

Abstract

“Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Matt 19:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16). Based on the gospel accounts of Jesus’s welcoming of little children, many people today often presume that early Christianity offered a new, uniform, and positive understanding of children against the backdrop of the ancient world. Challenging such a Christian exceptionalist approach to history, this book asks how individual texts construct childlikeness as it relates to God’s kingdom within their socio-cultural milieus. In particular, this book examines imagery of the child used in the Gospel of Matthew, 1 Corinthians, and the Gospel of Thomas vis-à-vis a set of philosophical, historical, and archaeological materials concerning ancient children, thereby presenting a socio-cultural context in which to understand the childlikeness each text distinctively promotes.

Situating the selected texts within discourses and practices related to children in the ancient Mediterranean world leads to an understanding that Matthew, 1 Corinthians, and Thomas do not speak of childlikeness in the same way. The Gospel of Matthew turns to the social disparity between royal children and poor ones in a post-70-CE Roman colony, using the little child (Matt 18:2) to urge the hearers to abandon their aspiration to political and economic privileges. In 1 Corinthians, “infant” is a term of invective against the Corinthians, whose infantile lack of proper speech and *logos* marks their unpreparedness for God’s kingdom. In the Gospel of Thomas, the child serves as an exemplar of the primordial being in Gen 1:27 who exists without shame, for this gospel idealizes the child’s sexually undeveloped body and liminal status in society. As these texts take up various aspects of the child from contemporaneous discourses on childhood according to their historical situations, theological foci, and rhetorical purposes, they present no one uniform understanding of childlikeness. Instead, the child’s marginalized status in Rome’s client kingdom, the intellectual incapability of infants presented in ancient philosophical discourse, and the ancient cultural perception of the baby’s non-gendered state define childlikeness in Matthew, 1 Corinthians, and Thomas respectively, functioning to communicate to their historical audiences different human values regarding God’s kingdom.

Despite these different understandings of childlikeness, however, it is important to note that Matthew, 1 Corinthians, and Thomas simultaneously invite the adult audience to “think with” children in the process of seeking God’s kingdom. These varied images of children respond to an important religious and ethical question – what kind of bodily form or human quality should we cultivate to enter God’s kingdom? – thereby concretizing social, moral, and spiritual transformations that Christ-followers must aspire to or avoid. In turn, these texts’

references to children cannot be used as direct evidence for claims that early Christ-followers were kind to children. However, they present the richness and diversity of theological ideals among those who first received Matthew, 1 Corinthians, and Thomas. Exploring the developmental characteristics and social situations of children reveals that some early Christ-followers cast young children as effective theological imaginaries for expressing various visions of a human condition in which one is worthy to enter God's kingdom.