JESUS' AFFECTION TOWARDS CHILDREN AND MATTHEW'S TALE OF TWO KINGS

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ABSTRACT

On account of multiple and independent attestations in early Christian literature Jesus' affection towards children can be taken as historical authentic. From a perspective of the social stratification of first-century Herodian Palestine, this article argues that it is possible to consider these children as part of the expendable class. Neither Mark nor its parallel texts in the other Gospels refer to parents bringing these children to Jesus. They seem to be "street urchins". In this article the episode where Jesus defends the cause of fatherless children in the Synoptic Gospels is interpreted from the perspective of Matthew's version of Jesus' affection towards children. The aim is to demonstrate that Matthew situates the beginning and end of Jesus' public ministry within the context of Jesus' relationship to children. Jesus' baptism by John (Mt 3:15) and Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (Mt 21:1-17) form the two poles of his ministry in Matthew. Both episodes are described as a kind of "cleansing of the temple". Both incidents were (in a midrash fashion) understood by Matthew as fulfilment of Scripture. The baptism scene is a Matthean allusion to Isaiah 1:13-17 and the record of the entry into Jerusalem is an explicit interpretation of Jeremiah 7:1-8.

1. INTRODUCTION

Multiple and independent attestations in early Christian literature show how seriously Jesus' attitude towards children should be taken historically. From a historical-critical perspective, multiple independent written evidence has greater historical probability than either singular evidence or a plurality of interdependent literary evidence (see Borg 1999:3-14). However, this does not mean that a single witness should be regarded as unauthentic, although such a case lacks historical plausibility.

Traditionally, in historical Jesus research, criteria have been used to distinguish between the words and deeds of the historical Jesus and those that his post-Easter followers pretended to have been Jesus'

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words and deeds. In the early stages of the research, sayings of Jesus reflecting an Israelite environment were distinguished from a later Hellenistic development (see, among others, Hahn 1974:11). Jesus sayings that reflect the convictions of the Jesus movement in the Israelite, as well as in the Greco-Roman environment, have not been regarded as authentic Jesus sayings. This criterion of dissimilarity was applied in such a way that probable authentic Jesus traditions were distinguished from, on the one hand, post-Easter Jesus movements, and on the other hand, from the conventional Israelite tradition.

In the case of the Greco-Roman and the Galilean-Syrian contexts, a change in environment caused a discontinuity in the content of words with regard to the transmission of the Jesus tradition. However, discontinuity does not always mean that a *material relationship* (according to Bultmann [1928] 1969:230, a *sachliche Relation*) between Jesus' intention and that of his interpreters does not exist. The term "dissimilarity", therefore, does not cover both aspects, continuity and discontinuity, in the transmission of the Jesus tradition. In view of this shortcoming, Theissen and Winter (1997) refined the issue of "dissimilarity" between Jesus and the Israelite tradition. They replaced the "criterion of dissimilarity" with the "criterion of historical plausibility". By doing so, they pointed out that Jesus was both in continuity and in discontinuity with the Israelite tradition of his day. This kind of approach creates the possibility of describing and explaining the vision of Jesus within the context of the Israelite tradition of his time. Theissen uses the terms "Jesus' Jewish world" (i.e. the Israelite tradition) and "Judaism" (i.e. conventional Judean legalism). This distinction opens up the possibility of applying what I call the "environmental criterion". This criterion can assist in identifying the similarities and differences, the continuity and discontinuity between the words and deeds of Jesus and the interpretation of the evangelists. In this regard, insights into the domestic, social, political, economic, agricultural, urban and religious structures of both the environments of Jesus and those of the Gospel writers will assist in distinguishing the words and deeds of Jesus from the interpretations of Jesus by the evangelists.

Therefore, the criterion of multiple independent attestation cannot be applied without supplementary argumentation. For example, the influence of Easter on the handing down of Jesus traditions should

be taken into account. From the perspective of the resurrection belief, stories about Jesus' conception, birth, miracles, and the soteriological significance of his death and ascension to heaven were inspired or amended analogous to sacred narratives of divine figures in the Hellenistic-Semitic and Greco-Roman world. Furthermore, transmitters of the Jesus tradition often revised material to suit their narrative structures and theological intentions with regard to their particular audiences. Material and statements which clearly exhibit the literary preference of a particular writer and the characteristics of a post-Easter life situation of a community for whom the communication was intended, cannot historically be traced back to the oral period of 30-50 CE. Matthew, for example, represented Jesus in a way that conformed to the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint). In doing so, he made use of messianic themes derived from a shared late first-century Hellenistic-Israelite context. Such editorial material was often being attributed to Jesus. Some Jesus groups also designed certain apologetic statements in order to oppose defamatory campaigns by opponents.

In my book *Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus as child of God* (Van Aarde 2001) I reflected on the socio-cultural and theological implications of the fact that Joseph did not play a role in the life of the historical Jesus. I argued that Jesus' baptism, according to Mark 1:9 and in concordance with Isaiah 1:16-17, fits into the social context of someone who went to John the Baptist to "wash himself" of "systemic evil", to "plead for the widow" and "defend the fatherless". According to this particular view in Mark (Mk 1:10-11), the ("Joseph-less") Jesus, child of Mary (see Mk 3:31-35; 6:3), was believed to be child of God. By this remark, Mark anticipates his narrative account in Mark 10:1-12 and 13-16 that Jesus, child of God, pleaded for the (patriarchless) widow and defended the (fatherless) street children. The latter passage, the one about Jesus blessing the children and seeing them as central to God's kingdom (Mk 10:13-16), is often referred to as the *Gospel for Children* (in Latin: *Evangelium Infantium*).

Without repeating the painstaking detail of historical-critical analysis, I indicate that I accept John Dominic Crossan's (1991a:xxxii-xxxiv; 1991b:1200) finding on the "complex" *Jesus-Kingdom of God-Children*. Crossan shows that, in terms of the sequence of strata, the

first stratum contains data chronologically closest to Jesus. Literary "units" of Jesus tradition composed within the first stratum are not necessarily historically the most accurate. Theoretically, a "unit" from the fourth stratum can be more original than one from the first stratum. Therefore, a hierarchy of attestation of "units" and, especially, "complexes" of "units" is necessary, beginning with the first stratum and working from there to the second, third, and fourth. The complex *Jesus-Kingdom of God-Children* comprises six "units," namely the Gospel of Thomas 22:1-2; Mark 10:13-16//Matthew 19:13-15//Luke 18:15-17; Matthew 18:3; and John 3:1-10. Thus, it is a "complex" that is attested by a textual "unit" belonging to the first stratum (Gospel of Thomas) and that is supported by multiple independent attestations of the second stratum (Gospel of Mark) and third stratum (Gospel of Matthew and Gospel of John).[2]

2 The earliest Christian texts originated in 30-60 CE. Four authentic Pauline letters (1 Ts; Gl; 1 Cor; Rm) form this stratum. Some Jesus sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas* can also be traced back to this period (see Crossan [1985] 1992:3-19; Koester 1990:84-86; Patterson 1993b:13; Miller 1992:302-303; Riley 1994: 234; cf. Roukema 1998:158). The second stratum originated in 60-80 CE and consists of several documents: the *Gospel of the Egyptians* (known only from citations in patristic letters and independent of the canonical gospel tradition — see Koester 1980:238-256; Funk 1985:371), the *Secret Gospel of Mark* (see Crossan 1992:61-75; Smith 1973; Miller 1992:402-405; Koester & Patterson 1991:14-16), the Gospel of Mark, *Papyrus Oxyrhynchus* 840 (see Crossan 1991:430; Cameron 1982:53; Miller 1992:412-415), the "second edited" layer on the *Gospel of Thomas* (originated probably in Syrian Edessa on account of the alleged authority of Thomas), a collection of dialogues which were embedded in the *Dialogue of the Savior* (independent from the canonical Gospel tradition and editorially finalised in 150 CE — see Pagels & Koester 1978:66-74; Miller 1992: 336-350; Crossan 1991:430; Koester 1980: 255-256), and the deutero-Pauline letter Colossians. Some scholars regard the hypothetical "Signs Gospel", embedded in the Gospel of John, as part of the second stratum (see Fortna 1988 and Von Wahlde 1989). On the level of the third stratum, that originated in the latter part of the first and beginning of the second century CE, we find the Gospel of Matthew, Luke-Acts, the Revelation of John, *First Clement*, the *Letter of Barnabas*, *Didache* 1:1-3a and 2:2-16:2 (independent from the canonical Gospel tradition and to be distinguished from the later addition), *Didache* 1:3b-2: 1, an apocalyptic source behind *Didache* 16:3-5 (see Crossan 1991:431; Draper

This is the reason, in concurrence with these multiple and independent attestations, why I stated at the beginning of this article that Jesus' affection towards children should be taken as historically authentic. In this article I will argue from a perspective of the social stratification of first-century Herodian Palestine that it is possible to consider these children as part of the lowest "class", namely the "expendables". Neither Mark nor its parallel texts in the other Gospels, such as Matthew, refer to parents bringing these children to Jesus. It seems that the children were "street urchins". My aim is to interpret this episode of Jesus defending the cause of "fatherless children" from the perspective of Matthew's version of Jesus' affection towards children. The aim is to demonstrate that Matthew situates the beginning and end of Jesus' public ministry within the context of Jesus' relationship to children.

1985), the *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Mandate* 2:4-7 (see Osiek 1997; Brox 1991:55-71), the Letter of James, the Gospel of John, seven letters by Ignatius, First Peter, the *Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians* 13-15 (see Koester 1982:306-308), and the First Letter of John. The fourth and final stratum originated in 120-150 CE. This stratum consists of the *Protevangelium of James* (see Cameron 1982:55-570, 1st and 2nd Timothy, Second Peter, the *Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians* 1-12, *Second Clement*, the *Gospel of the Nazoraeans* (consisting of 23 excerpts from Matthew which is known because of their patristic quotations and margin notes in a "family of manuscripts" taken from the so-called "Zion Gospel" in the 5th century, but of which the translations can probably be traced back to the 2*nd* century CE — see Koester 1982:201-202; Cameron 1982:97-98), the *Gospel of the Ebionites* (written *circa* 150 CE and dependent on a harmonized version of Matthew and Luke, and probably also Mark; all seven excerpts were quoted by Epiphanius at the end of the 4th century; Epiphanius referred to this "Gospel" by mistake as the *Gospel of the Hebrews* — see Koester [1980] 1987:201-202; Davies & Allison [1997] 2004:725-77; the latter is to be found in Jerome's commentary on Isaiah 4 – see Tatum 1994:89; the original title of the *Gospel of the Ebionites* is unknown to us — see Koester 1982:202-203; Cameron 1982: 103-104), *Didache* 1:3b-2:1 (a kind of harmonization of Jesus sayings in Matthew, Mark and Luke – see Layton 1968:343-383; Crossan 1991:433) and the *Gospel of Peter* (see Crossan 1998b:7-52; Dewey 1998:53-70).

2. THE GOSPEL FOR CHILDREN

Scholars have argued from a historical-critical perspective (especially from the exegetical point of view that is referred to in German as *formgeschichtlich*) that the original social setting (*Sitz im Leben*) of the *Evangelium Infantium* in Mark 10:13-16 should be seen as a miracle story (see Sauer 1981; Robbins 1983:447-448). This passage (translated in the Scholars Version — Miller [1992] 1994) reads as follows:

> 13. And they would bring children to him so he could lay hands on them, but the disciples scolded them. 14. Then Jesus grew indignant when he saw this and said to them: "Let the children come up to me, don't try to stop them. After all, God's domain is peopled with such as these. 15. I swear to you, whoever doesn't accept God's imperial rule the way a child would, certainly won't ever set foot in (God's domain)!" 16. And he would put his arms around them and bless them, and lay his hands on them.

The Jesus Seminar coloured the saying in verse 14 pink and the one in verse 15 grey[3] (Funk & Hoover 1993:89). This means that most Fellows of the Jesus Seminar believe that these sayings about Jesus' acceptance of "street children" and seeing God's kingdom as belonging to people who are like these children, circulated independently during the oral period of transmission of the Jesus tradition. This passage represents one of those examples where the vision of Jesus and the interpretation by the Evangelists have been dialectically interlinked. The result is that it is almost impossible to discern between authentic individual components that go back to Jesus and individual components that were coloured by early Christians during the process of oral transmission. However, in terms of the criterion of "historical plausibility", there is no reason to see the thrust of the *Evangelium Infantium* as authentic — even if this thrust originally goes back to a "healing" episode (or episodes) in the life of Jesus. Mark 10:13-16 as literary unit is Mark's composition.

Since the time of the Reformation, Mark 10:13-16 has been associated with the practice of baptizing children (see Ludolphy 1973). This is still so in modern times (see Cullmann 1948:65-73; Jeremias

3 Pink indicates that it is probably historically accurate, and grey that it is dubious, probably not historically accurate. Grey can also indicate an average vote.

1958:61-68; Lindemann 1983:77, 97-99). Today this direct association between the baptizing of children and the *Evangelium Infantium* is not generally accepted (see *inter alia* Aland 1961:67-71; Klein 1970: 68-69; Schweizer 1975:112; Gnilka 1979:81; Sauer 1981:27-29; Derrett 1983:1-3; Ringshausen 1986:34-42; Schmithals 1986:445-446). As far as form is concerned, Mark 10:13-16 demonstrates the characteristics of a short (almost aphoristic) narrative. The German exegete J. Sauer (1981:41-45) argued convincingly that this episode is a combined form of an *apothegm* and a healing story, although it shows more of the characteristics of the latter. Influential studies have independently or consciously supported Sauer in this view (see Derrett 1983:1-2; Ringshausen 1986:41).

What is immediately noticeable, is that the introduction to Mark 10:13-16 demonstrates strong similarities with other healing narratives where the disabled are brought to Jesus as a performer of miracles, with a call on him to heal them (cf. Klein 1970:59; Pesch 1977: 131; Sauer 1981:41; and particularly Schmithals 1986:445). Walter Schmithals (1986:447-448) understands Mark 10:13-16 against the background of the healing of ostracized children. In line with this interpretation, my research indicates that the Greek word *tithemi* (τίθημι) in Mark 10:16 ("And he would put his arms around them and bless them, and lay [τιθείς] his hands on them") functions semantically as the antonym for the Greek word *ektithemai* (ἐκτίθεμαι). In some contexts the latter is used to denote "being put out of the home"/ "left out of doors"/"abandon," while *tithemi* (τίθημι) denotes "accommodating someone" (see Van Aarde 1992:435-453). This accommodation especially concerns ostracized children. To bless your child, or to give your child a name, implies accepting the child into your house. When the father proclaims the name of the child, he recognizes it as his own. In the fifties, the late At van Selms (1954:90) wrote about family life in Ugaritic literature and noted: "Through the proclamation of the name the child becomes legally existent."

To bless your children, is to accept them into your home; not to bless your children, is to abandon them. Being put out of home was often the lot of unwanted children, like the handicapped. The same fate fell on children "born of unlawful unions" (*Wisdom of Solomon* 4:6). Physically and mentally disabled children, the blind, those with only

one eye or one arm, the leprous, the deaf, and the dumb were often ostracized in this way (Stockton 1983:90). The Roman philosopher and statesman, Seneca (*Controversiae* 10:4.16) referred to incidents in this connection (see Boswell 1984:21 note 26; cf. Rawson 1986:170-200). In the second or third century CE, the anonymous writer of the well-known *Letter to Diognetus* referred to the widespread Hansel and Gretel phenomenon of children being put out of homes (*Loeb Classical Library* 1965:358-361; cf. Wilson 1988:763 note 4).

> For the distinction between Christians and other [human beings], is neither in country nor language nor customs. For they do not dwell in cities in some place of their own, nor do they use any strange variety of dialect, nor practise an extraordinary kind of life ... Yet while living in Greek and barbarian cities, according as each obtained his lot, and following the local customs, both in clothing and food, and in the rest of life, they show forth the wonderful and confessedly strange character of the constitution of their own citizenship. They dwell in their own fatherlands, but as if sojourners in them; they share all things as citizens, and suffer all things as strangers. Every country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is a foreign country. They marry as all [human beings], they bear children, but they do not expose [ἐκρίπτω] their offspring. They offer free hospitality, but guard their purity ...

The Greek word translated above as "expose" is used in several places to refer to the ostracizing action of "putting someone out of the house or country" (in Greek: ἀλλ' οὐ ῥίπτουσι τὰ γεννομένα) (see Liddell & Scott 1961:1572).[4] This casting away of children should probably be seen as a primitive means to control population growth and ensure survival (see Boswell 1984:10-33; Countryman 1989:22).[5]

4 Several other references to the casting out of children are encountered in the writings of, among others, Lactantius (circa 250-circa 325 CE), *Institutiones Divinae* 5.9; Justin Martyr (died circa 165 CE), 1 *Apologia* 27; Clement of Alexandria (circa 160-215 CE), *Paedagogus* 3.3; Seneca (circa 4 BCE-65 CE), *Controversiae* 10.4.16 and Tertullian (circa 160-circa 212 CE), *Ad Nationes* 1.3.16 (see Van Aarde 1992:435-453). It is in particular the Greek verb and noun *ektithemai* (ἐκτίθεμαι)/*ekthesis* (ἐκθέσις) (cf. Louw & Nida 1988:483) and the Latin *exposito* that are used to refer to this ostracizing action. It often took place under the pretext that it was a sacrificial religious action. The practice in the Middle Ages of "donating" children to cloisters with ecclesiastic approval and regulation (see Deroux 1927:1-16, 81-113, 193-216), could be seen in the same light.

5 Susan Scrimshaw (1984:448) puts it as follows:

When a woman with an unwanted pregnancy (whether married, betrothed or not) escaped death, yet was abandoned, the child could be cast away at birth. It seems that in New Testament times, people of other fringe groups who tried to exist outside the circle of normal family care were often the only refuge of the outcast woman and/or child. It is possible that the socioeconomic group that Josephus frequently referred to as the "bandits" (see Horsley 1979:37-63), should be seen as among these people. Also among them seems to be people such as we encounter when we read texts like Matthew 15:29-32. From the perspective of the "politics of holiness" (see Neusner 1973: 15-26), "unclean" and "imperfect" people were the "sinners" who were under the influence of demons. It is with reference to this that Matthew refers to some of the Galileans as those living in the "land of the shadow of death" (Mt 4:16).

According to Matthew (who developed his understanding of Jesus' healing activities from themes in the Hebrew Scriptures — see Is 8:23-9:2; 58:10), Jesus' message that God's kingdom was near-at-hand was for these peripheral people who "lived in darkness". His message was like the dawning of a light. According to purification customs, these people were the socially despised who were put out of homes and were refused admittance to the temple and synagogues. Jesus' miracles were aimed at people in Galilee like them. Matthew 4:23-5:4ff. is another example of such a report.

In his book *The miracle stories of the early Christian tradition* ([1974] 1983), Gerd Theissen focuses on the meaning of the fact that Jesus turned to the social and political outcasts. Theissen (1983:207) notes that belief in miracles among the humble people was "concentrated ... on specific situations of distress, on possession, disease, hunger, lack of success and danger." The Matthean miracle summaries

> leave no doubt about the sort of people who flocked to [Jesus]; it was the *ochlos*, the "crowd", the humble people (Theissen 1983:249).

> The society tends to mandate infanticide in areas affecting the entire society in either ecological (overpopulation) or social (illegitimate) domains.

In many societies, records witness that "adulterous conception was offered as grounds for infanticide."

They were part of the expendable class,

> about 5-10%, for whom society had no place or need. They had been forced off the land because of population pressures or they did not fit into society. They tended to be landless and itinerant with no normal family life and a high death rate (Saldarini 1988:44).

Street children were to be found among them. It is striking that, in many places in Matthew, the "crowd" is called the "least" (Mt 25:40, 45), the "children" (Mt 15:26; 18:3), the "little ones" (Mt 18:14), and "sheep" (Mt 18:12; cf. Mt 10:36 and 15:26). The metaphorical use of "sheep" in Matthew 9:36 and 18:12 correlates with the expressions "the lost sheep of Israel" in Matthew 10:6 and "the little children" in Matthew 18:3-5, as well as with "the little ones" in Matthew 18:6, 10, 14 (cf. Mt 10:42).

We have seen that Schmithals (1986:447-448) describes the *Sitz im Leben* of the *Evangelium Infantium* (as far as it can be discerned historically) as that it should be understood against the background of the healing of ostracized children. He also notes that Jesus' acceptance of the children, which is apparent from his actions, should be seen as a condemnation of the practice of "turning the children out of the home". Just as the words "hot" and "cold" cannot be used in a semantically independent manner — the one finds its meaning in terms of the other — the meaning of the Greek word *ektithemai* (ἐκτίθεμαι) is complemented by the word *tithemi* (τίθημι). The latter can indicate, among other meanings, an act of "assigning/appointing someone to a particular task, function, or role" (Louw & Nida 1988: 483). In other words, it is an act of "choosing". "Choosing" need not always imply "selection," but could also mean the "acceptance" or even the vocation to the fulfilment of a specific role. The name given to a child by the parents was sometimes related to the identification and vocation to fulfil a particular role or perform a task (Patte 1987:23-28). In this connection, it is important to note that the parental custom of blessing a child and placing one's hands on that child (see the analogy in Mark 10:16) relates to the action of "accepting into the home" as opposed to "putting out of the home".[6]

6 To bless your child means to promise help and care. As a result of the (covenantal) relationship between a son and his father, one of the most important signs of

3. MATTHEW'S TALE OF TWO KINGS

The *Sitz im Leben* of both Mark 10:1-12 (Jesus' critique of divorce) and Mark 10:13-16 (the *Evangelium Infantium*) served as the source for Matthew's version of the complex "Jesus-Kingdom of Heaven-Children". The same social setting can be assumed to be part of the background of the narrative about the birth of Jesus, at least as told in Matthew's story. Matthew's story about the origins and infancy of Jesus forms an appropriate parallel to what many find to be perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Jesus' ministry (cf. Patte 1987:27; Beare 1981:68): his association with the "least", the "children", the "little ones", the "sheep". The use of these names portrays the care and love of Jesus, symbolized in the Matthean infancy narrative as shepherd of God's people (Mt 2:6). A genealogical record is a kind of certificate of status in terms of a male's identity. It certified the bearer as an official member of his culture in good standing, and conferred upon him the cultural credentials of role and status apposite to his ancestral heritage.

According to Matthew's narrative strategy, the birth record of Jesus (Mt 1:1-17) paves the way for the birth narrative as such (Mt 1:18-25). And the birth narrative in its turn paves the way for the story of King Herod versus the newborn king of the Jews (Mt 2:1-23). Instead of leading God's people, Herod (appointed by Caesar as "king of the Jews"), killed children (see Josephus *BJ* 1.431-440) and in response was feared (see *Assumptio Mosis* 6:2-9; cf. Tromp 1993:17, 211-213). Susan Scrimshaw (1984:445), therefore, postulates "dynastic politics" as the "proximate reason" for Herod's infanticide. Jesus, on the contrary, being an adopted child (Mt 1:19-20), touched (Mt 19: 13-15) and healed children (Mt 21:14) and, in response, was honoured in the temple by children as Son of David (Mt 21:15). The Matthean infancy narrative can thus be interpreted from the perspective of the social pattern of *challenge* and *riposte* (see Malina [1981] 1993:33) in terms of the ascribed and acquired honour of two kings.

honour that a son can show his father is to care reciprocally for him when he is old, and to bury him. The Greek word *tithemi* (τίθημι) is also used for this (see Acts 7:16), as well as *prostithemi* (προστίθημι) (see Acts 13:36, where the word literally means "to entrust your father to his fathers") (Louw & Nida 1988:531).

"Challenge and riposte" can be studied from the social-scientific perspective of honour and shame as pivotal social values. Such an interaction takes place among equals. This is a problem where Jesus is concerned in Matthew's Gospel (see Malina & Neyery 1988; Neyrey 1998). Jesus was not an equal of Herod the Great. We know that Antipater, the father of Herod the Great, was ascribed honour by Caesar when he was declared king of the Judeans in 47 BCE (see Botha 1995:1015-1016). Herod the Great himself was made king by the Roman Senate. However, although he was a Judean by religion, his racial descent was Idumaean (cf Brandon 1967:27). Herod acted as patron among the people through agriculture and commercial enterprise but the response to his program was fear and hostility (*Assumptio Mosis* 6:2-9). On the other hand, Matthew's version of Jesus' genealogy places him among the disreputable who lacked honour so that there was no honour to defend. The "impure" women Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Uriah's wife Bathsheba in Jesus' birth record were comparable to other defenceless people: orphans, widows, sexually objectified women, destitute poor, resident aliens — people incapable of defending their own honour. This meant that a patron with honour was needed in order to defend a person without honour. According to Matthew, God was the one who intervened on behalf of Jesus.

In the Matthean infancy narrative, the life of the child Jesus was threatened by Herod the Great. Because of God's intervention, he became Joseph's adopted son (Mt 1:25). Joseph, when wanting to divorce Mary, is described as her husband, just (or righteous), and unwilling to put her to shame (Mt 1:19). Joseph, when taking Mary into his home, is also described as son of David, obeying (Mt 1:24), without fear (Mt 1:20), adopting Jesus by giving him his name (Mt 1:25), and transmitting the vocation to be saviour of *all* Israel — including the marginalized children (see Van Aarde 2003). Though Jesus was portrayed as born from and among despised outcasts, he was God's "adopted son" (Mt 3:17).

Herod the Great, the challenger of Jesus, was a murderer of children. In order to maintain his geopolitical power, Herod the Great murdered those sons who would be more readily acceptable to the Judeans as king. The legend about Herod's infanticide in Matthew should be understood against this background. Matthew narrates how

Jesus escaped being murdered by Herod. This was a result of God's intervention. In Matthew's story Jesus, in his turn, became the protector of defenceless children.

Matthew situates the beginning and end of Jesus' public ministry within this context of Jesus' relationship to children. Jesus' baptism by John (so that they both can fulfil "all righteousness" — Mt 3:15) and Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (Mt 21:1-17) form the two poles of his ministry. Both episodes can be described as a kind of a "cleansing of the temple". The last episode is explicitly told and the first episode implicitly. Both incidents were (in a midrash fashion) understood by Matthew as fulfilment of Scripture. *The baptism scene is a Matthean allusion to Isaiah 1:13-17 and the record of the entry into Jerusalem is an explicit interpretation of Jeremiah 7:1-8*:

> Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations — I cannot bear your evil assemblies … I am weary bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! *Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.* (Is 1:13-17; my emphasis.)
>
> This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Stand at the gate of the Lord's house and there proclaim this message: 'Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the Lord.' This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, This is the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord! If you really change your ways and your actions *and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place*, … in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever. But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless." (Jer 7:1-8; my emphasis.)

In the beginning of Matthew's story the "authorities" in Jerusalem almost murdered the infant Jesus with other "expendable" children. In the middle part of the story Jesus acted as the protector of the honour of the miserable. At the end, quite unconventionally, Jesus was honoured by infants. Here, near the end of Jesus' life, Matthew unexpectedly places the children in the temple. Children were not permitted to enter the temple. Yet, according to Matthew, children were the ones to honour Jesus. Jesus, born from among the despised, was also

not expected to be found in the Temple. Honour could only be ascribed by notable persons (Malina 1983:34). The implication of this is that Matthew treated both Jesus and the children as notable people. In Matthew's story, God is shown "to be one who sides with the outcast and endangered woman and child" (Schaberg 1987:74). Thus Matthew retold the tradition of the divine intervention that caused Joseph's acceptance of the messianic child and his mother.

4. FINDINGS

Matthew emphasizes Jesus' messianic role by situating the beginning (Mt 3:15) and end of Jesus' public relationship (Mt 21:1-17) within the context of Jesus' relationship to children. In a midrash fashion, these two incidents were understood by Matthew as fulfilment of Scripture (Is 1:13-17 and Jer 7:1-8 respectively). By doing so, Matthew's emphasis on God as Father is an indication that the Jesus movement was the commencement of a new "fictive" family (Mt 19:29), a family of God (Mt 23:9). By making the child and not the father the model for entry into the reign of God, Jesus "reversed the hierarchical assumptions that governed all of life" (Countryman 1989:188; Riches 1980: 132-133). The Matthean Jesus' attitude towards the status of women and his affection towards children represents the deliberate breaking down of boundaries (Schaberg 1989:77). The new way was for all to assume the position of children (cf. Mt 23:11-12).

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