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Focusing on the Child Next to Jesus in Mark 9:33-37

By A. James Murphy

Child-centered, or childist, interpretation is one of the newest academic approaches to critically reading the Bible. With cues from feminist criticism and other methods, scholars begin by looking for passages that touch on children or contain child characters. Then, rather than focusing upon typical main characters, scholars draw the reader's foremost attention to the child, reading the actions and words of other characters, narrator, even the author in relation to the child. Sometimes we use this approach to learn more about children historically, and peoples' views of them. We may also use this approach along with literary methods to understand how young figures function within a story. Many use this method, drawing on our empathy for children, to challenge readers to reassess our moral and ethical relationships with children today. The following examples focus on Mark 9:33–37, “The Child in the Midst.”

Mark 9:33–37 is a brief story that includes figures that Christians and New Testament scholars would likely consider the most important in the New Testament, Jesus and his disciples. Yet, we will pass over these figures to focus on “a small child” who is in a house Jesus and the Twelve have entered in Capernaum. First, it is helpful to know that the Greek word Mark uses for “a small child” can mean “child” or “slave” and may imply the figure is a child slave. Elsewhere, Mark usually implies female figures through more specific Greek words and even uses a precise term for a female slave, so Mark likely intends a young boy here. He provides no name. The boy is part of a household, but Mark mentions no parent or master. He appears alone, singled out by those who have entered the house. Furthermore, the child says and does nothing. Characters that speak and act tend to reveal *something* to the reader about themselves—Peter's

impulsiveness, or a nameless woman's desire for healing when she touched Jesus' garment. Our child in Mark 9 gets no such opportunity. In one sense, this child suffers from a lack of identity and context to present to the reader. To use a Markan phrase, this figure surely is among "the last of all" (or *least*) in society.

Despite these limitations, this child gets center stage. Jesus holds this child and the broader context of the passage positively contrasts him against the Twelve disciples, Jesus' closest companions. On their way to Capernaum, the disciples argued over who was the greatest, presumably among them (9:33–34). After entering "the house," Jesus sits and calls the Twelve around him and says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (9:35; NRSV). Then Mark writes, "Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me'" (9:36–37; NRSV). In other words, Mark suddenly depicts this child who has no name, voice, or actions, in a manner symbolically, as well as perhaps physically, closer to Jesus than his named, speaking, active, adult, male, and constant followers. As such, the child would be able to look intimately upon Jesus' face. Looking outward (and upward), he would see these adult men standing around them, looking at him, listening to Jesus talk about him. What an insider! One moment they were jealously arguing about who was greatest in this new kingdom, the next moment a child slave appears to occupy that position. The symbolism of this moment, in which Mark uses a child, is a major theme for this gospel. The author constantly uses minor, and often marginal characters in order to help Jesus reveal glimpses of the coming reign of God and that Jesus is God's son.

Next, Jesus identifies (something about) this child with himself ("Whoever welcomes one such child...welcomes me"), and via Jesus, with God (9:37). Welcoming a child is equivalent to

welcoming God! To put this in even more stark terms, we can contrast this child whom Jesus uses with other children as depicted in Mark's social background. He is not the son or servant of the emperor. He is not the son or servant of anyone with a hint of status, such as Jairus' daughter (the synagogue ruler; Mark 5:22) or even the High Priest's servant girl (14:66–70). Yet, Mark presents this child as central to our welcoming God. In doing so, the author sharply contrasts this young symbol of servanthood with the self-interest displayed by the disciples a few verses earlier. Mark quickly follows this "Child in the Midst" story with a warning by Jesus for those who would cause "one of these little ones" to stumble (9:42), with no indication the scene has changed; the child remains centered.

One avenue those who engage in child-centered readings of the Bible take is to openly connect the ethical implications of such passages to how we interact with children today. If the Bible portrays children in some passages as so vulnerable yet valuable, then what should be our responsibilities toward them today? Such scholarship can provide theological support for discussions about child refugees or asylum seekers, victims of child abuse, the importance of social programs for disadvantaged children, and more. For example, if God is concerned with the plight of children, if welcoming one is akin to welcoming God, how do we justify turning children and their families away from crossing national borders?

Occasionally, scholars have attempted to imaginatively illustrate possible perspectives of children within biblical stories in ways that deepen reader empathy and sometimes challenge reader assumptions. For example, following Mark's storyline, the author depicts our servant child in a house in Capernaum, a town beside the Sea of Galilee, and the list of those identified as residing in or near Capernaum is small. In fact, Mark lists Jesus as having a home in Capernaum (2:1) and intimates that the disciples James and John as well as Simon and Andrew

live there (1:21, 29–34; tradition has long identified Peter’s house with archaeological remains in Capernaum). Mark frequently mentions both a synagogue (and archaeologists have uncovered the foundation of one dating back to the first century) as well as a “house” that seems to serve in Mark as a sort of “urban” resting place for Jesus early on, although it is unclear to whom the latter belongs (e.g., 3:20; 7:17; 9:28). It is quite possible, therefore, that the synagogue ruler Jairus was a resident of Capernaum too (cf. 4:35, 5:1, 21–22). Could the child in Mark 9:36–37 possibly be a household servant of one of these biblical figures? Would his eyes light up with news that his master’s sons (if disciples) are home? What if it is Jesus’ house? Would the child be curious what Jesus and the disciples have been doing? Would his age or status have prevented him from asking? Does their arrival mean more work for him? One can raise so many new questions about the Bible, its authors, and main characters through child-centered readings.

Another creative angle provides further challenges our sensibilities and our ideas about God, Jesus, or the Kingdom of God. Imagine the master of the house tells this child to quickly prepare because a godly teacher and his disciples are stopping in for a visit. Attending to those in the room, the teacher whom the child doesn’t know suddenly reaches out and takes his hand and pulls him over and stands him directly beside him with one arm clutching him. He looks up to see several faces glaring down at him in bemusement. “What is this man doing?” He listens. “Whoever welcomes someone like me welcomes God? What does this mean?” he might think. “Am I important to God? Are people supposed to treat me better? Will I be freed?” Then, the teacher and his disciples go off, down the road to spread his “good news.” Perhaps later, he asks his master or parent about Jesus’ words and his own questions. Careful attention to Mark’s story might lead us to conclude a reply to the boy something like, “Ah, no boy. Jesus was not really welcoming you personally. But he used you to demonstrate a very important teaching.” Is the

boy in Mark 9:36–37 merely *used* by Jesus to teach adults? Might the boy have noticed? Should we imagine him old enough to understand at all?

These examples, focused around the “Child in the Midst” in Mark 9:33–37, and the questions and scenarios they raise, illustrate just how complex, rewarding, and challenging a child-centered reading can be for the serious student of the Bible. After all, Jesus and his followers left our boy behind, still a slave with the same daily tasks typical of a young slave boy in first-century Galilee.