The Significance of Childhood in the Gospel of Luke

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The child grows to become an adult. Without childhood there is no adulthood. Childhood and the child is equally as important as adulthood or the adult. In Luke's story, Jesus is not just an adult; he first comes as a baby conceived in the womb of a virgin, then he is born. Luke insists on telling a story of the childhood of Jesus at the age of twelve. The adult Jesus begins ministry following his baptism only after this story. The adult Jesus also ministers to children; and presents children as a model to adults. This paper explores the significance of childhood in Luke's narrative.

Luke's Gospel begins with two birth stories. In the first Luke draws the reader's attention to a childless couple who have always longed for a child (Luke 1:5-25). The second concerns a young woman of marriageable age who conceives by the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:26-38). Luke's beginning thus depicts the miraculous conception/birth of two children whose adult story will come up later

in the narrative. This introduction already highlights Luke's interest in the relevance of children, and thus of childhood.[1]

Interestingly, of the four canonical Gospels, only Matthew and Luke offer the reader something about the conception and infancy of Jesus. When juxtaposed against Matthew, Luke stands tall in his presentation of the child/hood of Jesus. Luke tells the reader about Jesus' conception (1:26-38), his birth (2:1-7), his naming (2:21), and presentation in the Temple (2:22-38). Luke also narrates a story from Jesus' childhood—how Jesus, at the age of twelve, engages in a discussion with the teachers of the Law in the Temple (2:41-52). Luke further shows that the adult Jesus ministers to children (8:40-42a, 49-56; 9:37-43), makes children the yardstick of entry into the kingdom (18:15-17), and tells stories that express concern and care for children (11:7, 11-14).

Luke writes not only about the begetting of Jesus, but also about the origins of John the Baptist.[2] While Luke offers no particular story about John's childhood, the narrative does give indications about John transitioning from childhood to adulthood. Luke makes frequent references to child/ren in the narrative suggesting that this theme is

[1] Childhood as employed here refers to the state of being a child—that stage of human development when one is defined in physically developmental and social terms as having not yet 'come of age'. In the first-century world of the NT, though a person's life was often divided into stages, child development did not often fall into idealised stages. The boundaries were fluid and shifting, for both boys and girls. In this article, it suffices to hold on to the view that the child is one who is dependent on the adult world around them. See, James A. Murphy, *Kids and Kingdom: The Precarious Presence of Children in the Synoptic Gospels* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 7; Cornelia B. Horn and John W. Martens, *Let the Little children Come to Me: Childhood and Children in Early Christianity* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 2-4.

[2] This is a solely Lukan material.

important for the author.[3] This affirming the assertion that, "One's early years of life… have a crucial significance, because one's development during this phase lays the foundations for later growth into virtuous and rational adulthood."[4] As Sharon Betsworth states, "The Gospel of Luke contains more material about children than the other canonical Gospels do."[5]

In what follows, I do not intend to examine every text where Luke makes references to a child, children or related terms. My aim is to explore the significance of childhood in Luke's Gospel by examining some texts in three key areas: the infancy narrative, parables of Jesus, and healing stories in the Gospel. I shall begin by briefly exploring childhood in the narrative world of Luke-Acts.

Childhood in the narrative world of Luke-Acts

The Gospel narratives reflect the narrative context in which they were written. Luke, generally believed to have been written about 80—90 C.E., is situated within the context of the first century C.E. Greco-

3 Child—Luke 1:35, 41, 44, 59, 66, 76, 80; 2:5, 6, 12, 16, 17, 21, 27, 34, 38, 40, 48; 8:54; 9:38, 47, 48; 11:11, 12; 14:5; 16:25; 18:17; Acts 7:5; Child's—Luke 2:33; 8:51; Childless—Luke 20:29, 31; Children—1:7, 17; 3:8; 6:35; 7:32, 35; 11:7, 13; 13:34; 14:26; 16:8 [2x]; 18:16, 29; 19:44; 20:28 [2x], 36 [2x]; 23:28; Acts 2:39; 13:33; 21:5, 21; infant/s—Luke 10:21; 18:15; 21:23; Acts 7:19. Luke also uses the word 'boy' twice in the Gospel (2:43; 9:42) and once in Acts (20:12). The word 'girl' does not appear in Luke-Acts but 'daughter/s' appears in several places (Luke 2:36; 8:42, 48, 49; 12:53; 13:16; 23:38; Acts 2:17; 7:21; 21:9) as well as son/s (Luke 1:13, 32; 2:7; 5:10; 15:11; Acts 1:13; 2:17; 4:36; 7:16).

4 Malin Grahn-Wilder, "Roots of Character and Flowers of Virtues: A Philosophy of Childhood in Plato's *Republic*," in Reidar Aasgaard and Cornelia Horn, with Oana Maria Cojocaru (eds), *Childhood in History: Perceptions of Children in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 19,

5 Sharon Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 99.

Roman civilisation. Children, no doubt, had their place in this society.[6] But what can we understand about childhood in this world?

Terms used for children: In Greek, young children were called νήπιοι (*nepioi*), and in Latin, *infantes*.[7] Both words refer to inability for speech (similar to 'barbarian' — which indicated that a person did not speak Greek).[8] The child's "inability to communicate in the way adults do made [the child] a symbol of non-participation in the rational world of the adult citizen."[9] Similarly, the word παῖς (*pais*) is used to refer to both children and slaves. This suggests that children, like slaves, were powerless (or vice-versa).[10]

The child and reason: The child was perceived as lacking reason. For instance, Marcus Aurelius (a Stoic philosopher) ponders, "Whose soul inhabits me at the moment? A child's, a [youth's], a woman's, a tyrant's, a dumb ox's, or a wild beast's?"[11] The assumption here would be that Marcus considered all these categories in some way —

6 James Francis, "Children, Childhood," in David Noel Freedman (ed), *Eerdmans' Dictionary of the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 234.

7 Infancy was generally from birth up to seven years. A child younger than seven did not take responsibility for his/her actions, but at seven years of age, a child was considered to know right from wrong. Childhood ended with adolescence/puberty, considered to be twelve years for girls and fourteen for boys. Post this, the child transitions into adulthood. Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 17, 18.

8 Cf. Ray Laurence, "Childhood in the Roman Empire," *History Today* 55, no. 10 (2005), 22.

9 Thomas Wiedemann, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 21-22.

10 Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 8-9.

11 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 4.23.

something 'less than' the ideal person he was striving to be.[12] Similarly, Seneca (another Stoic) asserts: "A person, once a child, becomes a youth; his peculiar quality is transformed; for the child could not reason, but the youth possess reason."[13] For Seneca, a child can transition to become a reasoning adult; only that then the child has become something different from what the child was before. Both Marcus and Seneca "used the child as a symbol of the 'irrationality of an unphilosophical adult'."[14] In the same vein, the Greek philosopher Epictetus (55—135 C.E.) remarked that children can amuse themselves, for example, by building sand castles.[15] His point, however, is that "the uneducated man, the unphilosophical man, is a child."[16] This idea of the unreasonableness of a child also permeates the Septuagint, especially the Wisdom books (for instance, Wis 12:25; Prov 22:15; Sir 30:1-30). Generally, children were viewed as adults in the making which provided the grounds for the argument that children were weak in mind, deficient in rationality, and that only adults can engage in rational argument.[17]

12 Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 9.
13 Sen. *EP*. 118.14.
14 Wiedemann, *Adults and Children*, 24.
15 Epictetus *Epist*. 3.13.
16 W. Martin Bloomer, "Roman Conceptions of Childhood," in Reidar Aasgaard and Cornelia Horn, with Oana Maria Cojocaru (eds), *Childhood in History: Perceptions of Children in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 59.
17 Francis, "Childhood," 234.

The child as metaphor for irrational behavioural patterns: Childhood as a metaphor was well known in antiquity and widely employed in Hellenistic rhetoric.[18] We find this frequently employed in Paul (cf. 1 Cor 3:1-2; 13:11-12; 14:20; Eph 4:14), which pictures the "philosophical and religious instructions throughout the ancient world."[19] For instance, in his biography of the philosopher, Peregrinus, Lucian of Samosata writes (ca. 150-180 CE), "It was then that [Peregrinus] learned the marvelous wisdom of the Christians by associating with their priests and scribes in Palestine. And—what else would you expect?—in a moment he made them all look like children…" (*De morter Peregrini*, 11).[20] In this world, children were used as symbols of irrational behavioural patterns and attitudes. One adult criticised other adults by calling 'their conduct childish'.[21] The fact that this view of childhood appears in a number of the NT letters (cf. Heb 5:12-14; 1 Pet 2:2), written by different authors at different contexts suggests the possibility that this "metaphor was used widely, not only in the 1st-century Mediterranean world but also amongst the early Christians."[22] The metaphorical understanding of childhood as a perspective for discipleship reflects the status of children expressed

18 Jan Grobbelaar, "Doing Theology with Children: A Childist Reading of the Childhood Metaphor in 1 Corinthians and the Synoptic Gospels," *HTS* 76(4), a5637.https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i4.5637, 3.

19 R. B. Hays, *First Corinthians, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary on Teaching and Preaching*, kindle edn., (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 48.

20 Richard S. Ascough et al (eds), *Associations in the Greco-Roman World: A Source Book* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2012), 248.

21 O. M. Bakke, *When Children Become People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, transl. B McNeil (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 54.

22 Grobbelaar, "Doing Theology with Children," 2.

negatively as childishness, the child as an object lesson in what to avoid.[23]

The relevance of the child as a child: Bloomer points out that for most of the elites of the ancient world in which the Gospels were written the child is simply not that important.[24] Even when children were included in religious and social events in this world, it was essentially for their development. Such experiences, it was thought, would help children develop virtue and therefore, become citizens able to maintain the values and traditions of their society.[25] Betsworth counters several of the ideologies that portray children as unimportant.[26] As she argues, these ideologies were only means by which society coped with situations at the time.[27] But therein lies the crux of the matter—the fact that children became the sacrifice for society (the world of the adult) to cope with situations at the time. Bloomer's summary is apt, that broadly speaking, ancient writers view children from one of two approaches: (1), Children "understood as typifying social virtues because they are

23 Francis, "Childhood," 234.

24 Bloomer, "Roman Conceptions of Childhood," 56.

25 Patricia Baker, "Greco-Roman Paediatrics," in Reidar Aasgaard and Cornelia Horn, with Oana Maria Cojocaru (eds), *Childhood in History: Perceptions of Children in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 77. See also Lena Larson Lovén and Agneta Strömberg, "Economy," in M. Harlow and R. Laurence (eds), *A Cultural History of Childhood and Family in Antiquity* (Oxford: Berg, 2010), 47. Vuolanto highlights the importance of children for their insight into the world of the divine and knowledge of the gods they were thought to possess. Ville Vuolanto, "Faith and Religion," in Mary Harlow and Ray Laurence (eds), *A Cultural History of Childhood and Family in Antiquity* (New York, NY: Berg Publishers, 2010), 147-148.

26 For instance, *paterfamilias*, words used to describe young children, infanticide and exposure, the practice of wet-nursing. For details, see Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 6-13.

27 Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 6-13.

human beings before the deleterious effects of social ambition or personal vice." Here, "children's behavior can be employed as an incentive to the virtues of generosity, sympathy, and charity of spirit…" (2), children "perceived as uninformed persons driven by unruly appetite and desires." Here, children represent "an image of all that is in need of transformation."[28] This is what Berryman classifies as a high and a low view of childhood. In Berryman's presentation, the high view "is respectful to, moves toward, and is open to learning from children."[29] A low view is on the other hand "dismissing of, moves away from, and only sees children in a narrow, closed way, as objects to be taught and purified."[30]

Both of these views are discernible in the NT. While it may be argued that much of Paul's views represent a low view of childhood, the Gospels, and especially Luke, represent a high view. Paul, in order to be rhetorically persuasive, employed this general and widely accepted notion of childhood in the world of his addressees.[31] My focus in this paper, however, is Luke's view as presented in the Gospel of Luke.

28 Bloomer, "Roman Conceptions of Childhood," 19.

29 J. W. Berryman, *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace* (New York, NY: Morehouse Publishing, 2009), 204.

30 Berryman, *Children and the Theologians*, 204.

31 R. Aasgaard, "Like a Child: Paul's Rhetorical Uses of Childhood," in M. J. Bunge, T. E. Fretheim & B. R. Gaventa (eds.), *The Child in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 372. Also, Mark I. Wegener, "The Arrival of Jesus as a Political Subversive Event According to Luke 1—2," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 44:1 (January 2017), 15.

Childhood in the Gospel of Luke

Luke's Gentile audience most likely included children (cf. 18:15-17; Acts 2:39); the narrative reflects Luke's awareness of the child in its social setting (cf. 11:11-13a).[32] In this section, I shall explore childhood in Luke, examining the following texts: Jesus' childhood — 2:41-62 (Jesus in the temple); Jesus' teachings — 9:46-48 (children and greatness), and 18:15-17 (Jesus blesses children); healing stories — 8:40-56 (a girl-child restored to life), and 9:37-43 (a boy-child healed). The starting point, however, is a brief examination of John the Baptist as a growing child.

John the Baptist

The conception of John the Baptist kickstarts Luke's narrative (after the preface, 1:1-4). While the other evangelists only relate the ministry of the adult John (Matt3:1-17; Mark 1:2-8; John 1:19-34), Luke gives the reader some insight into John's beginnings. Childlessness in the Old Testament (OT) is a reproach (Lev 20:20-21; Jer 22:30; 1 Sam 1:5-6; cf. Luke 1:25); Luke's narrative, on the other hand, is crafted such that the reader sees God's hand at work (1:6-13), and God's plans for this child (1:14-17). This recalls God's act with many of the great OT characters who were born under similar situation.[33] The child's birth will great joy bring to the parents. At his birth and naming, the

32 Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis, IN: Fortress Press, 2006), 66-67.

33 Darrell Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50* (Grand rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 78. Cf. Isaac to Sarah (Gen 18:11); Samson to wife of Manoah (Judges 13:2); Samuel to Hannah (1 Sam 1—2).

neighbours and relatives marvel at the event and their sense of wonder focus on the child—what will the child become (1:66)? This question becomes the bridge between John's childhood and adulthood.

Though given the name, John (1:63), Luke emphatically points out that this is about a child, hence "the child grew, and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness till the day he appeared publicly to Israel" (1:80). The concept of growth is child development. The reference to "became strong in spirit" obviously does not refer to the infant John but to a growing child. Marshall affirms that this is about John's childhood "described on the pattern of 1 Sa 2:21. He undergoes normal physical growth to maturity… and becomes strong in spirit."[34] From the wilderness the growing child prepares for the adult ministry (1:80b), thus linking childhood and adulthood. The notion of growing also implies maturity and development in what one already is and has.

Luke is not interested in at what age John entered the wilderness to prepare for his public adult ministry. Luke however casts light on three things: (1) the child growing, (2) the child becoming strong in spirit, and (3) the child being in the wilderness. This signals the possibility that while still a child John goes into the wilderness. At this point of the narrative what Luke emphasises is the child and his childhood (in

34 I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1978), 95.

summary), until the child transitions to adulthood to begin his ministry to Israel. This does not begin until Luke 3:2. The child's growth and development, physically and spiritually, is Luke's concern now.[35] Luke's highlight of these details buttresses the importance not just of John's adult ministry, but also of his beginning—his childhood.

Jesus' beginning

While Jesus' adult ministry fills the narrative of the four canonical Gospels, only Luke accentuates his childhood. In Luke 2:40, Luke offers the compendious account: "the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom and the favour of God was upon him." This recalls the summary statement about the child who grew to become John the Baptist (1:80); thus, implying a similar age bracket for John and Jesus in relation to the statement. The next pericope places Jesus at 12 years (2:41-52)—a strong indicator that Jesus "grew and became strong" hints at a time before this age. This could be the case for the child (John) in 1:80 as well.

The "child grew" indicates that the child in question (Jesus) is no longer of the same age as at when the child was presented in the Temple before Simeon and Anna (2:22-38). Childhood development is in view here from two dimensions: physical growth (ηὔξανεν, *euxanen*, he grew) and spiritual growth (ἐκραταιοῦτο, *ekrataiouto*, he became strong). The

35 Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50*, 194. See also F. W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age: A Commentary on St Luke's Gospel* (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1988), 51.

extent of this growth, especially in respect to wisdom, will be demonstrated by Jesus's wise perceptions in the story that follows in 2:41-52.[36]

Jesus in the Temple (2:41-52)

This childhood story is very particular to Luke's Gospel. How does this story of the child Jesus among the teachers in the Temple help articulate the significance of childhood in Luke's Gospel?

i. Luke's opening remarks: the story of a 12-year-old child

This narrative places Jesus at age twelve (v 42). At this age Jesus is "well below the age of majority according to Roman custom; he would still be considered a juvenile."[37] While it was a requirement for adult males to attend the Passover, it wasn't for women and children.[38] Some Mishnah texts state that "Jewish boys reach the age of independence and responsibility at age 13 and that the preceding year is a year of study and preparation."[39] Luke thus highlights this childhood story of

36 Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I—IX* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 432.

37 Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 111.

38 However, Yarbrough suggests that according to some Mishnah texts (*m. Hag*. 1.1), boys old enough to 'ride upon their father's shoulders or hold his hands' as they climb the Temple Mount were required to attend the three great festivals. See, O. Larry Yarbrough, "Parents and Children in the Jewish Family of Antiquity," in Shaye J. Cohen (ed), *Jewish Family in Antiquity* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993), 47.

39 *Nid. 5.6; Meg. 4.6;* cf. also, *Gen. Rab. 63.10 and 'Abot 5.21*. See Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 108, who references, Bradly S. Billings, "'At the age of 12': The Boy Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:41-52), the Emperor Augustus, and the Social Setting of the Third Gospel," *JTS* 60 (2009): 72. Going by the difficulty of knowing how much these texts reflect earlier tradition, since they are later than the New Testament, Betsworth, appealing to Bovon, suggests that instead the age simply indicates that Jesus is still a child and not yet an adult. Betsworth, 108; cf. Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1—9:50*, 111.

Jesus on the corridors of the age of responsibility and growing up; but still a child. In the OT, there is precedence for twelve-year-olds assuming responsibility. The story of Samuel in the Temple comes to mind.[40] Josephus suggests that Samuel began his prophetic ministry when he was about the age of twelve.[41] At the end of both narratives, the authors indicate that the boys grew in favour with both humans and with God (1 Sam 3:19; Luke 2:40). Solomon was also twelve when he ascended to the throne of his father David (1 Kings 2:12). The story is thus firmly grounded within its Jewish context.

ii. The boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem: the child has a will

The Boy Jesus stays behind in Jerusalem at the end of the festival without his parents' knowledge and approval (v 43). His parents are unperturbed presuming that he is among the group of travellers (v 44). This implies the possibility of other children with whom the boy Jesus could have been. The use of "the boy Jesus" (παῖς) emphasises his youthfulness, and makes certain that Luke intentionally brings his childhood to limelight. The contrast between παῖς and παιδίον (paidion, little child) in 2:17, 27, 40, underscores Jesus' growth since the previous event in Luke 2. The use of παῖς in 2:43a thus could be Luke's deliberate style to stress that "the event comes relatively early in Jesus'

40 The parents of both children (Samuel and Jesus) make annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem (1Sam 1:3; Luke 2:41), both children are dedicated to the Lord (1Sam 1:2428; Luke 2:25-38), both children are found in the Temple (1 Sam 3:3; Luke 2:46).

41 Josephus, *Ant*. 5.10.4.

life."[42] The reference to "his parents did not know it" (v 43c) suggests that he is still under their supervision; hence a child. This is further strengthened by the fact that they (the parents) start to look for him (v 44b); worry and anxiety set in because of the presumed loss of their child. But does Luke suggest that the boy is lost? Luke's statements: "The boy Jesus stayed behind," and "his parents did not know it" emphasise the boy's decision to stay back. Many commentators stress the loss of a child.[43] This is the case when examined from the position of the parents. From the child's viewpoint, on the other hand, it is a deliberate and purposeful decision, hence, he is not lost. The narrative simply points out that, though still a child, he possesses his own will.

iii. The boy Jesus among the teachers: the child possesses wisdom

This twelve-years-old boy is not roaming the streets of Jerusalem looking lost; he is not about admiring the beauty of the Temple (cf. 21:5), he is not worried about the parents. Rather, as Luke asserts, he is seated in the midst (ἐν μέσῳ) of the teachers listening to them and asking them questions (v 46). This is common ancient practice where teachers sit with their students; however, as Green argues, nothing in the text serves to portray Jesus as a student.[44] Not only is the child Jesus seated among the teachers, he listens to them and asks them questions.

42 Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50*, 264.

43 For instance, Michael Mullins, *The Gospel of Luke* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2010), 142; Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 127; Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50*, 264

44 Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 155, f/n. 10. Contra, Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50*, 267; Fitzmyer, *The Gospel of Luke*, vol. 1, 442.

Again, another custom within Judaism where pupils dialogue with their teachers in a question-and-answer format.[45] While Luke is not interested in the subject of discussion, he does highlight the depth of this child's knowledge and wisdom (2:40, 52). This is emphasised when the author indicates that "all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers" (v 47). Contrary to Fitzmyer's suggestion that Jesus only asks and listens to the teachers "as a pupil would,"[46] the narrative actually emphasises the depth of the child's knowledge and insight in what he says. Marshall's argument is apt that the boy Jesus "astonishes his teachers by the understanding of the law apparent in his questions and answers to their counter-questions."[47] This explains the reference to the child's intelligence (συνέσει, sunesei), which identifies in the child an "understanding that is able to penetrate to the heart of an issue, and the term can be rendered as 'insight' (Isa 11:2; 1 Chr 22:12)."[48] It is thus plausible to suggest that for Luke, the child Jesus is not only inquisitive; in his wisdom he also provides intelligent answers to questions from the teachers to their amazement and all listening to him. The obvious point is that the child engages the adults in a thought-provoking discussion. This is contrary

45 Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50*, 267. See also, John F. Jansen, "Luke 2:41-52," *Interpretation* 30, no. 4 (1976): 402.
Later in the narrative Jesus will be in the Temple again, this time teaching the religious authorities (cf. Luke 20:1-40). Karen Chakoian, "Luke 2:41-52," *Interpretation* 52, no. 2 (1998): 187.

46 Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I—IX*, 442.

47 Marshall, *The Gospels of Luke*, 128.

48 Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50*, 268. See also Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (London: Chapman, 1977), 475.

to the general view of the time that children were weak in mind and that only adults can engage in rational argument.[49]

iv. The child speaks to his parents: the child has a voice

Luke echoes the astonishment of the parents at finding the child. The term used ἐξεπλάγησαν (exeplagesan) refers to a reaction of being overwhelmed by events (see Luke 4:32; 9:43; Acts 13:12), and indicates both amazement and relief.[50] The sense of amazement could arise from seeing him, a twelve-year-old child, sitting among the teachers, asking them intelligent questions, and providing brilliant and amazing answers to their questions. As Marshall rightly pointed out, this is beyond what a child might have shown at this formal stage of his career.[51] His mother speaks to him as a child, emphasises their (your father and I) authority over him, and expresses their fear and anxiety for him missing (v 48). In response, he says, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (v 49).[52] This is Jesus' first recorded words in the Gospel (spoken as a child), and he refers to another (and a higher) authority over him. Luke reports that the child's parents "did not understand what he said" (v 50). Interestingly, earlier, his responses and answers mesmerise the teachers of the law, who marvel at his wisdom, understating and insight. Now, his response baffles his mother who "treasured all these

[49] Francis, "childhood," 234.

[50] Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50*, 268.

[51] Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 128.

[52] The debate around the content and meaning of his response is beyond the scope pf this paper. For some reading and discussion see Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50*, 269-271

things in her heart" (v 51). This alludes to the child's intelligence and knowledge. It articulates and strengthens the argument that the child might possess some knowledge that the adult lacks. Luke highlights Jesus' self-understanding; a knowledge so deep that his parents do not comprehend.[53] An important element to note is Luke's acknowledgement of this insight through the voice of the child. Also, while the mother and father have the parental authority to reprimand the child, Luke has suggested that the child too has the right of expression. He is, nevertheless, obedient to them; he goes with them to Nazareth.[54] This also portrays the loyalties and affections between spouses and between parents and children.[55] Later on in his ministry, the adult Jesus will not be obliged to go with them any more (cf. Mark 3:31-35).

v. Luke's closing remarks

Luke's closing remarks picture other childhood incidents concerning Jesus. Though the parents "did not understand what he said to them" (v 50), his mother "treasured all these things in her heart" (v 51b). The plural form, "all these things," recalls more than this temple incident. This implies the occurrence of prior similar incidences concerning the child. The Greek word διετήρει (dieterei, carefully kept) denotes careful recall, keeping a close eye to something (cf. Gen 37:11; Acts

53 Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50*, 274.

54 His obedience to his parents is in keeping with the expectation of children at that time and cultural context. Obedience was a value of particular importance in Judaism and to early Christian families (for instance, Deut 21:18-21; Sir 3:2016; Matt 21:28-31; Rom 1:30; Eph 6:1-4; Col 3:20; 1 Tim 3:4; 5:8). Horn and Martens, *Let the Children Come to Me*, 79.

55 Beryl Rawson, *Children and Childhood in Roman Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 217.

15:29). Luke suggests that the child's mother takes note of this and recalls other childhood experiences which are not narrated here.

To close the chapter on the childhood of Jesus, Luke notes that Jesus increases in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour (v 52). The child is getting older and wiser. This suggests comparison of childhood development from one stage to the other. The childhood narrative is over; now the child's name is employed (Jesus, v 52). In the narrative so far, Luke's terms for Jesus change from one pericope to the next. First, βρέφος (brephos, baby, 2:16), then παιδίον (paidion, little child, 2:40), then παῖς (pais, child, 2:43), and finally just his name Jesus (2:52).[56] Until this point of the narrative, Luke draws the reader into the childhood world of Jesus (and of John the Baptist up until 1:80). From this point there is a transition into the adult world of Jesus (beginning with his baptism, 3:21-22) and of John (with his proclamation in the wilderness, 3:1-17).

Childhood in Luke through the lens of Jesus' ministry

a. Children in the teachings of Jesus

Generally, in Judaism, children before the age of twelve could not be taught the Torah; time spent with children was considered a waste.[57] An ancient Jewish text reads: "Morning sleep, midday wine, chattering

[56] A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St Luke* (Edinburgh; Clark, 1896), 78; cf. Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50*, 274. For the Baptist, see Luke 1:59, 66, 76, 80; and 3:2

[57] Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50*, 894.

with children, and tarrying in places where men of the common people assemble, destroy a man."[58] Luke, however, gives us a different approach in Jesus' ministry with children as exemplified in the following two stories set against the background of the low social status of children. My objective here is to point out that the imagery of children that Luke employs in these contexts contradict the traditional views of childhood and the relationship between children and adults in the first century Mediterranean world.[59] Here, Luke focuses on childhood so much that the Lukan Jesus' action reverses cultural expectations.[60]

i. Reception of children: Luke 9:46-48

Following the healing of the boy with a demon (9:37-43a), Jesus predicts his passion and resurrection for the second time (9:44; cf. v 22). An argument subsequently ensues between the disciples about greatness (v 46), which suggests a disconnect between Jesus' teaching and the disciples' response.[61] The narrator points out that Jesus perceives the dispute among the disciples. Usually, such knowledge creates a pathway for correction (Mark 2:8//Luke 5:22; 6:8; 7:39-40).

58 *M. Abot 3:11*.

59 Berryman, *Children and the Theologian*, 16. Also Jan Grobbelaar, "Jesus and the Children in the Gospel of Matthew," in J. Grobbelaar and G. Breed (eds.), *Theologies of Childhood and the Children of Africa* (Durbanvillle: ASSIS, 2016), 132-186.

60 See Grobbelaar, "Doing Theology with Children," 6, who argues that Jesus' actions are absolutely countercultural. Also, W. A. Strange, *Children in the Early Church: Children in the Ancient World, the New Testament and the Early Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 69. Strange suggests that the Lukan Jesus invites his followers to view children with new eyes.

61 Jerome Kodell, "Luke and the Children: The Beginning and End of the 'Great Interpolation' (Luke 9:46-56; 18:9-23)," *CBQ* 49, no. 3 (1987): 420.

Jesus, in order to address this dispute brings a child into the conversation (*paidion*, a little child) and positions the child by his side. This gesture emphasises Jesus' solidarity with this child.[62] Next, Jesus makes a profound statement: "Whoever receives this child in my name receives me" (v 48). In this statement, "Jesus identifies himself with the child, who is to be treated as Jesus' own representative ('in my name')."[63]

While the obvious correction in this context concerns the issue of true greatness, there is a subtle message about the status of children from three perspectives: First, Jesus taking a child to his side (παρ᾽ ἑαυτῷ, beside himself) emphasises a reversal of the image of childhood available in the society and points out that there is greatness in being a child.[64] Second, Luke emphasises receiving the child. Donald Hagner interprets receiving the child as being hospitable towards children.[65] This implies that the adult disciples should serve the children.[66] The emphasis is not just receiving the child, but receiving the child in the name of Jesus, which suggests the meaning of recognising Jesus in the

62 James L. Bailey, "Experiencing the Kingdom as a Little child: A Rereading of Mark 10:13-16," *WW* 15, no. 1 (1995): 63. Johnson suggests that the child in question could be the boy that Jesus just healed in 9:37-43a since there is no change of scene. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 159.

63 John T. Carroll, "'What Then Will this Child Become?': Perspectives on Childhood in the Gospel of Luke." In Marcia Bunge (ed), *The Child in the Bible* (Grand rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 189.

64 In Matt 18:2 as in Mark 9:36, Jesus places the child in the midst of the disciples. Mark further states that Jesus takes the child in his arms.

65 D. A. Hagner, *Matthew 14—28* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1995), 522; cf. B. J. Malina & R. L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 92.

66 Grobbelaar, "Doing Theology with Children," 7.

child. Hence to receive the child is to receive Jesus. In Bock's words, "To receive someone in the name of Jesus means recognizing the value of that person as God's creature."[67] This in itself speaks volumes about the status of the child for the author of Luke's narrative. Jesus among the disciples is their leader and teacher. If to receive the child in Jesus' name is to receive the teacher, it means the child possesses the greatness of Jesus the teacher in whose name the child is received; just as to welcome Jesus is to welcome God since Jesus possesses the greatness of God who sent him. Luke in this statement strongly suggests that Jesus identifies with children.

Third, Jesus' statement that the lesser one among them (ὁ μικρότερος) is indeed the one who is great (μέγας) calls for deep reflection on Jesus' consideration of the child (and by extension childhood) among them. As Betsworth states, "Children were at the bottom of every societal hierarchical scale—physically, economically, and politically—but Jesus identifies with this child and tells the disciples that this is what greatness will look like in God's reign."[68]

ii. Blessings of children: Luke 18:15-17

Luke's version of this story begins with the emphatic reference to people bringing "even infants" to Jesus. In this story, Luke changes Mark's παιδία (children, Mark 10:13) to βρέφη (infants, babes, Luke

[67] Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50*, 896.
[68] Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 124.

18:16). The fact that Luke points out the bringing of καὶ τὰ βρέφη (even the infants) and yet retains παιδία in verse 16 suggests that in addition to older children (as in Mark's version), people brought babies too.[69] The reason for bringing these children and infants is for Jesus to touch them. This provokes a stern reaction from the disciples who ordered the adults not to bring the littles ones to Jesus (v 15b). The disciples' reaction portrays the societal attitude towards children at that time, which regards spending time with children as waste of time. Luke, however, projects a counter-cultural response from Jesus, which asserts the significance of childhood for the community. The opening words at the beginning of verse 16, ὁ δὲ (but), emphasises the contrast to culturally accepted behaviour that Luke proposes. What follows thus is a teaching that is corrective in character.

First, Jesus calls them to him. Whereas in Mark Jesus is angry at the disciples for their obduracy and thus calls the children to him, in Luke, there is no reference to anger. Rather, Luke places emphasis on Jesus calling. It is not certain whether the προσεκαλέσατο αὐτὰ (called them to him) refers to the disciples or to the children. If the children, it is already a counter-cultural gesture from Jesus opposing the reaction of the disciples. If the disciples, it suggests a solemn beckoning for the purpose of educating the disciples. Either way, the invitation attracts the attention of the disciples which then prepares them for what Jesus

69 Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 124.

has to say since the call is followed by the verb, λέγων (saying). The object of the verb (to say) is most certainly the disciples; for it is meant to instruct them concerning their reaction towards the children.

Jesus instructs the disciples using two constructions to say the same thing: first *via positiva*, and the other *via negativa*. First, ἄφετε τὰ παιδία (allow the children), suggests let the children, give way to the children, to come to me. The second construction only highlights the first one: μὴ κωλύετε αὐτὰ (do not prevent them); which invariably accentuates the sense of "do not stop the children," but allow them to come to me. The use of these two constructions in one go points out the seriousness of the instruction for the instructor.

Furthermore, Jesus makes clear that the kingdom of God belongs to such as these (v 16), thus asserting that children are fully part of God's covenant.[70] More so, to enter the kingdom of God is to receive it like a little child (v 17). Jesus thus makes a child an example of the pathway to the kingdom of God, for his disciples. This metaphor would have been a hard saying for Jesus's hearers. It nevertheless represents what Luke intends to communicate to the community. As Hagg asserts, "In antiquity, as today, metaphors constituted an efficient way of communicating religious beliefs and social values."[71] Looking at the

70 Francis, "Childhood," 235.

71 Henny Fiska Hägg, "Aspects of Childhood in Second- and Third-Century Christianity," in Reidar Aasgaard and Cornelia Horn, with Oana Maria Cojocaru (eds), *Childhood in History: Perceptions of Children in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 128.

children around Jesus and listening to this teaching would have been strangely shocking for the disciples. The implication is that to enter God's kingdom the disciples must become like children, people considered by the society as lacking status (or of low status). Not only does Jesus gladly welcome children who are brought to him, he expects his followers to do same. Here, the ones of low status and no power are lifted up as the ones that God honours.[72] This recalls the principal theme of Mary's song (Luke 1:52).

b. Children in Jesus' healing ministry

i. The healing of a girl-child (Luke 8:40-42, 49-56)

Luke presents Jesus as a superstar who, upon his return, is welcomed by the crowd who "were waiting for him" (v 40). Both Mark and Luke name the leader of the synagogue as Jairus. Jairus' gesture of "falling at the feet of Jesus" (v 41) on the surface level suggests his regard for Jesus. On a deeper level, however, it demonstrates how much he wants Jesus' help for his daughter, which also indicates how much he wants his daughter alive. This is the reason in the first instance that brings him before Jesus. The girl is Jairus' only daughter (v 42a), and is in a critical state (v 42b; cf. Mark 5:23; not dead as in Matt 9:18b).

Luke, emphasises the girl's age (twelve) by bringing it to the beginning of the story, unlike Mark who leaves this to the end (Mark 5:42).

72 Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 124.

Bringing the girl's age to the fore of the story recalls the age of the boy Jesus in the Temple (2:41); also indicative of a childhood story. In the first-century C.E. context, a 12-year-old girl is nearing womanhood; for such a girl her parents might expect to arrange a marriage soon.[73] With this introduction, Luke from the outset highlights ministry to a dying child. Will Jesus, who has just returned, welcomed by a waiting crowd, have some time for a dying child? Jesus' response will go a long way to speaking for children in the Lukan community. Jesus obliges Jairus and goes with him to his house (v 42b). This gesture indicates that the well-being of the child is also important for Jesus; thus, Jesus leaves behind the crowd who continue to press in on him.

On the way Jairus receives the news of his daughter's death. Jesus counters the news and asserts that the girl will be saved if only Jairus believes (v 50). Jesus also assures the weeping crowd in the house that the child "is not dead but sleeping" (v 52). The fact that they laughed "knowing that she was dead" indicates that nothing could be done anymore. But Jesus is determined to minister to this child. He reaches out, takes the child by the hand, and addresses her: "child, get up!" (v 54). Touching her alone would have rendered Jesus unclean, but "restoring the child to life and health is more important than any ritual cleanliness (Num 19:11)."[74] Following her healing, Jesus gives the directive to give her something to eat (v 56a). This story draws attention

[73] Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 116; Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50*, 792.
[74] Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50*, 803.

to Jesus' care for children/young people. Though his popularity is highlighted in the story (v 40), Luke shows that Jesus allows time to minister even to children.

ii. The healing of a boy-child (Luke 9:37-43a)

This is another story of an only child; this time a boy-child (v 38). Only Luke emphasises this detail (cf. Mark 9:14-29; Matt 17:14-20). Unlike Jairus (8:40-42a, 49-56), the father in this story speaks to and addresses Jesus as teacher (v 38). He speaks on behalf of his son who is an only child (μονογενής). Though the age of this child is not stated, Luke refers to him as παῖδα (boy, v 42). The combination of μονογενής and παῖδα suggests that the boy is non-adult child.[75] This father first takes the child to Jesus' disciples seeking healing for his child (v 40a). However, the disciples' inability to heal this child brings Jesus into the picture (v 40b). The detailed description of the symptoms for Jesus indicates the father's mental state at seeing the child in such a state (v 39).

The initial phase of Jesus' response is a rebuke of the adult generation who fails to meet Jesus' expectation (v 41a). It addresses the boy's father but also the disciples and people present. Just as the father is concerned for the well-being of this child, so also is Jesus. Hence, he says to the father, "bring your son here" (v 41b). This recalls Jesus'

75 Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 119.

statement, "let the little children come to me…" (18:16). Luke focuses on Jesus' ministry to this child detailing three steps: first, Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit; then, Jesus heals the boy; thereafter, Jesus returns the boy to his father. Luke portrays Jesus who attends to the need of this child — he relieves him of the demonic attack. While the obvious sense of this story in Luke may be the portrayal of God's powerful presence (in Jesus) among God's people,[76] Luke has emphasised here that children are an active part of the people of God.

That the boy is given back to his father (v 42b) confirms that he is only a child. It also implies that the father still has the responsibility of providing for and caring for this child. Elsewhere, Luke also acknowledges that Jesus gives a young man raised from death to life back to his mother (7:15); Jesus gives direction that Jairus' daughter be given something to eat (8:55b). The child (Jesus) goes with the parents to Nazareth (2:51). As Francis asserts, "The life of the child was formed and oriented within the household under the ultimate authority of the paterfamilias, who might (Luke 11:7) or might not (in the case of children of slaves) be the father."[77] Luke shows that children are meant to be valued, protected, provided for, and cared for (see also Luke 11:7-8).

[76] Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 392.
[77] Francis, "childhood," 234.

The use of μονογενής in the stories above (8:40-42, 49-56; 9:37-43a) ties the stories and children together (cf. also 7:11-17). Betsworth contends that, "in an era of high child mortality, each and every surviving child was a blessing, but to have an only child survive a threatening illness or demon was perhaps understood as a double blessing."[78] Begetting children was interpreted as gracious (Luke 1:24-25; cf. 2 Kgs 4:11-17). To lose a child thus, and an only child, meant the opposite (Luke 7:11-17; cf. 1 Kgs 17:17-24). This assertion is reflected in the words of Menekites son of Menetheus: "… I gained a remarkable reputation among the Isis-devotees (*Isiakoi*) as a testimony. For I have brought about glory for my father Menesthes, leaving behind three children…" (*IPrusaOlymp* 1054 + 1028 =*SEG* 42 (1992), no. 1112).[79] On the grave of a seven-year-old boy who performed rites for Dionysos, it is written, "…Not yet having tasted youth, I slipped into the realm of Hades, leaving behind tears and groans to my parents for my short time…" (IGUR 1228 = PH188867).[80] The death of a child meant agony for the parents.

Conclusion

Luke is not oblivious of the low view of childhood in his society. Luke may well have had access to a collection of Paul's letters (and other NT letters) which subscribes to the conventional low view of childhood; a

[78] Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 120.
[79] See Ascough et al, *Associations*, 69.
[80] See Ascough et al, *Associations*, 312.

view that depicts children as unimportant. Luke consciously deviates from that conception in his presentation of the childhood stories of Jesus at age 12, in the references to John the Baptist's childhood, and in other stories of Jesus' ministry to children. Jesus, in Luke, challenges this cultural perception and invites his followers to reconsider their opinion about children/childhood. Hence, "Whoever receives this child in my name receives me" (9:48); "let the children come to me, and do not stop them," (18:16); to enter the kingdom of God is to receive it like a little child (18:17); "the greatest among you must become like the youngest" (22:26). Contrasting the culturally accepted image of childhood as immaturity Jesus makes childhood a metaphor for faith. I guess Luke has, all the time, been teaching the community something which is well articulated in the words of Jan Grobbelaar that: "children have also come to be valued as subjects of their own lives with full rights. Children are agents, befitting their age and development."[81] As Betsworth puts it, "Luke's interest in children is in keeping with his overall theme of concern for the marginalized and powerless, among whom children in the first century would certainly be numbered."[82]

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81 Grobbelaar, "Doing Theology with Children," 1

82 Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 101.

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