the story with the issue of greatness. The disciples' argument about greatness, which initiates the story, is settled by Jesus' offering a new definition of greatest. The least one among them, embodied in the little child at Jesus' side, is the greatest.

The second episode is narrated in Luke 18:15-17 and resembles closely the Markan story. Yet in the Lukan narrative this second story loses its close association with the earlier episode in Luke 9:46-48 because of the extended journey section that intervenes. Moreover, the Lukan version differs from Mark 10:13-16 in three striking ways: First, it includes in the opening verse a Greek word (τὰ βρέφη) that means "infants" rather than the word (παιδία) that designates children older than infants yet below the age of puberty. Second, the Lukan story does not mention Jesus' indignation in reaction to the disciples' rebuke of those bringing the infants. Third, Luke 18:15-17 concludes with Jesus' double saying, containing no description of Jesus' compassionate action of taking the children into his arms and blessing them. The interplay between Jesus' saying and demonstrative action is missing. By omitting the final action, the Lukan form underscores Jesus' closing maxim "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."¹² Finally, Luke's placement of Luke 18:15-17 in the larger narrative reveals something about his understanding of this story. Luke omits the Markan story about divorce (Mark 10:2-12), presumably because he has included, in Luke 16:18, another saying of Jesus about divorce, but he returns to the Markan sequence (Mark 10:13-52) directly after incorporating in Luke 18:9-14 Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. In this parable Jesus declares the unlikely person, the tax collector, to be justified and then concludes with a maxim that offers the reason for this declaration ("because everyone who exalts him/herself will be humbled [by God], but the one who humbles him/herself will be exalted [by God]").¹³ In contrast to the Pharisee, the tax collector humbles himself before God. By inserting our focus text at this point in the narrative, Luke apparently views this story as providing another illustration of the need for humility before God. Everyone who receives the kingdom of God "as a little child" expresses that humility and will find entrance into the kingdom. The disciples' rebuke suggests that they have not learned this lesson.

¹²See Robbins, "Pronouncement Stories," 53, who draws on information in ancient rhetorical handbooks to distinguish among three types of *chreiae* (maxims): a sayings *chreia*, an action *chreia*, and a mixed *chreia* (involving both a saying and an action). The widely used term "pronouncement story" to label a number of stories fails to acknowledge that these stories can contain an action as well as a saying.

¹³Author's translation.

2. *Matt 18:1-5 and 19:13-15*

Matthew presents the material in a way to feature even more clearly the need for humility. By inserting a story about Peter and the temple tax in Matt 17:24-27, he has broken the connection between Jesus' second passion prediction and the disciples' debate about who is the greatest. Instead he begins the fourth major discourse with the disciples' question: "Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" This question, undoubtedly posed with the Matthean community in mind, prompts Jesus' action described in 18:2a ("He called a child, whom he put among them...") and then his extended speech beginning in 18:3:

- 3 Truly I say to you,
if you do not turn and become as the little children,
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
- 4 Therefore, whoever will humble him/herself as this child,
this one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.
- 5 And who receives one such child in my name,
receives me.¹⁴

Matthew also includes the second Markan story (Mark 10:13-16) in 19:13-15 but there he omits Mark 10:15 ("Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, will never enter it") because he has inserted an altered version of that saying of Jesus in 18:3. Whereas the Markan version focused on the receiving and embracing of a little child in Jesus' name and thus the embrace of Jesus himself and even God (Mark 9:37) and God's kingdom (Mark 10:15), the Matthean rendering in 18:3 accentuates the need to repent (literally, "turn") and become like the little children as the way to enter the kingdom. Matt 18:4 further clarifies that greatness in the kingdom is equated with "humbling" oneself like a little child.

Concerned with the destructive effect of arrogance and pride in the church, Matthew orders the material in 18:1-14 to warn his community of any action that scandalizes or any attitude that displays contempt for "the little ones" – probably a designation for the members whose faith was probably fragile or whose status in society demanded no respect (see especially 18:6,10,14). In his editing of Jesus' sayings, Matthew is communicating what the apostle Paul exhorts in Rom 12:16 ("Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly").

III. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As the exegetical investigation demonstrated, the Matthean presentation shapes its version of Mark 10:15 to concentrate on the personal conversion and the childlike posture of humility needed in disciples. The Lukan version of Mark 10:13-16, given its placement directly after Luke 18:14, also interprets Jesus' saying about receiving the kingdom "like a child" as tantamount to humbling oneself before God. This accent on humility before God as the "childlike" characteristic

¹⁴Author's translation.

needed for entrance into God's kingdom has invariably been imported into our reading of Mark 10:13-16. As a result, we have failed to hear the kingdom saying in Mark 10:15 as Jesus' challenging invitation into solidarity with "the little child," the epitome of vulnerability, as a way to experience God's kingdom.

At first glance the Matthean version of Jesus' kingdom saying in Matt 18:3-5 seems to convey a message contrary to Mark 10:15. Whereas in Matthew Jesus' saying focuses on the disciples and the childlike qualities they are to assume, such as humility, in Mark it finds its locus in the vulnerable little child with whom the disciples are to be in solidarity. Yet if the use of the verb "to humble" in both Matt 18:5 and Luke 18:14 (in Greek ταπεινώω)¹⁵ is interpreted to mean "to make oneself small" (or "low" or "weak" or "vulnerable"), then in Matthew and Luke the stress is on the disciple's conscious action of assuming the posture of the small, weak, poor, and even exploited (like the vulnerable position of little children) in the eyes of others and before God. This invitation to humility is a call to recognize one's place, not to a type of psychological self-flagellation in some modern sense. The call to humility, particularly for the sake of identifying with the "little" or "weak ones" in the Christian community (so Matt 18:1-14), is in continuity with Mark 10:13-16, especially if a contemporary and naive notion of childhood is not superimposed on the biblical texts.

We do not know a great deal about children in the first-century Mediterranean world. Existing literary documents (including the New Testament), nonetheless, do allow us to surmise some things about adult attitudes towards children and the actual circumstances of children's lives. Clearly both the Palestinian Jewish society and the larger Greco-Roman world were patriarchal, in which male offspring were valued more highly than female ones. Roman law did not prohibit the exposure of babies, especially females, as a means of ridding a father of an unwanted infant. In contrast to our contemporary idea of childhood, the number of years for childhood was few, with girls promised and given in marriage by mid-teens, boys only somewhat later. Crucially important to the father of the household was the marriageability of young daughters as a means of extending and improving the honor and financial security of his family. A father's son extended the family lineage and control over a trade or land that was owned. Peasant families with meager or no land holdings undoubtedly needed both young sons and daughters to contribute quickly to the family work force. Some scholars have suggested that harsh economic disruptions (and possibly divorce) could create a need for a family's abandoning children or selling them into slavery.

Affluent Americans, who expend considerable energy and money to guarantee their children extended years of safety and proper growth, can wrongly assume that childhood in other places and times can be characterized as a time of innocence and naiveté for children, receptiveness and unquestioning acceptance on

¹⁵See W. Grundmann's article in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, abridged volume by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 1152-56.

their part, or contentment in their total dependency on adults. Parents' ability to protect their children can create an illusion that forgets vulnerability as the other side of children's dependency on the adult world in the past as well as our own time. As I was completing this article, television news was daily depicting the devastating consequences of the mass exodus of people from Rwanda to Zaire. Included were ghastly scenes of abandoned children, epitomizing their extreme vulnerability as victims of adult conflicts and violence.

Although less exposed to the lens of the camera, every economic and social sector of our American society sometimes takes advantage of the vulnerability of children—including many apparently safe middle-class homes. Thus, our society is caught in a striking contradiction. On the one hand, we idealize children and romanticize childhood. Yet, on the other hand, we are shocked by the staggeringly high incidence of severe child abuse in our society. For over a decade Alice Miller, a Swiss psychoanalyst, has written concerning the dire consequences for a society when the violence done to children, often by their own parents, goes unattended. The pattern often involves parental violence against a child within the secrecy of the family circle, resulting in the dominated child's inability to react in anger, and rationalization of the parent's harmful action as motivated by his or her "good intention." This hurt child tends to repress the painful memory of the abuse, whether physical or verbal, so that only in adulthood does this person end up unconsciously discharging the stored-up rage on others who tend to be smaller and weaker (frequently the person's own children). This results in what Miller labels as a "'vicious circle of contempt for those who are smaller and weaker,' patterns of domination that are maintained and psychically enforced intergenerationally."¹⁶

In light of these patterns and the plight of many children today in our society and around the world, Jesus' speech and action in Mark 10:13-16 are especially challenging. Jesus invites his followers to rid themselves of a naive notion of childhood by entering the space of "the vulnerable child" (the one often exploited by adults). What does it mean to be in solidarity with the most vulnerable (thus Mark) and to take on the characteristic of the vulnerable (thus Matthew and Luke)? Since Jesus' kingdom saying does not promote human passivity, Christians must risk entering the sphere of the vulnerable child. In doing this, will we not sense our own vulnerability and discover the kingdom as an experience of God's graciousness for the weak and vulnerable? Mark 10:13-16 concludes by describing Jesus' em-

¹⁶See Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 269, who summarizes Alice Miller's early book, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983). See also her more recent book entitled *Banished Knowledge: Facing Childhood Injuries* (New York: Doubleday, 1990). Other recent volumes related to this topic are *When Children Suffer*, edited by Andrew D. Lester (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), Jane Middleton-Moz, *Children of Trauma* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 1989), and Lenore Terr, *Too Scared to Cry: How Trauma Affects Children...And Ultimately Us All* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).

brace of the little children and his blessing touch.¹⁷ Does not this Markan text invite us Christians to become incarnations of Jesus' embrace and blessing for today's vulnerable children? And in so doing, will we not also experience Jesus' warm embrace and blessing on us and our communities of compassion?

¹⁷John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994) 64, suggests a provocative interpretation of Mark 10:13-16. In light of the power of a father in the Roman world, Crossan views the words *touch, took in his arms, blessed, laid hands on* as "the official bodily actions of a father designating a newly born infant for life rather than death, for accepting it into his family rather than casting it out with the garbage." Moreover, he reads the disciples' opposition to Jesus' acceptance of the children as a sign of a heated debate in the Markan community as to whether or not abandoned children should be adopted.