

I.

INTRODUCTION

In the stacks of the Yale Divinity School library, a small collection of books is growing. In the robust contemporary theology section, dwarfed by countless volumes on liberation and feminist theology, a foot's worth of shelf-space is occupied by an emerging subject: the theology of childhood. The publication dates of all these volumes fall within the last fifteen years, with the exception of one slim volume,¹ and most are the fruits of the past five years. Further articles on children and childhood can be found scattered throughout theological or biblical studies journals, theological anthologies and encyclopedias; these, with very few exceptions,² mirror the publication patterns found in our small collection of books.

The content of these books shows all the signs of being first-generation work. Several are collections of speculative or exploratory essays, either by a single author, or by contributors to initial, investigative conferences. The vast

¹ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child* (trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991); trans. of *Wenn ihr nicht werdet wie dieses Kind* (Ostfildern / Stuttgart: Schwabenverlag AG, 1988).

² The key exception is an article by Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," in *Further Theology of the Spiritual Life 2*, (trans. David Bourke; vol. VIII of *Theological Investigations*; London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1971), 33–50. As will become clear, the publication of this article helped precipitate the field as a whole, even as many of the "Ideas" contained within it were, in fact, widely neglected. It is probably safe to assume, however, that Von Balthasar's key contribution, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, was in part a response to his fellow Catholic Rahner's call for theological effort on behalf of children.

majority are indeed “children” of the feminist and liberation theology that surrounds them. Very few are actually book-length, sustained theological examinations of children or childhood in depth. A thorough reading of the footnotes often reveals an interdependence among the scholars for sources and ideas. Much of the same ground is re-tread, many of the same biblical passages are examined. Yet gradually, with each new collection of essays a new area of Christian history or theology, another classic Christian thinker, is brought under the lens of this new discipline and appraised for its vision of childhood and the implied, or stated, ethics therein.

In most of these books, theology morphs rather quickly into ethics. There is an abiding concern for the practical application of the work—indeed, the term “practical theology” recurs constantly. In amongst the repetition, as in most new endeavors, is a sense of urgency. For our authors all agree on one thing: worldwide, childhood is changing rapidly, at the hands of both well-intentioned social engineers and an accelerating, unguided global entropy. In the words of one author: “A major reinvention of childhood is under way. Christianity . . . must be a ready participant in figuring out *who children are* and *why we should care about them*.”³

Who are children, and why should we care about them? Surely these are questions that the Orthodox tradition and contemporary Orthodox theologians and ethicists have answers for. However, as of yet, there is only one Orthodox

³ Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2003), xxii. Italics mine.

author represented in our collection of books.⁴ There is the very rare nod to Eastern Orthodox belief and practice, and the very occasional and stilted use of the writings of the Church Fathers. Perhaps this is unsurprising, given both the relative representation of Orthodox theologians in systematic theology in general and in the more focused, contemporary theological fields, such as feminist and liberation theology and ethics, in particular. Specialized theologies such as feminist and liberation theology have not attracted much positive attention or energy from Orthodox scholars, associated as they usually are with calls for radical social or ecclesiological change and emerging often as the result of particular emphases and problems often foreign to Orthodox experience. Similarly, non-Orthodox feminist and liberation theologians, the voices dominating the development of the theology of childhood, have not often turned to Orthodoxy or its traditional sources for inspiration, seeing them as bastions of patriarchal conservatism unlikely to be sympathetic to modern questions and dilemmas.

However, even as it is unsurprising, the lack of a strong Orthodox presence in the ongoing “reinvention of childhood” is inexcusable. There is no good reason why Orthodox theological insights should be withheld, or kept at bay, from questions about childhood. After all, childhood is the one universal experiential category of humankind. Thus the question of who children are and

⁴ Vigen Guroian, “The Office of Child in the Christian Faith: A Theology of Childhood,” in *The Vocation of the Child* (ed. Patrick McKinley Brennan; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 104–124, and “The Ecclesial Family: John Chrysostom on Parenthood and Children” in *The Child in Christian Thought* (ed. Marcia J. Bunge; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 61–77. Guroian revisits children and their place within the family and in relation to marriage in some of his other work as well. See bibliography.

why we should care about them is a truly universal question. Further, it is a question that Orthodoxy is perhaps uniquely poised, at this particular juncture in history, to answer.

For while the theology of childhood is now being constructed from countless angles, there is one vision that is conspicuously absent: “The crucified and risen Christ, proclaimed in this way by the apostles ‘in accordance with the Scripture.’”⁵ For reasons we shall soon explore, there has been little to no interest in considering whether the Christ Child himself has anything to teach us about childhood. The focus has largely been on the sayings of the adult Jesus about children and his interactions with children from the Gospels. But the early church was chiefly animated by an understanding of Jesus as vision of reality, rather than Jesus as moral teacher and example. If Christianity is to be a ready participant in the “reinvention of childhood,” Orthodox Christianity must be the voice that calls for the use of what was in the early church the defining Christian theological lens: a biblically and patristically based Christology that unveils a particular theological anthropology, what Fr. John Behr has called “Theology as exegetical confession of Christ.”⁶

Orthodox participation in the theology of childhood is not necessary simply as a means to balance and leaven the rest of the theological landscape; it is a critical task in rescuing the health of the Orthodox community itself. There

⁵ John Behr, “What Are We Doing, Talking About God? The Discipline of Theology,” in *Thinking Through Faith: New Perspectives From Orthodox Christian Scholars* (ed. Aristotle Papanikolaou and Elizabeth H. Prodromou; vol. 1 of *The Zacchaeus Venture Series*; Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2008), 76.

⁶ Behr, 71.

are no longer any emphases or problems foreign to Orthodox experience; Orthodox children and their families, especially in the West, are subject to all the same pressures precipitating this “reinvention of childhood.” Thus far the Orthodox community has yet to articulate clearly to ourselves, to our current generation of parents, godparents, teachers, clergy and indeed all adults associated with the care and nurture of children, who we believe children are and why we should care about them. And it is increasingly urgent, in a shrinking, pluralistic and relativistic society where the core definitions of Christianity, personhood and even humanity are shifting, that our children themselves understand who they are and grasp, as soon as possible, our responsibilities towards them and their place in the Church and the world.

So, to flesh out the task before us, what is the theology of childhood? One of the best narrative summaries of the field is found in Angela Shier-Jones’

Children of God:

. . . what is God saying to us in the existence of childhood, in the necessity of our life beginning with this peculiar time of separation and dependence? Childhood is not merely a phase of a stage in life, it is a part of our being before God. We were created to be children before we were adults—not just for a day—but for long enough for it to make a substantial difference to how we perceive ourselves and form our relationships with others and the world. It would be natural to assume therefore that Scripture and the Church have something substantial to say about childhood, that theologians and pastors have reflected upon the state of the child before God and have something to contribute to how childhood is perceived today.⁷

⁷ Angela Shier-Jones, “Introduction,” in *Children of God: Towards a Theology of Childhood* (ed. Angela Shier-Jones; Werrington, Peterborough: Epworth, 2007), xii.

This thesis is an attempt to understand God's ordering of human childhood in light of the existence of the childhood of Jesus, in the necessity of his life beginning with this peculiar time of separation and dependence, and to articulate what, through the lens of his incarnation as a child, do the Scripture, the Church Fathers, hymnographers, iconographers, theologians and clergy have to contribute to how childhood is perceived today. The thesis begins by first sketching the emergence of the theology of childhood and its place in the constellation of contemporary theology, especially its relationship to feminist theology; against this constellation, it considers the particular contribution of the Orthodox perspective, identifying a possible point of entry in an orthodox christological interpretation of Luke 2:20–41. It illustrates how the key elements of any Orthodox theology may be applied to the theology of childhood and undertakes the synthesis of an example Orthodox theology of childhood with an exegesis of the Lukan passage, an exploration of the relevant patristic commentary and a brief look at the contrasting accounts of the same episode as they exist in non-canonical Infancy gospels. Finally, it concludes with thoughts on how to order the ethical implications therein.

II.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE THEOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD

The growth of secular concern for children

The next century will be the century of the child, just as this century has been the woman's century. When the child gets his rights, morality will be perfected.¹

The above quote from early feminist Ellen Key's manifesto *The Century of the Child*, embodies the eschatological aura countless intellectuals attached to the deliverance of the child. Ellen Key was a vociferous critic of Christianity at this point in her life, but she and many other secular advocates for children clearly still believed in salvation. The human race was to be remade through a deliberate cultivation of its youngest members: their careful breeding into healthful existence and an unprecedented allocation of societal resources to their care and education. The advocacy of Key and her colleagues joined a stream of energetic efforts on behalf of children that is still cresting today.

“Never before in the history of the Western countries, and probably also in other parts of the world, have the situation of children and issues related to

¹ Ellen Key, *The Century of the Child* (New York: G.P. Putnum's Sons, 1909), 45. Also available on-line: May 2, 2009, <<http://books.google.com/books?id=FXQCAAAYAAJ>>.

childhood been so much in the focus of public life as they are now.”² That focus is the result of societal shifts that sparked the separation of children into an independent category and thereafter stimulated approximately one hundred and fifty years (and counting) of ever-deepening research into their realities and needs.³ In the most recent chapter of this evolution, as the plight of children in the factories and resulting cities of the industrial revolution became known and fully understood, legislative action in Western countries eventually led to their being barred from work in the latter half of the nineteenth century. However, society now needed to occupy children in other ways during the hours that their parents worked. Community schools became an increasingly present reality for all social classes. By the early part of the twentieth century the first modern scientific studies into normal child development were being done, and soon thereafter research-based educational theory exploded as a field. Most of the major educational models in use in the West today were developed in the first

² O.M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* (trans. Brian McNeil; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 1. That “the situation of children and issues related to childhood” have become a focus of public life parallels the evolution of “children” and “childhood” as a free-standing group and category in modern social thought. However else humanity has thought of children throughout history, and the variations are no doubt legion, it has generally thought of them as inseparable elements of wider human society. To talk of children apart from families or peoples is a relatively new idea. Interestingly it parallels many other examples of the atomization of humanity into groups with particular experiences and needs.

³ Documenting and thoroughly analyzing the historical details of all dimensions of those shifts is beyond the scope of this thesis, as fascinating a tale as that is. The confines of space and time require me to disregard countless philosophical and literary streams, such as the work of Rousseau and Goethe, that no doubt also fed this river of change. However, those interested in learning more about the changes that occurred in childhood and more particularly in the study of childhood, will find much of interest in the following books: *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* by Philippe Aries; *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times* by Colin Heywood; *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500* by Hugh Cunningham.

half of the twentieth century and continued to evolve and spread during the second half of that century.⁴

The development of the first governmental and non-governmental international institutions on behalf of children occurred roughly in parallel. From the mid-nineteenth century on, the development and increasing dissemination of mass media brought the plight of children into public consciousness in the wake of various wars and natural and societal disasters. In response, charitable, governmental and inter-governmental efforts coalesced on behalf of children,⁵ but they were limited in their scope and effectiveness. Finally, the most prominent of these, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) was first formed in the wake of World War II.⁶ It became a permanent part of the UN in 1953, and focused for a decade on the children's health and development issues that on-going research was bringing to light. In 1959 the UN adopted the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* and expanded its focus to include education, in concert with the expanding interest in educational models. 1965 saw the climax of UNICEF being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and ever since, they have successfully brought one child welfare issue after another before the public. They also accomplish the impressive bureaucratic feat of supplying the world with

⁴ Progressive education (developed by John Dewey) and its variations, Montessori education, Waldorf education and democratic education are all products of this period.

⁵ For example, when "The League of Nations was established as an attempt to provide collective international security after World War I," its "Covenant, adopted in 1920, did address some children's issues, such as providing humane labor conditions and halting the trafficking of women and children," April 15, 2009, <<http://www.faqs.org/childhood/In-Ke/International-Organizations.html>>.

⁶ A more complete and detailed history of UNICEF and international efforts on behalf of children can be found on-line: April 15, 2009, <http://www.unicef.org/about/who/index_history.html>. All the dates and events highlighted here were found at that location.

relatively up-to-date statistics on the plight and well-being of children across the globe in their annual *The State of the World's Children* report.⁷ However, perhaps more important than UNICEF's particular success is the movement they inspired and symbolize. In 1950, UNICEF was one of "only a handful of organizations working together to contribute to the improvement of the lives of children; today there are thousands."⁸

So it should be unsurprising that, in this social climate, formal academic interest in all aspects of childhood exploded over the past forty years. In the first chapter of her book *Children and Our Global Future*, Kristen Herzog does an excellent job of detailing the increasing attention being paid to the topics of children and childhood in a wide variety of academic fields, giving examples from psychology, history, art history, legal scholarship and philosophy.⁹ One manifestation of this phenomenon is that in 2009 alone, all manner of private institutions, non-profit organizations and governmental departments in the United States and other Western countries are hosting dozens of conferences addressing childhood from every possible angle. Just a few titles include: "Childhood Besieged: Restoring Hope and Integrity in Children's Lives"¹⁰; "Social Justice in Early Childhood"¹¹; "Childhood Obesity"¹²; and "Children and

⁷ April 15, 2009, <<http://www.unicef.org/sowc/>>.

⁸ April 15, 2009, <<http://www.faqs.org/childhood/In-Ke/International-Organizations.html>>.

⁹ Kristen Herzog, *Children and Our Global Future: Theological and Social Challenges* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 15–17.

¹⁰ April 10, 2009, <<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/offices/comm/press/releases/gorse.shtml>>.

¹¹ April 10, 2009, <<http://www.socialjusticeinearlychildhood.org/campaigns/>>.

¹² April 10, 2009, <<http://www.first5la.org/events/2009-childhood-obesity-conference-creating-healthy-places-for-all-children>>.

War.”¹³ Even the prestigious Dumbarton Oaks Research Library devoted its 2006 symposium to the topic “Becoming Byzantine: Children and Childhood in Byzantium,”¹⁴ citing the need to make up for the fact that “Byzantinists have shown little interest for children and childhood, even after the fin-de-siècle surge of studies on that topic in classical, medieval and early modern studies.”¹⁵

Increasingly, in addition to being a point of interest for other disciplines, the study of childhood is becoming a discipline in its own right. Like its precursor women’s studies, childhood studies is finally gaining the foothold of institutional support and form.

Rutgers-Camden interim chancellor Margaret Marsh imagined a childhood-studies program as early as the 1980s, when she taught history at Stockton College. Back then, she thought, “in the first part of the 21st century, children's rights will be as important as women's studies are today.” [. . .] The first undergraduate children's-studies program in the United States was founded in 1991 at Brooklyn College by sociology professor Gertrud Lenzer. Faculty drew on arts, humanities, social and natural sciences, education, medicine, and law for a holistic view of the issues affecting children from birth to age 18. Other colleges followed, creating degrees up to the master's level. [. . .] Rutgers-Camden established the Center for Children and Childhood Studies in 2000 to support faculty research, community service, and undergraduate courses. A separate academic department, offering bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees, was created in 2007.¹⁶

¹³ April 10, 2009, <http://childhood.camden.rutgers.edu/children_war/index.html>.

¹⁴ April 10, 2009, <http://www.doaks.org/research/byzantine/byz_2006_symposium_program.html>.

¹⁵ April 10, 2009, <http://www.doaks.org/research/byzantine/doaks_byz_symposium_2006_04_28.html>. The publication of the results of symposium is expected in September, 2009.

¹⁶ April 6, 2009, <http://www.philly.com/inquirer/local/nj/20090406_Interest_grows_in_Rutgers_childhood-studies_doctoral_program.html>.

The emergence of theological attention

In the light of all the secular governmental, non-profit and academic activity of the last century and a half, it is surprising that it took so long for the theological disciplines to follow suit and turn their attention to children and childhood. As late as 1989, it was true that “For Systematic Theology the child is still neither a factor nor a topic of scholarly reflection; neither did it take up the idea of a theology oriented in the child, nor did it pursue the task of a theological anthropology of the child.”¹⁷ There were a number of key points of theological engagement throughout the “century of the child,” but all of them failed to create a sustained interest in the childhood, despite the status of the scholars involved.

Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of modern theology, explored the significance and nature of childhood in his *Soliliquies* (1800), his novella *Celebration of Christmas* (1806) and his *Sermons on the Christian Household* (1820).¹⁸ Schleiermacher’s vision inspired Horace Bushnell, the pivotal American congregationalist theologian; Bushnell would eventually write *Christian Nurture*,¹⁹ first published in 1847. Thereafter systematic theology was largely silent on childhood until Karl Rahner published his “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood” in 1971.²⁰

¹⁷ Rainer Lachmann, s.v. “Kind,” *Theologische Realencyclopädie*, vol. 18 (Berlin/New York: 1989), 168. Translation and reference found in Herzog, 9.

¹⁸ Dawn DeVries, “Be Converted and Become as Little Children’: Friedrich Schleiermacher on the Religious Significance of Childhood” in *The Child in Christian Thought* (ed. Marcia J. Bunge; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 331.

¹⁹ Robert Bruce Mullin, *The Puritan as Yankee: A Life of Horace Bushnell* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 7.

²⁰ It is interesting to note that *Christian Nurture* was republished at regular intervals that coincide perfectly with our aforementioned periods of heightened societal concern for children: 1916, 1947 and 2006. A number of scholars have combed through the work of Karl Barth to assemble his thoughts on childhood, but Barth himself never approached the question

“Ideas for A Theology of Childhood” was merely an essay in Rahner’s massive collection of *Theological Investigations*, but it contained the most systematic approach to childhood yet seen in the modern era. In attempting to understand “In the intention of the Creator and Redeemer of children, what meaning does childhood have, and what task does it lay upon us for the perfecting and saving of humanity,” Rahner challenged theologians to consider the value of childhood, the Christian awareness of childhood, and how the fulness of childhood consists in being children of God. Rahner’s work was eventually followed by Hans Urs Von Balthasar’s *Wenn ihr nicht werdet wie dieses Kind* in 1988, translated into English as *Unless You Become Like This Child* in 1991. But otherwise it was met with deafening silence.

It is not until the mid-1990s that we see the flurry of theology activity that births our collection of books; it also gives rise to organizations such as the Child Theology Movement, which articulates its mission as “to reform all theological reflection and enquiry ‘with a child in the midst’ and to ensure that theology of this kind informs every aspect of the church’s life and mission, including that which relates to children.”²¹ But still, only in 2008 does a truly mainstream theologian, Lutheran Martin E. Marty, finally articulate a full-length response to Rahner’s explicit call for work on the theology of childhood.²²

systematically. More on Barth can be found in William Werpehowski’s “Reading Karl Barth on Children” in *The Child in Christian Thought* (ed. Marcia J. Bunge; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 386–405.

²¹ April 24, 2009 <<http://www.childtheology.org/new/objectives.php?PID=2>>.

²² Martin E. Marty, *The Mystery of the Child* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007).

Why did it take so long for the theology of childhood to coalesce as a field? Given that the period in question was so incredibly prolific both for modern theology, with all manner of newer theologies taking shape in the latter half of the twentieth century, it seems incredible that childhood would escape largely overlooked and disregarded. Indeed, it should have been an obvious area for development; as the activity of the last few years has shown, there is an incredible amount of fodder touching on childhood throughout the field of the Christian tradition. As they finally tackle the subject, some scholars now hail child theology as the new way to understand the Christian revolution, citing its beginnings in the teachings of Jesus:

From Chrysostom, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas to Luther, Calvin, and John Wesley; from Schleiermacher to Karl Barth, children have appeared in theological works. Hardly anywhere, however, can we discover a stance as radical as that attributed by the Gospels to Jesus of Nazareth: the child as model for our life and faith and as representative of Godself.²³

Yet as excited and prolific as theologians seem primed to be now, the publishing record still reveals a period of mystifying silence of approximately twenty years, from the mid-to-late 1970s through the mid-1990s. A world bent on understanding and meeting the needs of children; pivotal thinkers raising the issue; a tradition pregnant with relevant material—what were theologians waiting for? The oversight is peculiarly pointed when one considers the new influx of women into the field and, in many denominations, the clergy, during

²³ Herzog, 10.

the same period. Surely the concerns of children and childhood would have been particularly close to the interests of feminist theologians in particular?

One description and explanation for the reticence of theologians in general has been articulated by feminist theologian Marcia Bunge. She asserts that

. . . many churches consider reflection on the moral and spiritual formation of children as “beneath” the work of their theologians and as a fitting area of inquiry only for pastoral counselors and religious educators. Consequently, systematic theologians and Christian ethicists say little about children and offer few well-developed teachings on the nature of children or adult obligations to them. Although churches have highly developed teachings on related issues such as abortion, human sexuality, gender relations, and contraception, they do not offer sustained reflection on children or parental and communal obligations toward them. Children also do not play a role in the way that systematic theologians think about central theological themes, such as the nature of faith, language about God, and the task of the Church.²⁴

Her colleague Rita Nakashima Brock goes on to blame this negligence on yet another element of patriarchy: “Child rearing, as the responsibility largely of women, has not been regarded as a serious theological topic. Hence, the subject of children as a religious issue was placed under the less prestigious area of Christian education.”²⁵

There is likely some truth in this assertion. It is certainly true that the same period saw an incredible growth in concerns about children’s spirituality within the field of religious education.²⁶

²⁴ Marcia J. Bunge, “Historical Perspectives on children in the Church: Resources for Spiritual Formation and a Theology of Childhood Today,” in *Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications* (ed. Donald Ratcliff; Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2004), 42.

²⁵ Rita Nakashima Brock, “And a Little Child Will Lead Us: Christology and Child Abuse,” in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (eds. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carol R. Bohn; New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 42.

²⁶ “Children’s spirituality” is the term applied to the study of a child’s spiritual life. This particular conjunction of narrative theology, child development research and religious education theory was a clear outgrowth of alternative educational models, and has evolved steadily as a

Gradually, however, feminist theologians are admitting to another reason for the theological vacuum on children: their own principled resistance to taking up the task of reflecting on childhood at all.

Feminist resistance to a theology of childhood

Feminist theologians did touch on one aspect of childhood fairly early in the growth of their own field. In 1983, in her groundbreaking book *Sexism and God-*

field for the past fifty years. Two of the most significant Christian examples are the *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* and *Godly Play* movements. The Montessori-inspired Roman Catholic *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* began to be developed by Hebrew scholar Sophia Cavalletti in 1954. It in turn was the inspiration for the Protestant variation, *Godly Play*, developed by Episcopalian priest Jerome Berryman in 1971. Both movements established formal study centers and foundations, the Center for Children and Theology and the Center for the Theology of Childhood respectively, in the late 1990s. Both have published books and research papers and sponsored training events and conferences the world over. As academic interest in more conventional modes of religious education waned in the 1990s, children's spirituality overtook and dominated the religious education scene. But while children's spirituality is now a burgeoning movement in its own right, the secular, educational and non-governmental organizational roots and resonances of the movement still reveal themselves occasionally. In 2009, churches across England are celebrating an "interdenominational Year of the Child, to coincide with the 30th anniversary of the United Nations' International Year of the Child," <<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/news/pr8908.html>>, and to challenge "the Church to fresh vision and expression, inspired by the spirit of the child," <<http://www.yearofthechild2009.org.uk/page2.htm>>. As part of their efforts, parishes are encouraged to fundraise for UNICEF. (Websites accessed April 6, 2009.)

Non-Christian exploration of the field has grown exponentially also. The inter-faith *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, "an international, inter-disciplinary and multi-cultural forum for those involved in research and development of children's and young people's spirituality" was launched in 1996, (April 6, 2009, <<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713425284~db=all>>), and the resulting *International Conference on Children's Spirituality* has been held annually since 2000, bearing the fruit of a more permanent Association for Children's Spirituality in 2007. A search on Amazon.com for "children's spirituality" yields an impressive 2,458 hits in the category of "Books," and the subject sub-category "Religion & Spirituality." Only 1,427 of these are in the further sub-category "Christianity."

It is important to note that by the early to mid-2000s, children's spirituality as a subject had come to mix freely with and overlap considerably with a more academically focused theological effort on behalf of children. In June 2009, Concordia College in Chicago will host the third triennial *Children's Spirituality Conference: Christian Perspectives*. Papers at the conference will range in topic from "God loves us all: How insights from the Holocaust can help with the spiritual formation of contemporary Christian children," (children's spirituality) to "Thomas Traherne's sacramental image of the child" (theology of childhood). Two of the books listed in our bibliography, *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Applications*, edited by D. Ratcliff, and *Nurturing Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*, edited by H. Catterton Allen, are collections of essays from the previous two conferences in 2003 and 2006. While the title of all the conferences has been *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives*, it is clear that it intends to be a forum for all research touching on the Church's understanding and experience of children, and children's understanding and experience of the Church.

Talk, Rosemary Radford Reuther argued that classic Western theology of the atonement rendered Jesus' death nothing less than divine child abuse.²⁷ In 1989, Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, in their essay, "For God So Loved the World?"²⁸ would go even further, arguing that such an understanding of the crucifixion actually condoned and encouraged child abuse throughout Christian history.

. . . when parents have an image of a God righteously demanding the total obedience of "his" son—even obedience to death—what will prevent the parent from engaging in divinely sanctioned child abuse? The image of God the father demanding and carrying out the suffering and death of his own son has sustained a culture of abuse and led to the abandonment of victims of abuse and oppression. Until this image is shattered it will be almost impossible to create a just society.²⁹

Of course, neither Reuther, Brown nor Parker intended to make children their subject. Reuther names as the "critical principle" of feminist theology "the promotion of the full humanity of women,"³⁰ and to that end is chiefly interested in a feminist re-interpretation of Christianity's central symbols. Brown and Parker make their own interests perfectly clear in their article's sub-heading: "Theology and Abuse: Women's Experience." Indeed their first paragraph leaves no room for ambiguity:

²⁷ Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk: toward a feminist theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).

²⁸ Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (eds. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn; New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 1–30. Online: April 1, 2009, <<http://www.pinn.net/~sunshine/booksum/abuse.html>>.

²⁹ Brown and Parker, 8–9. Also available on-line: April 26, 2009 <<http://faculty.plts.edu/gpence/2490/html/forgodso.htm>>.

³⁰ Reuther, 18.

Women are acculturated to accept abuse. We come to believe that it is our place to suffer. Breaking silence about the victimization of women and the ways in which we have become anesthetized to our violation is a central theme in women's literature, theology, art, social action, and politics. With every new revelation we confront again the deep and painful secret that sustains us in oppression: We have been convinced that our suffering is justified.³¹

Clearly, any consideration of children is completely incidental.³² In the words of Serene Jones, feminist theologian and president of Union Theological Seminary,

feminist theorists focus on women [. . .] because women's lives have so long been ignored as a subject of critical reflection and because of a sense of urgency related to the present-day harms being done to women. In feminist theory, this decision to put intellectual energies in places where it is needed most is referred to as a "preferential option" for women.³³

Yet, simultaneously, feminists have always asserted that there is a universality to their ethic. As Jones continues,

This preferential option for women is qualified, however, by a second feature of feminist theory. Anyone who reflects on women's lives knows that the fate and future of women can never be separated from the fate and future of all persons and of the planet as a whole. Feminist theorists acknowledge this interconnection. Their concern is not only for the liberation of women but for all who are broken, physically and in spirit, by the oppressions of our world. Feminists emphasize the inclusive scope of the future for which they struggle by saying: "We are struggling for the liberation of women and all people." Feminist theorists know that if women were emancipated, all oppression would not suddenly disappear, and they recognize how women's oppression is intertwined with other forms of oppression, such as racism, poverty, exploitation,

³¹ Brown and Parker, 1.

³² There would subsequently be, over the years, work by feminist or liberation theologians that addressed the topic of child abuse directly, but examinations of non-abusive childhood were nonexistent.

³³ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 5.

heterosexism, ageism, and discrimination against children and the disabled, to name only a few.³⁴

Jones' mention of "discrimination against children" makes perfect sense in the context of her description of her field. For a movement that has been largely focused through the lens of the dynamics of power, one would think that children, arguably the most vulnerable members of any society, would have qualified for attention on those grounds alone. Further, the inter-relation of the concerns of women and children is by no possible definition a stretch. Indeed today, as theologians finally turn their attention to children, this inter-relation is explicitly recognized, though with some discernible reticence. In the words of one scholar,

Justly or unjustly, the concerns of women remain solidly linked to those of children in ways that are simultaneously relational, personal, and political. This close linkage means that advocacy for the full humanity of women cannot happen apart from advocacy for children. In a similar vein, though, I would argue that any true advocacy for children must take into account the needs and situations of women. Consequently, a part of this feminist practical theology of childhood seeks to address the issue of the theological meanings of childhood in a way that also takes account of women's lives and liberations, *rather than adding to their burdens*.³⁵

In that final clause, "rather than adding to their burdens," we see the crux of the issue, the now-acknowledged explanation for the prolonged silence of theology on the questions of children and childhood. In large part, since the mid-1970s, theology has been dominated as a field by the articulation of and

³⁴ Jones, 5–6.

³⁵ Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 17. Emphasis mine.

response to feminist theology, its corollaries and derivatives. This has certainly been true whenever theologians have addressed social concerns. So during a period during which societal concern for children had expanded to a global scale and reached a fever pitch, for approximately twenty years feminist theologians saw in the questions of children and childhood a dangerous challenge. They feared that asking and answering questions about the significance of children and childhood might derail their advocacy for women. In explanation, Miller-McLemore recounts the history of the movement and the path feminists tried to carve for themselves.

A core premise of second-wave feminism or the feminist politics of the 1960s was indeed women's right to choose against children, whether literally through abortion or more figuratively by forsaking motherhood or choosing to work outside the home. The distinctively radical core of the liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s was precisely the struggle against subordination of women in the home and at work, especially with regard to reproduction and child care. For most of human history, women's circumstances and survival depended upon their roles in procreation and matrimony. The mid-twentieth-century liberation movement insisted instead that women's full personhood should be independent of children, marriage and motherhood.³⁶

So it was natural, Miller-McLemore argues in "Generativity in Feminist Theory and Women's Lives: What's a Feminist Mother to Do?" for feminist theology to engage childhood only reluctantly.

Feminists have had good reason to feel reluctant about speaking up for the values of rearing children and motherhood. For too long, men left to women the relentlessly repetitive chores of "world-repair," the "million tiny stitches," the "cleaning up of soil and waste left behind by men and children." Creating public policies to allow more time for women to perform these activities is a dubious accomplishment at best; at worst, it is a reinstatement of restrictive definitions of gender complementarity and

³⁶ Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 106–7.

circumstances of injustice. *Retrieving anything related to the institutions of motherhood, family and children has its inherent dangers.* Women have paid, and continue to pay dearly for nurturing children, costs that men have not known. The constraints of nurturing children are real. Reproductive difference, a potential source of power, is at the same time the source of women's greatest vulnerability. Initially, throwing the baby out with the bath water may have been the only viable option.³⁷

But feminists' reluctance to address childhood came with its own costs: a catastrophic disconnect with the life experiences of the vast majority of women—all of whom were daughters, many of whom were mothers—the world over. Eventually this disconnect would become glaringly obvious and roundly criticized. Miller-McLemore details some of that criticism in *Also A Mother*, citing in particular economist Sylvia Hewlett's work, *A Lesser Life*:

"The feminists of the modern women's movement made one gigantic mistake: They assumed the modern women wanted nothing to do with children. As a result, they have consistently failed to incorporate the bearing and raising of children into their vision of a liberated life." [Hewlett] continues, "The women's liberation movement has not just decided to ignore children. . . feminists rage at babies; others trivialize, or denigrate them." Not just anti-men, the movement has been "profoundly anti-children" and "anti-motherhood." In a word, "*Motherhood is the problem that modern feminists cannot face.*"

Hewlett is wrong here in several ways. To make a sure impression, she grossly oversimplifies the feminist stance. She sorely misplaces the blame. But she does raise a crucial question: If women have gained, why are mothers and children worse off?³⁸

³⁷ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Also A Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 83. Miller-McLemore indicates in her own notes that the quotations in this passage derive from Adrienne Rich's "Foreword" in *Working it out: 23 Writers, Artists, Scientists, and Scholars Talk About Their Lives and Work* (eds. Sara Ruddick and Pamela Daniels; New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), xvi, and that her inspiration comes from "Rich's important distinction between the rich experience of being a mother and the oppressive institution of motherhood as constructed under patriarchy" in *Of Woman Born, Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976). Emphasis mine.

³⁸ Miller-McLemore, *Also A Mother*, 65–6. Sylvia Ann Hewlett, *A Lesser Life: The Myth of*

Miller-McLemore tempers Hewlett's criticisms with the fact that various historical, sociological and theological trends have brought us to our present North American state of confusion over the nature of children and their place in our lives—feminism has been but one participant. But she does now admit that it has been such a participant, and perhaps a more central one than many feminists intended it to be.

According to Miller-McLemore and other feminist theologians, it has not been criticism from outside of feminism, such as that of Hewlett, that has caused feminists to re-evaluate their willingness to engage childhood. Indeed, part of feminism's self-conception is that of a prophetic movement, at odds with the prevailing, oppressive culture. No, a more key factor has been that criticism finally began to emerge from within feminist theology as it diversified and expanded to include within its ranks of scholars women from more cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic levels than its second-wave founding mothers.

In particular, fresh views from women of color and second- and third-generation feminists, greater awareness of the influence of class, frustrations in the workplace, and intensified globalization have revealed diverse child-bearing experiences and forced reconsideration of previously uncontested feminist assumptions about women's desires and needs. For those in marginalized communities for whom mere survival is sometimes difficult, mothering, children, and strong families have immense value, men need jobs and education along with women, and "choice" is not the only moral consideration in bearing and rearing children. In contexts of social repression and even genocide, children and child rearing offer a dramatic means for political resistance. Neither motherhood nor children, then, pose the same kind of hardship that they did for white, middle-class U.S. women of the 1960s.³⁹

Women's Liberation in America (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 179–80, 184–85. Emphasis in the original.

³⁹ Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 112.

Further, feminist theologians have come to realize that in failing to address, or allow others to address, the genuine needs and realities of childhood, they presided over the creating of a critical cultural vacuum. While mainline liberal theologians withheld their intellectual resources on behalf of a “preferential option for women,” other Christian groups generated a steady stream of teaching about the nature of children and childhood, not necessarily within academic contexts, but as part of widely published, preached and practiced proscriptions for child-rearing.⁴⁰

In the United States in particular, theologians were slow to wake up to this emergence of other Christian voices on childhood. Or, rather, they were loath to engage it even as they saw it gaining strength. In the first instance, any terms of engagement would undoubtedly omit the all-important preferential

⁴⁰ Fundamentalist Protestant groups have been most willing to answer the questions “who are children and why should we care about them?” most assuredly and emphatically. Some excellent examples of this trend are Gary Ezzo’s Growing Families International, <<http://www.gfi.org/>>, Bill Gothard’s Advanced Training Institute International, <<http://ati.iblp.org/ati/>>, and Michael and Debi Pearl’s No Greater Joy Ministries, <<http://www.nogreaterjoy.org/who-is-ngj/>>. All of these movements articulate particular theologies of childhood based on their own interpretation of the Bible and instruct parents in the parenting principles that they believe flow from those theologies. They claim between them, here in the U.S. and abroad, millions of adherents, and have attracted diverse criticism over the years. Growing Families International in particular maintains a link on their website to <<http://www.ezzotruth.com/>>, a forum where criticism is answered and prominent critics (including pediatricians, authors, and other Christian leaders) are profiled. It is impossible to treat these movements adequately here, but it there is no question that they see themselves as providing a countercultural alternative to the ethos of the “century of the child” by advocating strict adult-centered and -controlled families through a particular theological lens, sometimes even willingly adopting the title “patriarchal.” A few examples will suffice: “Leftwing dogma would advocate turning the other cheek. They would advise us to give the child everything she wants, and when she is bloated with her personal expressions, she will normalize. But the Jungs, Darwins, and Deweys are ready in the wings with drugs in the event their social experimentations don’t work. If their promiscuous approach to child development fails, they have reserved the privilege of labeling the child as a victim of a brain disorder,” <<http://www.nogreaterjoy.org/articles/general-view/archive/2000/september/01/the-will-to-dominate/>>; “God is not sitting on His throne waiting to jump up at our every cry, trying to prove that He loves us. [. . .] Praise God that the Father did not intervene when His Son cried out on the cross,” <<http://www.nogreaterjoy.org/articles/general-view/archive/2009/february/06/the-balanced-patriarch/>>.

option for women. Secondly, at face value they considered their opponents' arguments a wholly unacademic exercise rooted in, at best, traditionalist nostalgia, and at worst, irrational bigotries. Sally Purvis, writing in 1996 for one of the first collections of theological essays about family life from a liberal feminist perspective, captures the concerns of the field well.

As a Christian feminist ethicist I was at first startled by a request to write about the family. I want to begin these reflections, then, by introducing some problems for a Christian feminist ethicist in working with the topic.

First, Christian feminist literature by and large does not address "the family" per se. Issues tend to be identified in more focused ways, as in the literature on motherhood, gender relations, reproductive issues, and so on. Or the issues are broader and deal with contextual questions of power relationships, economic factors and systems, sexual orientation, friendship, etc. [. . .]

Part of the reason that the family sometimes seems incompatible with feminism, then is that the phrase the family as it is commonly used trades on the assumption that there is one model, one normative shape for families. In fact, much of the traditional Christian teaching about the family tends to support that assumption: The Christian family is a constellation of related persons whose core is one or more heterosexual married couples, and there exists a nest of satellite assumptions and values and norms that have to do with roles and relationships appropriate to various persons within that constellation. The family so understood has been one conceptual and institutional fortress of patriarchy, sexism, and heterosexism.⁴¹

However, despite her reservations, Purvis eventually wrote her essay, "A Common Love: Christian Feminist Ethics and the Family," as did nineteen other feminist authors resulting in the book *Religion, Feminism and the Family*. Other books followed and the theology of childhood section is growing. For

⁴¹ Sally Purvis, "A Common Love: Christian Feminist Ethics and the Family," in *Religion, Feminism, and the Family* (eds. Anne Carr and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 111–2.

theologians finally came to realize that “Not only is silence no longer necessary, it will now be more harmful than talking about motherhood, for the discussion will proceed by the sheer force of social history, whether feminist theologians participate or not.”⁴²

Feminists are finally willing to face the question “If women have gained, why are mothers and children worse off?” Secular research is continually bringing the realities of childhood before society and the academy, governments, non-governmental organizations and the church are calling for those realities to be acknowledged. So “feminists can no longer avoid the question of what children really need, even if it means hard choices when the needs of parents and children do directly conflict.”⁴³

Long the gate-keeper of social theology, feminist theology has matured to a point at which it can no longer ignore questions of children and childhood if it is to address the situation of women more fairly, comprehensively and holistically. Feminist theologians are stepping down, stepping back and opening the door to theologies of childhood, for themselves and for theologians across the spectrum.

Surveying the field

So what has been accomplished thus far? What is the lay of the land in this new field of the theology of childhood? The following review of the literature is only

⁴² Miller-McLemore, *Also A Mother*, 95.

⁴³ Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 114.

intended to sketch the areas of concern, and is in no way intended to be comprehensive.

Unsurprisingly, in large part theologians have been playing “catch-up” on many of the concerns that secular advocates for children have been working on for years and examining the challenges of the modern world with a theological lens. Karen Hertzog, for example, has chapters in her book *Children and our Global Future* entitled “The Child as Victim and Agent around the World: Child Workers and Child Soldiers,” “Violence against Children and By Children: A Global Environmental Issue,” and “The Child as (God’s) Agent of Global Change.” Similar collections of essays, *Children of God*, and *The Vocation of the Child*, cover a similar diversity of topics, but in a more domestic direction: “Maturity, Delinquency and Rebellion”; “Children, Chores and Vocation: A Social and Theological Lacuna;” “Hope for Unbaptized Infants: Holy Innocents after all?” to name just a few. There has been a new look at the issue of child abuse, with book-length treatments in *Suffer the Children: A Theology of Liberation by a Victim of Child Abuse*⁴⁴ and *The Child’s Song: The Religious Abuse of Children*.⁴⁵

Feminist theologians in particular have taken up questions related to child-rearing and how caring for children impacts the lives of women; Bonnie McMiller-McLemore, in her book *In the Midst of Chaos*, explores caring for children as spiritual practice, and in *Also a Mother* considers “Work and Family

⁴⁴ Janet Pais, *Suffer the Children: A Theology of Liberation By a Victim of Child Abuse* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991).

⁴⁵ Donald Capps, *The Child’s Song: The Religious Abuse of Children* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

As Theological Dilemma.” *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* also relies heavily on feminist principals and methodology as it explores the place of children in the worshipping congregation, as does Miller-McLemore’s latest book *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* with its “feminist maternal theology” wrought via “practical feminist theological method.”⁴⁶ A series of conferences on children’s spirituality from a Christian perspective has thus far resulted in two collections of essays: *Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications*⁴⁷ and *Nurturing Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*.⁴⁸ The topics range wildly from the spirituality of children in Celtic Christian tradition to exploring the spiritual needs of families of children with disabilities. Finally, a Lilly Endowment-funded project, steered by feminist theologian Marcia Bunge, seeks to document the place and understanding of children in the Christian tradition more systematically. The collections *The Child in the Bible*, which contains essays such as “Exodus as a ‘Text of Terror’ for Children”⁴⁹ and “Like a Child: Paul’s Rhetorical Uses of Childhood,”⁵⁰ and *The Child in Christian Thought*, containing

⁴⁶ Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, xxxii.

⁴⁷ Donald Ratcliff, ed., *Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2004).

⁴⁸ Holly Catterton Allen, ed., *Nurturing Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008).

⁴⁹ Claire R. Mathews McGinnis, “Exodus as a ‘Text of Terror’ for Children,” in *The Child in the Bible* (eds. Marcia J. Bunge, Terence E. Fretheim and Beverly Roberts Gaventa; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 24–44.

⁵⁰ Reidar Aasgard, “Like a Child: Paul’s Rhetorical Uses of Childhood,” 249–277.

essays such as “The Child in Luther’s Theology”⁵¹ and “John Wesley and Children,”⁵² are the fruits of her editorial efforts thus far.

As noted previously, theologian-historian Martin E. Marty has the only full-length-book response to Rahner’s challenge, *The Mystery of the Child*.⁵³ In it he asserts that too many people view children “first as a problem faced with a complex of problems,” rather than “a mystery surrounded by mystery.”⁵⁴ Marty’s thesis is perceptive. As we look back over the approach so many scholars have taken, the impulse has indeed been to identify problems with childhood that need solving: needs not being met, injustices being inflicted, gifts unrecognized. There is the tendency to try and solve the problems first, before truly unpacking *whose* the problems are. In other words, many scholars have been asking the question backwards: *why should we care about children (and how)* before figuring out *who children are*. They try to hammer out ethical formulae for child-adult relationships before establishing a clear theological vision of who children are. The result of all this is a lot of extremely particular situational ethics, such as “The Place of Forgiveness in the Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone.”⁵⁵ Such studies and the insights they generate are not

⁵¹ Jane E. Strohl, “The Child in Luther’s Theology: ‘For What Purpose Do We Older Folks Exist, Other Than to Care for . . . the Young?’”, 134–159.

⁵² Richard P. Heitzenrater, “John Wesley and Children,” 279–299.

⁵³ While Joyce Ann Mercer also uses and responds to Rahner in *Welcoming Children*, and many authors refer to his insights throughout the body of literature, Martin is the only author to actually structure his entire work in response to Rahner’s essay “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood.”

⁵⁴ Marty, 1.

⁵⁵ Stephanie Goins, “The Place of Forgiveness in the Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone,” in *Nurturing Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices* (ed. Holly Catterton Allen; Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 289–304.

without their value, but the impression starts to build that what we need is a theological essay addressing the ethics of every particular “complex of problems” that children face. And in the face of so much dizzying atomization, we start to long for something more universal.

What of, instead, the “mystery” of the child? Certainly there is a sizable minority of our authors who have tried to address that key question and have, unsurprisingly, approached it through an exegesis of Jesus’ sayings about children: “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven,” (Matt 18:3 and its parallels in Mark and Luke); “Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these,” (Matt 19:14). As Von Balthasar writes, “What is Jesus pointing to when he insists that the attitude of the human child is necessary for salvation, for entering the Kingdom of God?”⁵⁶

The standard approach in this line of inquiry is to attempt to define what “like a little child” actually means. Which characteristics of childhood is Jesus referring to? Common responses are, among others, “innocence,” “the ability to trust,” “simplicity,” “the ability to love.” But these responses in turn provoke their own questions. What childhood are we talking about? Childhood in first century Palestine? Childhood today? Childhood where? Is the child soldier in Sierra Leone “innocent?” Does the child who attends full-time daycare in 21st century America “trust” in the same way that the child who spends his days attended by a primary parent or grandparent, or the child who keeps company

⁵⁶ Von Balthasar, 15.

with the television in an inner-city apartment, waiting for his single mother to arrive home from work? Does the child in extreme poverty who plays with trash because there is nothing else evince the same kind of “simplicity” as the child who awaits, with single-minded zeal, that one expensive toy she *knows* she will get for Christmas? When a child hits a sibling in the face for no apparent reason, have they lost their “ability to love” and been disqualified from childhood as Jesus envisioned it? In the face of supposedly universal childhood “virtues,” the theologian of childhood, like the historian of childhood, rightly begins to feel ill at ease. For “. . . many historians have experienced that middle-of-the-night panic when contemplating how thin a line sometimes separates their work from fiction. But on this score the study of childhood seems especially nerve-racking, threatening to turn us all into novelists.”⁵⁷

No, as feminists have correctly asserted, the attempt to be universal has challenges (and romance) all of its own. We yearn again for the precision of the particular, only to return to our original dilemma.

Christology?

Our original dilemma, of being unable to discern universal truths about all children from the lives of particular human children, is no contemporary problem. In fact, Christian theology has sought to solve it before. Gregory of Nyssa calls the Christ the “new man,”⁵⁸ “. . . who for us became as we are, had

⁵⁷ D.J. Rothman, “Documents in search of a historian: toward a history of children and youth in America”, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2 (1971–2): 369, quoted in Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (London: Longman, 1995), 186.

⁵⁸ Friedrich Mueller, ed., *The Treatise Against Apollinarius* 54 (GNO III.i, 223f.). Online: May 3, 2009, <<http://www.sage.edu/faculty/salomd/nyssa/appolin.html>>.

fellowship with our flesh and blood for our sake. And seeing as we are what we are by essence, so was he—the one who died for us, the one to whom it is set before us to belong to his kind, and to imitate.”⁵⁹ The answer to the question “how to find universal meaning for our particular lives” was to look to Christ.

Scripturally- and patristically-inspired—that is, orthodox —Christology reveals a theological anthropology and therein a spiritual reality—that we can discern truths about man through the God-Man, about human childhood through the Christ Child. Further, it asserts that those key truths are active and effective across the entire spectrum of humanity—young and old, male and female—through the power of “theology as a transformative word.”⁶⁰ “For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.”⁶¹ The mystery of Christ transfigures all things. The reality of the Christ, though seemingly bound in time and culture, is actually the universal key to human experience. Orthodox theology is always concerned with the particular—in its final application. But it always flows from the revelation of Christ, as expressed through the Scriptures and the tradition of the Church. So in the case of the theology of childhood, the natural beginning is the childhood of Christ himself.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 30 (GNO III.i, 178).

⁶⁰ Behr, 77.

⁶¹ Hebrews 4:12–13.

Surprisingly, in all our body of literature, no modern theologian of childhood has yet tried to discern the nature and significance of human childhood from the Gospel depictions of Jesus as a child. The norm, as we have previously discussed, is to examine either depictions of other children in the Bible or to analyze and extrapolate from Jesus' sayings about children. This reticence to examine Jesus' own childhood seems a bizarre oversight, one noted (if not adequately addressed) by theologian Robin Maas:

How is it, then, that such a fundamental aspect of revelation should continue so consistently ignored, sentimentalized, suppressed? Why do we steadfastly resist the obvious implications of Jesus' teachings on childhood and even more, his own childhood, as a sign not of the beginning of our spiritual quest but, in a very real sense, as its consummation?⁶²

The most common excuse for this oversight is that there simply is not enough material. As Hans Urs Von Balthasar states, "Thick veils cover his childhood: with the sole exception of the episode of the twelve-year-old Jesus at the temple, the infancy narratives tell us nothing concerning the child himself."⁶³ Yet Von Balthasar goes on to admit that "This one episode, however, does cast a bright light back on his hidden early years."⁶⁴

While it is true that there is relatively little material in the canonical Gospels about Jesus' conception, birth and childhood, the uniqueness of the material that does exist and the fact that it constitutes, from a narrative point of view, the very first glimpses of Jesus given to the reader, suggests it is worth a

⁶² Robin Maas, "Christ as the Logos of Childhood: Reflections on the Meaning and Mission of the Child," *Theology Today* 56 (2000): 458.

⁶³ Von Balthasar, 28.

⁶⁴ Von Balthasar, 28.

second look. Further, the existence of non-canonical material that puts forth an alternate version of the childhood of Jesus suggests that the childhood of Jesus was indeed a significant locus of meaning for the early church, and thus a locus of controversy. A sustained look at the patristic commentary reveals that this was indeed the case, and that the Church Fathers exegeted the passages in a relatively consistent manner, revealing as they did so a necessary new dimension of Christology for their age, and a new vision of the theological anthropology of childhood for ours.

Unfortunately, any effort to look at childhood through the lens of theological anthropology, especially one focused by a disciplined Christology, is likely to run afoul of our feminist colleagues who currently dominate the theological dialogue on childhood. There is no mystery as to why this is the case; traditional Christology is largely unwelcome in feminist circles. In the words of Reuther, it is only "Once the mythology about Jesus as Messiah or divine Logos, with its traditional masculine imagery, is stripped off," that "the Jesus of the synoptic Gospels can be recognized as a figure remarkably compatible with feminism."⁶⁵ Further,

In traditional Christian theology, Christ is the model for this redeemed humanity that we have lost through sin and recover through redemption. But Christ as symbol is problematic for feminist theology. The Christological symbols have been used to enforce male dominance, and even if we go back behind masculinist Christology to the praxis of the historical Jesus of the synoptic Gospels, it is questionable whether there is a single model of redeemed humanity fully revealed in the past. This does not mean that feminist theology may not be able to affirm the person of Jesus of Nazareth as a positive model of redemptive humanity. But this model must be seen as partial and fragmentary, disclosing from

⁶⁵ Reuther, 135.

the perspective of one person, circumscribed in time, culture, and gender, something of the fullness we seek. We need other clues and models as well, models drawn from women's experience, from many times and cultures.⁶⁶

In this context, we can see more clearly why Luke 2:40–52 in particular has been shunned. As one commentator notes,

. . . in certain circles of systematic theology today, people are seeking to substitute for a "Christology from above" a so-called christology from below. Say what one will about the legitimacy of this distinction and of the later understanding of Jesus, one has to realize that the Lucan infancy narrative, like that of Matthew, knows only a "Christology from above." That is the whole point of the "revelation" that is made to Mary, to the shepherds, and to Jesus' parents (indirectly) by the child in the Temple himself.⁶⁷

However, does a "Christology from above" really have no light to shed on the human condition? Do what feminists deem theological abstractions really tell us nothing about who Jesus was and who we are? To believe this is to ignore the fact that in the discerning of Christology, no small amount of anthropology must also be sifted. This fact is abundantly evident in the patristic commentary available on the childhood of Jesus. While the Church Fathers are indeed primarily concerned with establishing Jesus' identity, rather than describing his day, *the Church Fathers' Christology is only discernible against the contours of Jesus' humanity, and vice versa*. We do indeed glimpse the realities of the Child Jesus in their writings. There are even brief glimpses of his experiential realities—the bloodiness of birth, the warmth of clothing, the receiving of kisses. But chiefly

⁶⁶ Reuther, 114.

⁶⁷ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Gospel According to Luke (I–IX)* (vol. 28 of The Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1983), 447.

what we are given are the realities the Church Fathers choose to highlight as those aspects of childhood experience that give meaning to all the rest.

Consequently, it seems prudent to attempt an examination of Von Balthasar's "sole exception," the account of the boy Jesus in the temple, found in Luke 2:40–52.

An Orthodox point of entry?

Further, it seems likely that the Orthodox community might be the best candidate to begin the articulation of a christologically focused theology of childhood. But do more Orthodox scholars really wish to enter this fray? After all, Orthodox theology and feminist theology have hardly been companion disciplines—with good reason.⁶⁸ The idea of Orthodox scholars trying to participate in a discussion which feminist theologians have, by and large, been moderating, seems fraught with difficulty.

Certainly any Orthodox articulation of a theology of childhood is going to be particular in its parameters. In the first instance, an Orthodox theology of childhood will have to remain within the bounds of authentic theology, or "theology as exegetical confession of Christ"⁶⁹—regardless of the nature of the rest of the field. Sound Orthodox theology has at its heart this Orthodox Christology, sourced in the Scriptures and New Testament, guided by the

⁶⁸ From the very start, feminist theologians have taken aim at Orthodoxy in their understanding of it as a patriarchal tradition, and while opportunities for feminist theologians' engagement with Orthodoxy have been limited by the circumstances of history, there is no ambiguity about how feminist theology has judged the key tenants of Orthodox theology. In *Sexism and God-Talk*, Orthodoxy is the very first name on Reuther's list of oppressive traditions, even before her own Roman Catholicism.

⁶⁹ Behr, 71.

interpretation of the patristic tradition: “the affirmation of the divinity of the crucified and exalted Lord, Jesus Christ.”⁷⁰ Further, if it is well conceived, Orthodox theology will prove itself by being that “transformative word” and multiplication, fruitfulness and contextualization will flow naturally for all possible settings. Conversely, theology which insists on beginning exclusively with the particular, only allowing the use of that which the setting itself can already supply, finds itself constantly foraging for new ground. It also risks building no universally-accessible vision but rather a series of theological ghettos.

So we ask again: why might Orthodox scholars want to walk through this door? Because through that door is the landscape, that “redefinition of childhood,” through which we all will pass with our families, whether we participate in that redefinition or not. Orthodox participation in the theology of childhood is not necessary simply as a means to balance and leaven the rest of the theological landscape; it is a critical task in rescuing the health of the Orthodox community itself. Whilst it is true that, in general, the average Orthodox parishioner in America has a parish experience undisturbed by the seismic shifts that feminist theology has wrought in the faith and practice in other expressions of Christendom, it is just as true that the average Orthodox family wrestles with all the same seismic shifts in the understanding and praxis of family that feminists are trying to address.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Behr, 70. Unfortunately, according to this definition, much theology of childhood already attempted, indeed most feminist theology, does not even qualify as theology.

⁷¹ So much so that one should probably no longer use the term “average Orthodox family.”

For as abstract as “theology of childhood” or “child theology” probably sounds to the average Orthodox layperson, it is at base made up of the most foundational and practical of questions: who are our children and why should we care about them? Or, as in Miller-McLemore’s further expansion,

this is not . . . about how children think in general or about how children think about God. Nor is it . . . on how to raise children in Christian faith. [. . .] . . . this is . . . about how adults think about children (a descriptive task) and about how adults should think about children (a prescriptive or normative task).⁷²

Every decision any Orthodox family makes about or for their children flows from their understanding of who children are, and especially who children are in relation to adults. How children are conceived, how (or whether) they are born, how they are cared for and by whom, how they are educated and to what end, how they are disciplined, how they are encouraged, what place they have in the life of the Church, and what place the Church has in their lives—all of these choices flow from whatever set of premises an adult holds about who (or what) a child is and what an adult’s responsibilities towards that child are. However, many Orthodox families make their choices largely out of a theological vacuum, or worse, using theological categories antithetical to Orthodoxy.

Orthodox scholars have noticed this vacuum, but have largely failed to do anything about it. In his book *Foundations for Christian Education*, John Boojamra bewails the church’s inattention to the role, meaning and significance of the family in Church life:

⁷² Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, xxv.

The Church's failure to produce a community of trained theologians, educators, and sociologists to consider the family has prevented the Orthodox community in North America from working for an effective family-centered and family-life catechesis. We Orthodox possess no guidelines on the family or family education. When formal thinking does occur, it is invariably in terms of pious affirmation of the family that serves to increase the stain as we compare the is and the ought of the actual experience. With the exception of contemporary works by Meyendorff and Constantelos, which treat marriage historically, *family life, Christian nurture, and parenting have been given short shrift in ecclesiastical tradition and current theological writing*. Within the next generation the Church in North America must crystallize its theology of the family and parenting in light of the social sciences; without this educators and parents cannot speak of a meaningful family-life or family-centered ministry.⁷³

Boojamra speaks primarily from the perspective of someone interested in maximizing opportunities for Christian education, yet here he cracks the lid on a question with ramifications far beyond Sunday School. Is it true that "We Orthodox possess no guidelines on the family"? Alas, it would seem that Boojamra is correct, at least when it comes to the interior, daily realities of "family life, Christian nurture, and parenting" that are found wherever there are parents and children. A quick internet search of the statements of Standing Commission of Orthodox Bishops in America (SCOBA) and the documents of the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) reveal very little on family life beyond teachings on marriage and the bioethical and technological challenges surrounding the conception of children. The most detail-oriented and in-depth treatment of a family-related topic is given to the spiritual formation of children of mixed Orthodox-Roman Catholic marriages.⁷⁴ But on the significance and

⁷³ John L. Boojamra, *Foundations for Christian Education* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1989), 64. Emphasis mine.

⁷⁴ *A Pastoral Statement on Orthodox/Roman Catholic Marriages*—Joint Committee of Orthodox and

meaning of parents' interactions with children in a unified Orthodox home, from these official and authoritative channels, we receive no guidance.⁷⁵

Need we be concerned about this vacuum? After all, should the Church be wading into one of the most private and, arguably, natural parts of human life? Child-bearing and rearing are actions that are in some ways perennially the same, and in other ways, so contextually influenced that in the first instance theological attention seems unnecessary and in the second instance, invasive. Yet leaving families to their own devices seems an inadequate response when the bishops themselves claim that "the family is disintegrating."⁷⁶ One also wonders whether it is a responsible stance even towards cohesive families who find themselves in a literal whirlwind of philosophical approaches to childhood.

We assume we know all about children. But the ground underfoot is constantly shifting. Assumed visions inherited from bygone Christianity and modern science no longer fit, yet new controlling images suggested by politics, popular psychology, and the market are inadequate and sometimes outright destructive. This [. . .] is about that convulsing ground on which children and caring adults stand: the images that are failing us; the battle over new ways to understand children; the distortions toward which many people, including myself, are tempted; and the attempt to assert healthier, richer moral and religious visions. *Reimagining children [. . .] will lead to a renewed conception of the care of children as a religious practice.*⁷⁷

Catholic Bishops, 1990. Online: May 2, 2009, <<http://www.scoba.us/resources/orthodox-catholic-bishops/orthodox-catholic-marriages.html>>.

⁷⁵ Of course, what can be found in a "quick internet search" is not necessarily indicative of the experience of any particular Orthodox family as they think about and interact with their children. The vast majority of Orthodox Christian life plays out at the parish level and in the context of a family's relationship with their priest. For the most part, this level is "invisible" to formal research, though new efforts on the part of the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute in Berkeley, CA may change that. Their *Parish Life Project* gives a first glimpse into these and is available online: April 25, 2009, <http://www.orthodoxinstitute.org/parish_needs.html>.

⁷⁶ *Encyclical Letter of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America on Marriage*. Online: May 2, 2009, <<http://oca.org/DOCencyclical.asp?SID=12&ID=4>>.

⁷⁷ Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, xxv–xxvi. Emphasis mine.

The Orthodox community needs “a renewed conception of the care of children as a religious practice” as much as anyone else. Indeed, we may need it more. The fact that for so much of our history Orthodoxy has been embedded in particular cultures means that there is often confusion over which understandings and practices derive their meaning from theological vision and which do not. Understandings and practices associated with childhood are no exception. As traditionally Orthodox cultures find themselves on the same constantly shifting ground as the rest of the world, and as Orthodoxy spreads to cultures that have never been Orthodox, the need to rediscover and truly understand our own theological anthropology becomes urgent.

III.

THE CHRIST CHILD, ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURE

Children in the Scriptures

Here am I and the children whom the Lord has given me! We are for signs and wonders in Israel from the Lord of hosts, who dwells in Mount Zion.¹

The history of Israel is punctuated with significant children—but exactly what their significance is seems a question well worth asking as we prepare to examine the gospel’s portrayal of the child Jesus.

The first group of children we can identify in the Scriptures are those which exist simply as signs. While their existence is a detail the writer deems worthy of inclusion, it is equally evident that the scriptural text is completely uninterested in the flesh and blood lives of these children, if we are even meant to understand them as having been actual, live children at all; their value seems to lie solely in their being a sign of something to someone.

Hosea’s children—Jezreel² (the location of the massacre that takes place in 2 Kings 9–10), Lo-ruhamah³ (“Not pitied”), Lo-ammi⁴ (“Not my people”)—are,

¹ Isa 8:18. Unless otherwise noted, biblical translations are from New King James Version, from *Accordance*, CD-ROM (Nashville, Tennessee: Oaktree Software: 1982).

² Hos 1:4.

³ Hos 1:6.

⁴ Hos 1:9.

quite literally, signs of God's judgment on Israel. The book of Isaiah also contains three named children who serve as signs: one, grimly, Maher-shalal-has-baz⁵ ("Pillage hastens; looting speeds"); another, more positively but still a double-edged sword, Shear-jashub⁶ ("A remnant shall return"); and finally most positively and creatively, Emmanuel ("God with us"). This final child is described in Isaiah 7:14 as a clear sign of God's deliverance: "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; behold, a virgin shall conceive in the womb, and shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Emmanuel." But within their immediate scriptural contexts, even in the case of Emmanuel, the role of these children in the narrative ends with their role as signs.⁷

Beyond this type of children as signs are other, particular children who are followed in the text into a childhood and then an adulthood of historical significance. Isaac, Joseph and Samuel are all examples of this type—children as catalysts, as prophets. Their births are indeed significant symbols, but also long-awaited, pivotal events that entirely change the dynamics of their parents' lives and destinies. Further, their value to the scriptural narrative does not end with their birth. The concrete details of their childhoods play key roles in the narrative's development. Joseph is a receiver of prophetic dreams while yet a child; the young Samuel is entrusted with God's message for Eli regarding the fate of his sons; and the boy Isaac serves as the locus of the dramatic testing of

⁵ Isa 8:3.

⁶ Isa 7:3.

⁷ For an extensive treatment of children in the book of Isaiah, including discussion of their role as signs, see Jacqueline E. Lapsley, "Look! The Children and I Are as Signs and Portents in Israel': Children in Isaiah," in *The Child in the Bible* (eds. Marcia J. Bunge, Terence E. Fretheim and Beverly Roberts Gaventa; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 82–102.

Abraham's faith. With some the childhood episodes described are many, with others they are fewer, but eventually all mature into adults that preserve and move forward the story of Israel in critical ways.

It is not difficult to see Luke's portrayal of the Child Jesus, on one level, simply as a recapitulation of this tradition of significant, catalytic and prophetic children in Israel.⁸ Like Isaac, his birth is foretold and then heralded as a sign by angels. He is followed, like the infant Moses, in and out of danger and Egypt, and he matures, through a few glimpses of his childhood proper, into the adult Jesus who completely transforms Israel's story. This understanding of Jesus' childhood, as the reality behind the other significant children of the Scriptures, continually emerges within the patristic commentary. The writings of the Church Fathers are replete with examples of the original children of Scripture being interpreted as types of the Christ Child, as in this hymn by Ephrem the Syrian:

Eve lifted up her eyes from Sheol and rejoiced in that day, because the Son of her daughter as a medicine of life came down to raise up the mother of His mother. Blessed Babe, that bruised the head of the Serpent that smote her!

She saw the type of Thee from the youth of Isaac the fair. For Thee, Sarah, as seeing that types of thee rested on his childhood, called him, saying, O child of my vows, in whom is hidden the Lord of vows.

Samson the Nazarite shadowed forth a type of Thy working. He tore the lion, the image of death, whom Thou didst destroy, and caused to go forth from his bitterness the sweetness of life for men.

Hannah also embraced Samuel; for Thy righteousness was hidden in him who hewed to pieces Agag as [a type] of the wicked one. He wept over Saul, because Thy goodness also was shadowed forth in him.

⁸ Indeed, he is explicitly linked with Emmanuel in Matthew 1:23.

How meek art Thou! How mighty art Thou, O Child!⁹

Already we see in these few verses how the teachers of the Church will harness poetic resonance to a radical reorganizing of the cosmos. “How meek art Thou! How mighty art Thou, O Child!” Divinity embraces a meekness we did not think it could. Humanity encases an inner strength and dignity we did not know we had.

The icon that the Church will paint of the Christ Child will be one that “affirms that divinity and humanity are found together with the same ‘face,’ in the same ‘being,’”¹⁰ and that being was first a babe. We will see the newborn on the altar, wrapped in his graveclothes; the toddler snuggling in his mother’s arms, surrounded by portents of the crucifixion; and the twelve-year old in the temple as the image of so many other children who led Israel—Isaac, Moses, Samson, Samuel, Josiah. We will see what Karl Rahner recognizes as one of Christianity’s most particular truths:

First and foremost the child is the *man*. Probably there is no religion and no philosophic anthropology which insists so manifestly and so strongly upon this point as one of its basic presuppositions as does Christianity; the point namely that the child is already the man, that right from the beginning he is already in possession of that value and those depths which are implied in the name of man. It is not simply that he gradually grows into a man. He *is* a man. As his personal history unfolds he merely realizes what he already *is*. He does not seek about in a void of indefinite possibilities ranging from all to nothing, to see what he can achieve by chance. He is equipped as a man, given his allotted task and endowed with grace to perform it right from the very outset with all the inexpressible value and all the burden of responsibility which this entails. And this, because it comes from God and because his personal

⁹ Ephrem the Syrian, *On the Nativity*, Hymn VIII. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf213.iii.v.ix.html>>. The word choices of this final clause suggest a reference to Luke 2:52.

¹⁰ Behr, 80.

history, in spite of being inextricably bound up with the history of the cosmos and the life principle as a whole, is related with absolute immediacy to God himself, to his original creative and inalienable design for him.¹¹

Rahner reminds us, as the Church has taught, that there is significance in Jesus' being a child that is connected to the rest of who he is and what he will do. If Jesus became a man to reveal to us the true nature of both divinity and humanity and to free man from sin and death, his becoming a child cannot be separated from that mission. Revelation and deliverance were the purposes of his incarnation, and he was incarnated, in the first instance, as a child.

And yet for so many this vision of the Christ Child has been lost, displaced by soft-focus images of the "Sweet Baby Jesus," and a precocious pre-teen "teaching" and talking back to his parents. These images are seen as only preludes to the real drama of the adult Christ. Too many of us have lost from consciousness the sense that "the willingness to identify God with an infant is somehow near the heart of what makes Christian belief so astonishing and so alien. . . ."¹² What a far cry this is from the hymn of Ephrem the Syrian, written for the Nativity, but clearly referencing, among other things, the incident in the temple:

Blessed be that Child, Who gladdened Bethlehem today! Blessed be the Babe Who made manhood young again today! [...] Blessed be He Whose own will brought Him to the Womb and Birth, to arms and to increase [in stature]. Blessed be He whose changes purchased life for human nature. [...] Glory to Him Who could never be measured by us! Our heart is too small for Him, yea our mind is too feeble. He makes foolish our

¹¹ Rahner, 37. Emphasis in the original.

¹² Jeremy Worthen, "Babes in Arms: Speechlessness and Selfhood," in *Children of God: Towards a Theology of Childhood* (ed. Angela Shier-Jones; Werrington, Peterborough: Epworth, 2007), 41–61

littleness by the riches of His Wisdom. *Glory to Him, Who lowered Himself, and asked; that He might hear and learn that which He knew; that He might by His questions reveal the treasure of His helpful graces!*¹³

The Gospel of Luke and Childhood

The gospel of Luke is unique in the attention that it gives the childhood, not only of Jesus, but also of John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary. Only in Luke do we find stories of the conception of John the Baptist, the Annunciation to the young Virgin Mary, and the bringing of the infant Jesus into the temple and his reception and acknowledgment by Simeon and Anna. While the gospel of Matthew shares the inclusion of the Nativity of Christ, and even moves beyond Luke with the escape of the Child into Egypt, it then shifts abruptly to the adult ministries of both John and Jesus. It is clear that in both Luke and Matthew, one of the chief motivations behind the inclusion of the conception, nativity and infancy narratives is to firmly ground the ensuing adult ministry of Christ and John in their particular genealogies within Israel and the accompanying history. But a delightful result, especially in Luke, is the chance to meditate on the human family that surrounded Jesus in a new kind of "in the beginning."

In sharp contrast with the teaching, actions and miracles that open Mark and the theological formulations of the first chapter of John, in Luke we have the incredible intersection of expansive prophetic odes with the grittiness of human limitations and suffering, expectation and disappointment, doubt and faith, joy and vulnerability. Amidst signs and visitations, two women become pregnant, feel their babies grow and move within them, birth and raise them facing a

¹³ Ephrem the Syrian, *On the Nativity*, Hymn II. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf213.iii.v.iii.htm>>. Emphasis mine.

horizon of strange hope and clear menace. Only Luke retains this glimpse of Jesus and John as human children with human parents, in the midst of universal emotions and uncertainties, yet imbued with particular meaning and significance. Only Luke lingers in that childhood to give us a final and transitional gift: the story of the boy Jesus in the temple with the elders in Luke 2:40–52.

Place of Luke 2:40–52 within the Tradition

For several reasons, the story of the finding of the boy Jesus in the temple commends itself as a locus for considering the theological meaning of childhood through a christological lens. In the first instance, it depicts Jesus not as a babe in arms but a child with active agency. It is here that we first see Jesus speaking and acting on his own. Indeed, we have no direct words at an earlier age from Jesus in any of the Gospels than “Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father’s business?” (Luke 2:49).

However, the possible significance of the passage is not reflected by a prominent place for it in the Orthodox tradition; there is no feast devoted to the celebration of this event per se.¹⁴ Its only liturgical remembrance occurs during what Vladimir Lossky calls “a festival of an idea,” the feast of Mid-Pentecost.¹⁵ While the icon of the boy Jesus in the temple is traditionally placed in the center of the church at this time, the Gospel reading is John 7:14–30, Jesus’ teaching in

¹⁴ However, among Oriental Orthodox churches, the Syrian Orthodox church’s lectionary does extend the reading for the feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple to include the subsequent account of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple. Online: May 4, 2009, <<http://www.syrianorthodoxchurch.net/Location/UnitedKingdom/SOC-ChurchOccasions&Services-UK-en.htm>>.

¹⁵ L. Ouspensky and V. Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1982), 193.

the temple as an adult man. When Leo the Great describes suitable times for baptisms, he lists the finding of Jesus in the temple among “the series of events which had to be accomplished in time through Jesus Christ our Lord,” noting that

All these things [including the finding of Jesus in the temple] we have alluded to with as much brevity as possible for this reason, that you may know, beloved, that though all the days of Christ’s life were hallowed by many mighty works of His, and though in all His actions mysterious sacraments shone forth, yet at one time intimations of events were given by signs, and at one time fulfillment realized: and that all the Saviour’s works that are recorded are not suitable to the time of baptism. For if we were to commemorate with indiscriminate honour these things also which we know it have been done by the Lord after His baptism by the blessed John, His whole lifetime would have to be observed in a continuous succession of festivals, because all of His acts were full of miracles. But because the Spirit of wisdom and knowledge so instructed the Apostles and teachers of the whole Church as to allow nothing disordered or confused to exist in our Christian observances, we must discern the relative importance of the various solemnities. . . .¹⁶

Thus the event is clearly labeled by Leo as, yes, a “mysterious sacrament,” but one that can be observed in practice to be, of “relative importance.” However, despite this apparent liturgical ambivalence, the scriptural passage itself has attracted a fair amount of theological attention over the years. The reason for that attention, it quickly becomes clear, is the christological implications of the parallel verses: “And the Child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, being filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him,” (Luke 2:40) and “But Jesus increased in stature and wisdom and grace with God and man.” (Luke 2:52).

¹⁶ Leo, *Letter XVI.3*. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf212.ii.iv.xvi.html>>.

Scriptural context

Luke 2:40–52, is placed directly after the meeting of the Lord in the temple and directly before the commissioning of John in the wilderness. Most English editions, in formatting the passage, and significant Western commentaries such as *The Anchor Bible*, in treating the passage, actually use Luke 2:40 as the final sentence in the narrative of the entrance of the infant Jesus into the temple; they tend to see the two appearances of Jesus in the temple, first as a baby and then as a twelve-year-old, as essentially unlinked. So why do we choose to treat them together here? Firstly, the resonance created by the fact they are both temple incidents and by the parallel language of 2:40 and 2:52 suggests, however one wants to divide the passage in print, the original compilers of Luke clearly wanted them to be linked. Further, some patristic writings include 2:40 as the beginning of the narrative of the older child in the temple in commentaries on the passage, or otherwise put forward the two verses as a pair to be considered together.

Exegesis

“And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him,” (Luke 2:40). The first point of interest is how Jesus is not named, but referred to as “the Child.” A glance back through the preceding verses reveals that up until this point Jesus is referred to by the Gospel narrator as “the child,” “her first-born son,” “a babe,” “the babe,” “this child”: all titles of relative anonymity. While we hear from Gabriel that Mary shall “call his name Jesus” (Luke 2:31) and from the angels appearing to the shepherds that he is “a

Savior who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11) it is, appropriately, not until “at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised,” that “he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb” (Luke 2:21). Thereafter he is “the child Jesus” (2:27), and then the enigmatic “child” again (2:40), and “the boy Jesus” (2:41). But by the end of the passage, where 2:52 is a clear parallel of 2:40, he is now simply “Jesus,” and will continue as such throughout the remainder of the Gospel; “And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him” becomes “Jesus increased in stature and wisdom and grace with God and man.”

The implication is that the passage as a whole represents a transition from the anonymity of “the Child” to the known, if still obscured, person of “Jesus.” And this transition is one theme of the entire passage: the revelation of an already fixed identity is underway. The jumble of references, names and titles within the passage itself actually work toward this end. Jesus’ identity—his name, who he is and what he will accomplish—is known amongst the heavenly host, even before he is conceived in the womb (Luke 1:31). This identity is again confirmed by the angels on the day of his birth when they declare him, “a Savior, who is Christ the Lord,” (Luke 2:11). And yet, appropriately, he enjoys the relative anonymity of all babies within the Hebrew community as he waits to be formally named on the eighth day (Luke 2:21), and the anonymity of children more generally, in a world of adults.

What can be said more particularly about Luke 2:40? The verse actually begins to give us clues as to what the nature of that identity is. References within the passage to the Scriptures and other parts of the Gospel powerfully underline

Jesus' connection with several other prophetic children. There is an echo of Judges 13:24, "So the woman bore a son and called his name Samson; and the child grew, and the Lord blessed him"; and 1 Samuel 2:26, "And the child Samuel grew in stature, and in favor both with the Lord and men." These references serve to link Jesus to two particular prophetic children within the history of Israel, both children born to parents in times of great transition and peril for the people of Israel.¹⁷ Both would serve Israel as judges; Samson would serve as a judge during a time of extreme lawlessness within Israel and vulnerability to enemies, the Philistines, outside of Israel,¹⁸ while Samuel would be Israel's final judge and reluctantly preside over Israel's transition to a monarchy, and the temptations thereof.¹⁹

"And the Child grew and became strong in spirit," in most manuscripts, also recapitulates much of Luke 1:80, "So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel," detailing the development of John the Baptist.²⁰ As another prophetic child, John's connection with Jesus is direct and obvious, and as explored at the beginning of

¹⁷ There are also lots of fascinating parallels that exist between the *Protevangelion of James'* account of the birth of Mary and the birth of Samuel. The author of the former was obviously evoking the prophetic child motif on behalf of Mary. Among other resonances: Anna is mocked for her childlessness, mourns, and makes a vow to devote to God whatever she brings forth; Anna sings a song that parallels Hannah's in 1 Sam 2; Mary is taken to the temple at age three in order to dwell there.

¹⁸ Further, Samson willingly dies in a cruciform position.

¹⁹ The parallel with Samuel is especially interesting when seen in the light of the establishment of the monarchy; Jesus is depicted as the heir of the throne of David and yet disestablishes that throne as he shrugs off the mantle of political messiah.

²⁰ As will Luke 2:52, obviously. The key difference between the verses is that John is not filled with wisdom. Fitzmyer suggests, on 432, that perhaps the insertion of wisdom here, into such a clear recapitulation, is anticipating the event about to take place in the temple. However, as we shall see in Chapter V, the canonical version of this story does not hold up very well as a "wisdom" episode.

the chapter, a chief feature of the Gospel of Luke. Similarly, “and the grace of God was upon Him” is perhaps an echo of his mother’s experience in Luke 1:30.²¹

“His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. And when He was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast,” (Luke 2:41–2).²² Verse 41, unsurprisingly, references Deuteronomy 16:1–8 and Exodus 23:15;²³ it clearly seeks to illustrate the sincere piety of Mary and Joseph. They are observers of the feast to the fullest extent possible—making the trip to Jerusalem every year, and staying there for the full duration of the feast (seven days).

At twelve, Jesus joins Mary and Joseph in their observance. There are the obvious parallels, if no direct textual references, with Samuel and Mary being taken to the tabernacle and temple as children, to be offered to the Lord as the fruits of their parents’ piety. However, at twelve, Jesus is much older than they were (three). Commentators give a number of opinions on the significance of Jesus’ being twelve, though all seem to assume that the text means to suggest

²¹ Fitzmyer. 432. In the same paragraph, Fitzmyer also points out that “Whereas the parallel story of John depicted him in the desert until the time of his manifestation to Israel, Jesus grows up in the circle of his Galilean family.” Fitzmyer picks up on an important theme here which we will see borne out in the patristic commentary.

²² Fitzmyer indicates at this point that “In a few mss. and ancient versions (ms. 1012, OL, Diatessaron) one finds rather [than His parents]. . . , “Joseph and Mary,” 439. This thesis is using the NKJV which uses the *textus receptus* which is very close to what the Fathers were using in commenting on this passage.

²³ Both are descriptions of the observation of the feast of Passover. While it is perhaps instinctual to look ahead from this point to Christ’s role as the Paschal sacrifice on the cross, surely an ironic glance backwards is also merited: “You shall eat no leavened bread with it; seven days you shall eat unleavened bread with it, that is, the bread of affliction (for you came out of the land of Egypt in haste), that you may remember the day in which you came out of the land of Egypt all the days of your life,” Deut 16:3, evokes the Holy Family’s flight into Egypt; and “None shall appear before me empty-handed,” Exod 23:15, (RSV), evokes the occasion on which Anna and Joachim, parents of the Virgin Mary, are turned away from the temple despite their rich offerings on account of their childlessness (*Proteuangelion* 1:2).

that this was Jesus' first visit since his entrance into the temple as an infant.²⁴ A likely explanation relative to Jewish tradition is that the significance of his age lies in the fact that twelve is one year younger than thirteen, the age of majority in Judaism. Thus, Jesus' travel with his parents to Jerusalem and his time in the temple with the elders is a sign of his joining the community as a man, but is also further evidence of Mary and Joseph's piety and Jesus' own zeal, as they choose to do it a year early.²⁵

However, once again there are interesting resonances with other significant children, strengthening the theme. Josephus recounts that Samuel was twelve at the time of the incident when he is sleeping in the tabernacle and is called by God.²⁶ And ironically, Manasseh of Judah is twelve when he becomes king; while he is by no means a "prophet," he is both significant and a catalyst of sorts. Unfortunately, his catalytic act is to lead Judah completely astray by filling the temple with idols and altars to other gods, and practicing, among other

²⁴ Fitzmyer, 440: "There was obligation for women or children to participate in this pilgrim feast (see m. Hagiga 1:1). The fact that Luke depicts both Mary and Jesus accompanying Joseph to Jerusalem is part of the Temple piety that pervades the infancy narrative in general." Temple piety or no, there are obvious interesting parallels here between Mary and her own mother Anna, who is also depicted accompanying her husband to the temple in the *Protevangelion of James*, and Hannah, the mother of Samuel again. Even Fitzmyer notes that "The detail echoes the Samuel story, Elkanah and Hannah going up yearly to the sanctuary (Shiloh) (in 1 Sam 1:3, 21; 2:19)," 441. One does wonder, however, if Jesus did not attend until age twelve, with whom he was left if Mary attended every year.

²⁵ Fitzmyer, 440-1: "From regulations set down in the later tractate m. Niddah 5:6 it was deduced that a Jewish boy became obligated to observe the Torah at the age of thirteen. (Of much later origin is the modern expression, *bar miswah*, "son of [the] commandment," as well as the ceremony related to it.) There is reason to think that some of the later Mishnaic regulations were somewhat applicable to the time of Jesus—at least in this case. From the age of thirteen on, he would have been obliged to take part in the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. That Jesus is here depicted as being taken up to Jerusalem at the age of twelve may reflect the custom said to exist among pious Jews of getting a young boy accustomed to the obligation, by taking him up at a younger age (see m. Hagiga 1:1; cf. Str-B, 2. 144-147)."

²⁶ Fitzmyer, 441: "Josephus (Ant. 5.10,4 348) dates the beginning of Samuel's acting as a prophet (i.e. his call narrated in 1 Sam. 3:3) to his twelfth year."

things, human sacrifice (2 Kings 21:1–18). Whether the narrator intended to invoke his memory or no, he makes for an interesting point of contrast.

“When they had finished the days, as they returned, the Boy Jesus lingered behind in Jerusalem. And Joseph and His mother did not know it,” (Luke 2:43). Mary and Joseph fulfill their religious obligation and then seek to return to the responsibilities of daily life. But the Child Jesus tarries, staying longer in Jerusalem and thereby going beyond, exceeding, the obligations of the Law and, by implication, the virtue of his parents. Further, his parents “did not know it,” a description that invites the first of many comparisons between Jesus’ knowledge and that of his parents.

The word used here to describe Mary and Joseph’s ignorance, οὐκ ἔγνωσαν, is used in two other places in the gospel of Luke: in Luke 11:44, where Jesus announces, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like graves which are not seen, and the men who walk over them are not aware of them”; and Luke 24:18, where Cleopas asks the risen Christ, “Are You the only stranger in Jerusalem, and have You not known the things which happened there in these days?” In both cases the implication is that the ignorance arises from innocence, yet still has serious ramifications; in the former, a blind trusting of the Pharisees, and in the latter, ignorance of the crucifixion. The gospel author could be implying the same state of affairs here: Mary and Joseph’s ignorance of Jesus’ actions is perhaps innocent and expected given their circumstances, but with the serious ramification of ignorance of Jesus’ true identity.

The narrator gives us no information about how Jesus managed to separate himself from his parents. Fitzmyer here adds the interesting detail that

“In the Temple precincts he would have been separated from his mother, but would have been with Joseph.”²⁷ This fact somehow makes Jesus’ later separation of himself from Joseph in Luke 2:49 more poignant; Joseph is probably the parent he was last physically with before his declaration that he is the Son of God. Jesus literally leaves his earthly father to be in his heavenly Father’s house and about his business.²⁸

“... but supposing Him to have been in the company, they went a day’s journey, and sought Him among their relatives and acquaintances. So when they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking Him,” (Luke 2:44–5). Mary and Joseph are so confident in Jesus’ secure place within their family circle that they travel for an entire day before noticing that he is missing. And even then the first place they search for him is among their own. Only when they are sure that he is not there do they turn back to Jerusalem, “seeking Him.” Only after they have exhausted their natural, familial options, do they seek God. The imagery here is clearly that of re-orientation, repentance even. There is also, again, the theme of Mary and Joseph’s ignorance. Mary and Joseph have believed one thing about Jesus and that belief has proved incorrect. In order to understand his relationship to them properly, they must turn back to Jerusalem, and seek Him directly.²⁹ Behind everything is the looming redefinition of Jesus’ family.

²⁷ Fitzmyer, 441.

²⁸ Again, echoes of the experiences of Mary and Samuel.

²⁹ There is also an echo of an interesting pattern that occurs throughout the gospel and is related to whether one is going towards or away from Jerusalem. The Magi seeking Christ go towards Jerusalem (Matt 2:1); Jesus himself reveals his coming death on the way to Jerusalem (Matt 16:21, Mark 10:32). However, the Pharisees and teachers of the law, seeking to split traditional hairs with Jesus over the behavior of his disciples, come to him from Jerusalem (Matt 15:1, Mark 7:1). Mary and Joseph are clearly heading in the right direction.

“Now so it was that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers,” (Luke 2:46–7). After three days³⁰ Jesus is found, sitting in socratic exchange with the teachers of the Law. To a reader looking for clues to Jesus’ true identity as the Messiah and the Son of God, there are no surprises here. Where is the presence of God to be found if not in the temple? Further, what higher hopes might we have for the teachers of the law but they be informed by that presence? Jesus again displays his piety, wrought by the faithful upbringing of Mary and Joseph, in his understanding of the tradition. His questions no doubt reveal his sense of the relative importance of what they are discussing, and a depth of insight that the teachers were not expecting in one so young.

However, the fact that the teachers are astonished does not necessarily mean that Jesus is revealing to them things they did not know, special secret wisdom that only he, as the Son of God, has access to. No, at this point there is no thing in the passage that would suggest that is the case. While many popular depictions and descriptions of this event refer to Jesus as teaching in the temple, it actually seems equally likely that he is in the position of a student here. Listening to and asking questions of elders was a classic mode of learning in the ancient world.

Further, it is certainly possible for adults to be impressed, even astonished, at the confluence of a certain facility of knowledge, a sincere and

³⁰ The use of “three days” seems a likely reference to Jesus’ time in the tomb, and works nicely with the parable in Luke 15 which equates being lost with being dead.

reverent questioning, and a sense of security in a particular child, without him being a supernatural prodigy. Jesus though separated from his parents, is willing to sit amongst other adults because they are of a known, safe category and context (teachers within the temple) and they are discussing something intensely interesting to him. This is not otherworldly behavior; it is perfectly reasonable to attribute such an episode to a regular, twelve-year-old child. This fact, however, does not stop many modern commentators from wanting to declare this point the most significant of the passage and the key theme of the passage the revelation of Jesus' wisdom.³¹ Such commentators are clearly influenced by examples from other traditions³² and non-canonical texts which treat the same passage (and which we shall address in Chapter V). As we shall soon see, Jesus does know something that other people do not know, but it is not something disproportionate to his age and station, but something unique to who he is.

“So when they saw Him, they were amazed; and His mother said to Him, ‘Son, why have You done this to us? Look, Your father and I have sought You anxiously.’ And He said to them, ‘Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father’s business?’ But they did not understand the statement which He spoke to them,” (Luke 2:48–50). When Mary and Joseph find Jesus they are amazed, likely with a combination of shock, relief, surprise and

³¹ Fitzmyer, 436–7: “Bultmann (HST, 300) thinks that the episode has a double point to make: (1) the outstanding wisdom of the child Jesus (v. 47); and (2) his staying behind in the Temple, which reveals his religious destiny. This, however, makes too much of the wisdom motif, which is only mentioned in the Lucan secondary conclusion (v. 52); the overemphasis stems from Bultmann’s regarding the episode as a legend, or story about Jesus.”

³² Fitzmyer, 437: “Bultmann is influenced, as are many other commentators, by the similarity of this story with many other stories of the precocious childhood and outstanding wisdom of famous figures of history or mythology.”

pride at the way in which he is interacting with the teachers. Again, Mary and Joseph have been caught off guard for lack of knowledge. But maternal angst soon takes over, and Mary's questions seek to firmly reestablish Jesus within the community of his family by reminding him of the responsibilities that they have towards each other. She also reminds everyone of Joseph's and her humanity when she mentions their anxiety.

Now it is Jesus' turn to be surprised. Rather than the accusatory tone that some commentators (and the Infancy gospels) assume, there is nothing here to indicate that Jesus is not, on some level, innocently baffled by his mother's questioning. Here is the thing that he knows which his mother and father do not: that it is necessary for him to be in his Father's house and about his business. Somehow this knowledge is interior to him but not to them. It is a revelation of his true identity that they did not teach him. The playing out of this passage follows very closely the description we have of the revelation of God in Behr's essay on the nature of theology, coming to know God:

. . . most important for our reflection on the nature of theological discourse is to understand how the disciples came to know that Jesus is the Lord, the Son of God. Thereby, we can contemplate the coming Lord in that same way, and so remain within the apostolic tradition. As we have observed, they did not come to this knowledge through hearing reports about his birth, nor by accompanying him for a period of time. This simply underscores the fact that the usual methods of human knowledge—scientific analysis, historical inquiry, or philosophical reflection—are inadequate when the desired object of knowledge is God. For God is not subject to human, physical, or mental perception, but shows himself as and when he wills, just as the risen Christ comes and goes at his own pleasure.³³

³³ Behr, 73–4.

As we can see, even being Jesus' parents, being present at his birth and accompanying him throughout the first twelve years of his life, does not guarantee an understanding of the Christ. The passage further underlines this fact by echoing, with its similar structure, Mark 3:31–35, when the adult Jesus is told that his mother and brethren are asking for him. Both incidents result in a re-definition of Jesus' familial ties. In that case, Jesus defines his mother and brothers as those who do the will of Jesus' Father. Here, when Mary declares that "Your father and I have sought You anxiously," Jesus replies with a clear re-definition of his father as the "Father" whose house Jesus is in.³⁴

"Then He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them, but His mother kept all these things in her heart," (Luke 2:51). Yet after this experience of differentiation from his parents, and his glimpse of the fact that he has an identity and a destiny separate from their own, Jesus returns to Nazareth with them and is "subject" to them. There is a Transfiguration-like quality to this description, though it is evident the effect of the episode is not as complete as it is on the mount. Jesus has been elevated before them (simply via his place in the temple as a twelve-year-old) and there has been an articulation of his true identity. But now he goes "down with them" and resubmits himself to their care and status as his parents. All the signs are that Mary and Joseph take this reintegration of their family in stride. Mary, however, gleans something, though it is not clear to us, or her, what it is. In a recapitulation of her response to

³⁴ However, as the patristic commentary will show, he is careful not to repudiate Joseph entirely.

Jesus' birth in Luke 2:19 "Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart."

"But Jesus increased in stature and wisdom and grace with God and man," (Luke 2:52). The passage closes by echoing 2:40, but now with Jesus clearly named. We are given a glimpse of how Jesus will spend his hidden years: increasing in stature, wisdom and grace, with God and man. This increasing, this becoming strong, is his task until he reaches his full measure, and as a thirty-year-old man begins his ministry. The only details the gospel gives about the next eighteen years of Jesus life (and, as one thinks about it, the vast majority of the last twelve as well), is that Jesus grew through boyhood into manhood, "increasing" in physical stature, in human wisdom and grace, while living in submission to his earthly parents. These are the realities the gospel writer has chosen to highlight as those aspects of childhood experience that bring meaning, and scandal, to all the rest.

IV.

PATRISTIC COMMENTARY

Therefore, O Thou who seemest to be born “from thence,” Thou art from everlasting! But let not human birth be thought of, but Divine eternity. He began then from the time of His birth; He grew: ye have heard the Gospel.¹

The Church Fathers clearly have no category “theology of childhood.” However, their use of Luke 2:40–52 shows that they believe there is great theological significance, even theological necessity, in the childhood of Jesus, in the concrete facts that he is conceived and developed in Mary’s womb, born as an infant into the care of a human family and community, and matures under the guidance and piety of both Mary and Joseph and their kinsfolk. Augustine asserts, “He began then from the time of His birth; He grew: ye have heard the Gospel,”² as if those particular facts, that Jesus began from the time of his birth and then grew, could stand in the place of all the other facts about Jesus’ adult life that we generally call “the Gospel.” That Jesus is a child is no accident. Indeed Cyril of Alexandria suggests that Jesus could have come to us as a full-grown man: “the Word as being God could have made His flesh spring forth at once from the womb unto the measure of the perfect man, yet this would have been the nature

¹ Augustine, *Psalm XCIII.5*. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf108.ii.XCIII.html>>.

² *Ibid.*

of a portent; therefore, He gave the habits and laws of human nature power even over His own flesh.”³

No, according to the Fathers, the childhood of Jesus, complete with all “the habits and laws of human nature,” is a part of our salvation. *All of the realities of Jesus’ childhood are a part of who he is, and who he is, God becoming human, is the very definition of his suffering for our sake, his passion.* “For by the miracles and the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit it was manifested and confirmed to the world that He is the Son of God. And this too, ‘The Child grew in wisdom and grace.’”⁴

So while patristic commentary on the finding of Jesus in the temple focuses around the revelation of Jesus’ identity as the Son of God, their exegesis of Luke 2:40–52 indicates that Church Fathers understand Jesus’ identity as being sourced in much more than his oral confession of that fact. While Jesus’ statement that they should have known that he would be in his Father’s house is clearly the narrative center of the event for the Fathers also, it is only the center of a much larger and more elaborate mosaic of Jesus’ identity established by his childhood as a whole. All the other elements that the gospel writer highlights for us as important and even normative—that Jesus grew through boyhood into manhood, “increasing” in physical stature, in human wisdom and grace, while living in submission to his earthly parents—are also taken up by the Fathers as the transformative realities of Jesus’ childhood, of his existence as the Christ

³ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke, Homily V* (trans. R. Payne Smith; New York: Studion Publishers, Inc., 1983), 63.

⁴ John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith V.18*. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf209.iii.iv.iv.xviii.html>>.

Child. The transformative realities of the Christ Child are not contained in what he says, but who he actually is: a real human child who is also the Son of God.

That childhood cannot be separated from who he is as an adult man, for it lays the foundations of that subsequent reality. In the words of Rahner:

Childhood is not only of eternal significance for man's destiny to the extent that in childhood the foundations are laid for decisions which have an eternal significance. It is important not only as a point of departure for the adult man, having an influence on what actually takes place later and thereby on that which will finally take place when the individual's life comes to its close. More than this it is important in itself also, as a stage of man's personal history in which that takes place which can only take place in childhood itself, a field which bears fair flowers and ripe fruits such as can only grow in *this* field and in no other, and which will themselves be carried into the storehouses of eternity.⁵

Jesus' identity as the Son of Man—wrought out of his experience of being a real human boy—is in large part a fruit of the field of his childhood, and is as important an element to his mission as his identity as the Son of God and his adult preaching and working of miracles. And it is the coexistence of the vulnerabilities of that real human childhood—weakness, ignorance, dependence, mutability / increase—with divine sonship, the fact that Jesus was the Son of God “from His very boyhood,”⁶ which the Fathers chiefly dwell on as they read this passage. That coexistence is what the Fathers' contemporaries dwell on as well: the scandal of God as a child ignites serious christological controversy. As a

⁵ Rahner, 36.

⁶ Tertullian, *Against Praxaeus*, XXVI: “These things, therefore, whatsoever they are—(I mean) the Spirit of God, and the Word and the Power—having been conferred on the Virgin, that which is born of her is the Son of God. This He Himself, in those other Gospels also, testifies Himself to have been from His very boyhood: ‘Wist ye not,’ says He, ‘that I must be about my Father’s business?’” Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf03.v.ix.xxvi.html>>.

result Jesus' childhood, and the finding of Jesus in the temple in particular, become the locus of intense and creative patristic activity.

The Fathers are careful, as they respond to their detractors, to distinguish what aspects of Christ's existence are sourced in which nature. But they are equally careful to insist that the reality of the Incarnation is that such distinctions, like death, have lost their power. The language consistently used is that of "submission." Jesus, though sovereign of the universe, chooses to submit himself to the limitations of humanity by becoming a human child. In the words of Ambrose:

Let us then think of His subjection. [...] The subjection therefore is that of obedience; the obedience is that of death; the death is that of the assumed humanity; that subjection therefore will be the subjection of the assumed humanity. Thus in no wise is there a weakness in the Godhead, but there is such a discharge of pious duty as this. See how I do not fear their intentions. They allege that He must be subject to God the Father, I say He was subject to Mary His Mother. For it is written of Joseph and Mary: "He was subject unto them."⁷

In his submission to the realities of human childhood—to its weakness, its ignorance, its dependence on others, and its increase, its constant change and growth—the Christ Child reveals that divinity can and will coexist with these realities. God's will is not subject to cosmic physics, which would force the precipitation of his divinity apart from his humanity. All the scandals of Orthodox Christology are made most explicit in Christ's infancy and childhood

⁷ Ambrose, *On the Christian Faith* XIV.ii.8. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf210.iv.iv.vii.xv.html>>.

as it “affirms that divinity and humanity are found together with the same ‘face,’ in the same ‘being,’”⁸ and that that being is at first a babe.

The scandal of weakness

The Fathers see Jesus’ passion, that which he undertakes for our salvation, as starting at the very beginning of his earthly existence. His conception in the womb, by definition the start of his submission to the confines of human nature, is painted by Jerome as the beginning also of his humility:

For our salvation the Son of God is made the Son of Man. Nine months He awaits His birth in the womb, undergoes the most revolting conditions, and comes forth covered with blood, to be swathed in rags and covered with caresses. He who shuts up the world in His fist is contained in the narrow limits of a manger. I say nothing of the thirty years during which he lives in obscurity, satisfied with the poverty of his parents.⁹

Already it is possible to see the parallels between Jerome’s description of what Jesus submits himself to as an infant, his extreme vulnerability in that state, and what we see and celebrate in the work of the Cross. After undergoing “the most revolting conditions,” Jesus is returned to his mother, “covered with blood, to be swathed in rags and covered with caresses.” “He who shuts up the world in His fist,” and as an infant no doubt opens and closes his tiny hands to his own endless fascination, “is contained in the narrow limits of a manger,” and is contained in the narrow limits of a tomb. God becomes weak. By the strength of his divine will, He delivers himself to birth and death, for our salvation:

⁸ Behr, 80.

⁹ Jerome, *Letter XXII*, 39. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.v.XXII.html>>. This final sentence is obviously a reference to Luke 2:51, 52, echoing his satisfaction in returning with his parents and being obedient to them.

the “two extremities to human life—the one we start from and the one we end in. And so it was necessary that the Physician of our being should enfold us at both these extremities, and grasp not only the end, but the beginning too, in order to secure in both the raising of the sufferer.”¹⁰

By becoming weak as a human infant, Jesus makes his work on the cross possible. In the words of Ambrose:

Further, our Lord’s flesh is that which could increase in stature with age, and be wounded through suffering, to the end that the whole human race might rest guarded from the pestilent heat of the pleasures of this world, under the shadow of the Cross whereon Its limbs are spread.¹¹

The scandal of ignorance

Just as it could not abide the thought of God subject to physical vulnerability, the ancient world also struggled with the idea that God might not have perfect knowledge or wisdom at all times. Yet the gospel statement that Jesus increased in wisdom suggests that over the years of his childhood, Jesus gains more wisdom and knowledge than he has originally as an infant. The Fathers affirm this is the case, and we shall treat the topic of how they believe that could happen in “The scandal of increase.”

We also see in patristic commentary on the temple episode a willingness to meditate on that state of ignorance in which the Christ Child, as a human baby with all the developmental limitations thereof, must have begun. In spite of their imperfect knowledge, so adequately showcased in the temple episode, Mary and

¹⁰ *Epistulae*, 3, xxi (GNO VIII.ii, 25) found in Peter C. Bouteneff, *The Theological Value of Christ’s Human Soul in the Cappadocian Fathers*, thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for DPhil in Theology, University of Oxford.

¹¹ Ambrose, *On the Christian Faith* IV.xii.169. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf210.iv.iv.vi.xii.html>>.

Joseph still have something to teach Jesus. One can expect that he learned from them the necessary developmental lessons that infants and children learn from their parents: how to talk, walk, engage with others. These are lessons that “the habits and laws of human nature” dictate must come to us from other humans, by watching the faces of other human beings, listening to their words, allowing them to guide you through their world. To these lessons they also add the content and praxis of their faith. According to Augustine, they also model human humility for Jesus, serving as examples of the servanthood he is conforming himself to:

“And they understood not the saying which He spake unto them; and He went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them.” Subject to whom but His parents? And who was the subject but Jesus Christ, “who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God”? And wherefore subject to them, who were far beneath the form of God, except that “He emptied Himself, and took upon Him the form of a servant,”—the form in which His parents lived?¹²

Yet the Fathers do not deny that at the time of the episode in the temple, Jesus has knowledge or understanding that his parents or those around him do not. He knows that he is the Son of God, and his knowledge of that fact does not come from Mary and Joseph. To the Fathers this knowledge is something they assume Jesus always had, but that he lacked the skills, understanding and awareness (these come with his “increase”) to express at an earlier point. They see this knowledge as another sign of the unity of identity which the gospel

¹² Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence* XII.11. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf105.xvi.v.xii.html>>.

writer and the Church Fathers all affirm exists at all stages of the Christ Child's development. In the words of Von Balthasar,

It may be difficult for us to bring both things into harmony: on the one hand, the presence, from the beginning, of the full mission in the small Child, who can envision it in its totality in the genuine, even if childlike, manner; on the other hand, the human process of maturing and the ever deeper understanding of this totality, until the total mission has attained, within the adult human consciousness, the plenitude that will allow its autonomous and responsible execution.¹³

The scandal of dependency

Jerome indicates that he shall say “nothing of the thirty years during which he lives in obscurity, satisfied with the poverty of his parents,” but of course Jerome's including them at all marks those years also as part of Jesus' passion. Jesus is not born as the eschatological child of Isaiah,¹⁴ cared for by benign wild beasts, or like Irenaeus' original Adam, into a paradise staffed by angelic guardians and designed for his nurture. No, though the Son of God, he submits himself to dependency on human beings, his own creatures. Ambrose writes,

Let us call to mind how kindly our Lord hath dealt with us, in that He taught us not only faith but manners also. For, having taken His place in the form of man, He was subject to Joseph and Mary. Was He less than all mankind, then, because He was subject? The part of dutifulness is one, that of sovereignty is another, but dutifulness doth not exclude sovereignty. Wherein, then, was He subject to the Father's law? In His body, surely, wherein He was subject to His mother.¹⁵

Ambrose is adamant here: Jesus is only subject to the Father's law in as much as he was subject to his mother!

¹³ Von Balthasar, 35.

¹⁴ Isa 7:14.

¹⁵ Ambrose, *On the Christian Faith* II.x.88. Online: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf210.iv.iv.xi.html>>.

This, of course, is another point of scandal for the Fathers' ancient colleagues. That God would only be able to accomplish something by being subject to one of his own creatures is inconceivable. Yet Jesus, as a child, and then subsequently as a young man, does just that. He submits himself to the poverty and anonymity of a particular human couple. Further, he honors both Mary and Joseph on account of the hospitality and care they willingly render him as an infant, that hospitality and care which he submits himself to: "The Lord Jesus was subject to His parents. He revered that mother of whom He was Himself the parent; He respected the foster-father whom He had Himself fostered; for He remembered that He had been carried in the womb of the one and in the arms of the other."¹⁶

Willingness to highlight and celebrate the role of Joseph in the childhood of Jesus is a fascinating feature of the Fathers' treatment of the temple episode; it is in particular a theme of Augustine, who is concerned to prove both the soundness of Jesus' genealogy,¹⁷ the virginity of Mary and the harmony of the gospel accounts.¹⁸ But his efforts render not just "proof texts" but a vision of the necessity of Jesus' human family, and in particular his human father.

He is found then in the temple, and His mother saith to Him, "Why hast Thou thus dealt with us? Thy father and I have sought Thee sorrowing;" and He said, "Wist ye not that I must be about My Father's service?" This He said for that the Son of God was in the temple of God, for that temple was not Joseph's, but God's. See, says some one, "He did not

¹⁶ Jerome, *Letter CXVII*, 2. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.v.CXVII.html>>.

¹⁷ Augustine, *The Harmony of the Gospels* II.1. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf106.vi.v.ii.htm>>. This is one example (there are others) when Augustine uses the passage to explain why genealogy is traced through Joseph.

¹⁸ Augustine, *The Harmony of the Gospels* II.5. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf106.vi.v.vi.html>>. Augustine uses the passage in creating a "harmony" of the Lukan and Matthean accounts of Jesus' infancy and childhood to show how they dovetail.

allow that He was the Son of Joseph.” Wait, brethren, with a little patience, because of the press of time, that it may be long enough for what I have to say. When Mary had said, “Thy father and I have sought Thee sorrowing,” He answered, “Wist ye not that I must be about My Father’s service?” for He would not be their Son in such a sense, as not to be understood to be also the Son of God. For the Son of God He was—ever the Son of God—Creator even of themselves who spake to Him; but the Son of Man in time; born of a Virgin without the operation of her husband, yet the Son of both parents. Whence prove we this? Already have we proved it by the words of Mary, “Thy father and I have sought Thee sorrowing.”¹⁹

The One who has a divine Father does not repudiate his earthly foster-father for even a moment! He is ever “the Son of both parents,” though it is hard for us to imagine what Joseph could possibly have been contributing the situation beyond the obligations of the generic earthly father. But it is just at the point of our skepticism that we see how Joseph’s participation in Jesus’ life transfigures those obligations into the utterly necessary part of Jesus’ reality and identity that they actually were. Chrysostom asserts that Joseph’s role in Jesus’ childhood is so central that even Mary is willing to undergo suspicion about her purity to maintain it:

that He was born of a virgin they do not say always: nay, not even His mother herself ventured to utter this. See, for instance, what saith the Virgin even to Himself: “Behold, Thy father and I have sought Thee.” For if this suspicion had been entertained, neither would He any longer have been accounted to be a Son of David, and this opinion not being held, many other evils besides would have arisen. For this cause neither do the angels say these things to all, but to Mary only, and Joseph; but when showing to the shepherds the glad tidings of that which was come to pass, they no longer added this.²⁰

¹⁹ Augustine, *Homily* 1.17. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf106.i.xvii.html>>.

²⁰ Chrysostom, *Homily* III.1. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf110.iii.vi.html>>.

Augustine claims that Mary considered Joseph's life as a virtuous foster-father as of equal value to her own role as biological mother in its significance to Jesus. Joseph's willingness to live righteously, chastely in regards to Mary and with full responsibility for Jesus, makes him more worthy to be called Jesus' father than if he had actually fathered him biologically.²¹

Let then the generations ascend and descend through [Joseph]. And let us not exclude him from being a father, because he had none of this carnal desire. Let his greater purity only confirm rather his relationship of father, lest the holy Mary herself reproach us. For she would not put her own name before her husband; but said, "Thy father and I have sought Thee sorrowing." It was to both His parents that He was subject, by the same condescension by which He was the Son of Man. A little way back women received their precepts. Now let children receive theirs—to obey their parents, and to be subject to them. The world was subject unto Christ, and Christ was subject to His parents. You see then, brethren, that He did not say, "I must needs be about My Father's service," in any such sense as that we should understand Him thereby to have said, "You are not My parents." They were His parents in time, God was His Father eternally.²²

Interestingly, Joseph is also commended for being a believer, suggesting that at an early point he understood who Jesus was. In fact, Chrysostom suggests that Joseph understood Jesus' true identity even before Mary did:

. . . it is not to be supposed that when the brethren had become believers, Joseph believed not; he who in fact had believed before any. Certain it is that we nowhere find him looking upon Christ as man merely. As where His mother said, "Thy father and I did seek thee sorrowing."²³

²¹ This clearly echoes the passage in Mark 3:31–35 where Jesus says his mothers and brothers are those who do the will of his Father.

²² Augustine, *Homily I*, 19–20. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf106.i.xix.html>>.

²³ Chrysostom, *Homily III* (on Acts 1.12). Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf111.vi.iii.html>>.

So the Fathers, like the gospel writer, securely establish Jesus within his human family despite the difficulties that arise as a result—the scandal of God being dependent on a creature and the challenge of maintaining a clear genealogy, Mary’s chastity and the significance of Joseph’s role as a foster-father all in good order and relationship to one another. To what end do they establish him thus? What will he accomplish during a childhood thus spent? He has suffered through the scandal of human gestation and birth, but now he is securely within the care of a pious couple. He will learn the Law, just as the prophetic children before him did, but how will he save? He will transfigure the most crippling of human weaknesses: growth.

The scandal of increase

Whether or not a being changed, grew or “increased” was a key element in what kind of a being it was in the ancient world. In the writings of the Fathers, man is differentiated from angels, in part on the grounds that angels

are not gradually perfected by increase and advance: [. . .] Thus with those beings who are not gradually perfected by increase and advance²⁴ but are perfect from the moment of the creation, there is in creation the presence of the Holy Spirit, who confers on them the grace that flows from Him for the completion and perfection of their essence.”²⁵

Further, God is differentiated from man in that “He is by nature immutable, perfect, and all-sufficient, whereas men are liable to change, and need His help. What further advance²⁶ can be made by the wisdom of God? What

²⁴ προκοπή. cf. προέκοπτεν of the boy Jesus in Luke 2:52

²⁵ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*, XVI.38. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf208.vii.xvii.html>>.

²⁶ Luke 2:52, προύκοπτεν

can the Very Truth, or God the Word, add to itself? How can the Life or the True Light in any way be bettered?"²⁷

God is immutable and man is liable to change; how can these two realities exist in the same being? Further, consider all the ways in which man as an infant is liable to change if we track his development from his conception in the womb to his attaining adulthood. While the ancients had no access to the modern technology that allows us to see the miraculous progression from zygote to fetus, they were still party to the incredible transformation that rendered the helpless infant into the child who could walk, talk, and discern sense where before he could not. The idea that the Christ Child could change and grow in these ways and yet still be God was unimaginable to many of the Fathers' contemporaries, but the father's adamantly claimed "increase" as a part of Christ's passion—what he "suffered" for our salvation. In response to those who took offense at the idea that God might be anything less than an impassive divinity, and were tempted to belittle the submission of Jesus to the various humiliations of the human condition, Gregory Nazianzen claims all of those humiliations as part of Christ's saving work, in the same vein as his Cross and Death.

But in opposition to all these, do you reckon up for me the expressions which make for your ignorant arrogance, such as "My God and your God," or greater, or created, or made, or sanctified; Add, if you like, Servant, and Obedient, and Gave, and Learnt, and was commanded, was sent, can do nothing of Himself, either say, or judge, or give, or will. And further these,—His ignorance, subjection, prayer, asking, *increase*, being made perfect. And if you like even more humble than these; such as speak of His sleeping, hungering, being in an agony, and fearing; or

²⁷ Theodoret, "The Epistle of Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria to Alexander, Bishop of Constantinople," in *Ecclesiastical History of Theodoret*, I.iii. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf203.iv.viii.i.iv.html>>.

perhaps you would make even His Cross and Death a matter of reproach to Him.²⁸

However, how exactly Christ's "increase" played a part in his passion and salvation of mankind was apparently lost on many, for the vast majority of the patristic commentary that we have on Luke 2:40 and 2:52 is actually in the form of response to the various heresies that sought to exploit this scandal of mutability. Athanasius cites an instance of the Arians using these as "proof texts" and they were likely not alone.²⁹ But it is Cyril of Alexandria who has the longest sustained analysis of the passage as a whole, focusing in on the christological challenges that the idea of Jesus growing and changing poses.

Cyril interprets the passage as a revelation of Christ's two natures. He devotes an impressive amount of commentary to the very first verse, 40—"And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him"—which according to Cyril, "must be taken as referring to His human nature." Cyril's reasons for this explicit attribution are clear: the verse highlights qualities that cannot be attributed to the divine nature—bodily growth, becoming strong in or increasing in the spirit, progressive filling with wisdom and an externalization of the grace of God. Thus v. 40 finds itself, understandably, at the heart of a number of christological disputes. "For it were a thing impossible for the Word begotten of God the Father to admit nothing like this into His own nature; but when He became flesh, even a man like unto us,

²⁸ Gregory Nazianzen, *On the Son*, XVII. Emphasis added. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf207.iii.xv.html>>

²⁹ Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, III. As we shall see, many Fathers respond to challenges to Christ's ability to increase, but it is lost to history much the time who exactly they were talking to.

then He is born according to the flesh of a woman, and is said also to have been subject to the things that belong to man's state.”

Cyril points out the care Luke takes when describing Jesus, embracing whole-heartedly the many ways in which Jesus “increased”:

For the wise Evangelist did not introduce the Word in His abstract and incorporeal nature, and so say of Him that He increased in stature and wisdom and grace, but after having shown that He was born in the flesh of a woman, and took our likeness, he then assigns to Him these human attributes, and calls Him a child, and says that He waxed in stature, as His body grew little by little, in obedience to corporeal laws. And so He is said also to have increased in wisdom, not as receiving fresh supplies of wisdom—for God is perceived by the understanding to be entirely perfect in all things, and altogether incapable of being destitute of any attribute suitable to the Godhead—but because God the Word gradually manifested His wisdom proportionably to the age which the body had attained.³⁰

It is interesting that here Cyril highlights a particular aspect of real human childhood to which Jesus submits himself: bodily growth.

We might be tempted to gloss over bodily growth as such an obvious, and obviously material, aspect of human childhood that can surely have nothing to contribute to a theological understanding of childhood. But Cyril does not allow this. Rather, he explicitly links bodily growth and the increase in Wisdom, or the manifestation of the Wisdom of God. Cyril says that it is precisely as a child physically and psychologically grows and changes that the Wisdom of God is increasingly revealed to them. The norm is that human growth and change is the experience whereby the Wisdom of God reveals itself. This is not, however,

³⁰ Cyril, 64.

because the Word of God is ever absent from them. It is, in fact, always there in its fullness. As Mai, a commentator on Cyril, explains

The body then advances in stature, and the soul in wisdom; for the divine nature is capable of increase in neither one nor the other, seeing that the Word of God is all perfect. And with good reason he connected the increase of wisdom with the growth of the bodily stature, because the divine nature revealed its own wisdom in proportion to the measure of the bodily growth.³¹

The Word of God does not grow, it is revealed. As it is not capable of increase, neither is it capable of decreasing or diminishing. So it is not that the presence of God is diminished or absent in earlier stages of childhood, but rather that it is hidden. A helpful analogy might be that of a sun rising over the horizon—the sun is the same sun below the horizon, but it only reveals its size, light and power as it rises slowly over the edge. But even before it emerges into view, its pull and presence are just as real and impacting on the child watching for it—it has always been the center of his universe and has given life and stability to the cosmos in which he lives. Cyril constructs an image in which Jesus' wisdom and knowledge of God, and likely the revelation that he was God's Son, dawned on him from within like a sun, as he naturally developed and grew as a child.

John of Damascus articulates a very similar vision, stating that Jesus grew in "wisdom and age and grace, increasing in age indeed and through the increase in age manifesting the wisdom that is in Him." John then goes on to say that by doing so, Jesus actually transformed "increase" for the rest of humanity:

³¹ Cyril, 64. In this edition Mai's commentary is embedded in the text. There are no note numbers.

yea, further, making men's progress in wisdom and grace, and the fulfillment of the Father's goodwill, that is to say, men's knowledge of God and men's salvation, His own increase, and everywhere taking as His own that which is ours. But those who hold that He progressed in wisdom and grace in the sense of receiving some addition to these attributes, do not say that the union took place at the first origin of the flesh, nor yet do they give precedence to the union in subsistence, but giving heed to the foolish Nestorius they imagine some strange relative union and mere indwelling, 'understanding neither what they say nor whereof they affirm.' For if in truth the flesh was united with God the Word from its first origin, or rather it existed in Him and was identical in subsistence with Him, how was it that it was not endowed completely with all wisdom and grace? Not that it might itself participate in the grace, nor share by grace in what belonged to the Word, but rather by reason of the union in subsistence, since both what is human and what is divine belong to the one Christ, and that He Who was Himself at once God and man should pour forth like a fountain over the universe His grace and wisdom and plentitude of every blessing."³²

What are the implications of this thought? First, it becomes possible to say that one truly universal characteristic or "virtue" of human childhood is this "increase," this growth or change. All children grow and change. Ideally, they grow and change towards something—the perfect man. And that is where the vast majority of us place the emphasis when faced with children and their experiences of all kinds, certainly their spiritual experience—their end point. That said, few adults achieve the perfect man, which suggests that growth and change must be a continuing piece of the adult experience if the growth in wisdom is also. And certainly, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that this is so.

But childhood is a period in life when this growth and change is most evident to all. As such it is a kind of active icon of this aspect of human

³² John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, XXII. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf209.iii.iv.iii.xxii.html>>.

experience. It is only as children grow that they can see more and more who God is. This understanding definitely provokes some interesting contrast with other theological models of childhood. For instance, Cyril's and John of Damascus' model values growth and learning more over the idea of innocence. For the field of children's spirituality, it holds in an interesting balance a child's very real access to God by his presence at all points, with the limitations imposed on that by developmental immaturity.

And not just children. For the Fathers asserted that adult men came in different sizes as well. The image of growth from the episode in the temple is also applied to spiritual growth in Christians of all ages, as in this passage from Origen:

"See that ye despise not one of these little ones." It seems to me that as among the bodies of men there are differences in point of size,—so that some are little, and others great, and others of middle height, and, again, there are differences among the little, as they are more or less little, and the same holds of the great, and of those of middle height,—so also among the souls of men, there are some things which give them the stamp of littleness, and other things the stamp of greatness, so to speak, and generally, after the analogy of things bodily, other things the stamp of mediocrity. But in the case of bodies, it is not due to the action of men but to the spermatoc principles, that one is short and little, another great, and another of middle height; but in the case of souls, it is our free-will, and actions of such a kind, and habits of such a kind, that furnish the reason why one is great, or little, or of middle height; and it is of our free-will either by advancing in stature to increase our size, or not advancing to be short. And so indeed I understand the words about Jesus having assumed a human soul, "Jesus advanced;" for as from the free-will there was an advance of His soul in wisdom and grace, so also in stature. And the Apostle says, "Until we all attain unto a full-grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ;" for we must think that he attains unto a man, and that full-grown, according to the inner man, who has gone through the things of the child, and has reached the stage of the man, and has put away the things of the child, and generally, has perfected the things of the man. And so we must suppose that there is a certain measure of spiritual stature unto which the most perfect soul can attain by magnifying the Lord, and become

great. Thus, then, these became great, of whom this is written, Isaac, and Moses, and John, and the Saviour Himself above all; for also about Him Gabriel said, "He shall be great."³³

Origen describes a world in which, just like bodies, human souls are of varying height, or quality. Some are great, some only mediocre. In the case of bodies, the limits of growth are predetermined for a person; it simply arises out of the "spermatic principles" (which we would likely call genetics) what a particular body is going to be like. The person has no control over his eventual shape. However, with the soul, one can use one's free will to intentionally grow towards greatness. In fact, Origen suggests that it is specifically because Jesus used his free will to choose to subject himself to humanity and thus to the ability to grow, that we gained this capacity to use our free will in this way, "to attain unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." For all men there is "a certain measure of spiritual stature unto which the most perfect soul can attain by magnifying the Lord, and become great." This is how the Fathers understood that only by entering into the human condition could Christ redeem human nature: only by entwining the weaknesses of human nature with his divinity could he transfigure them into transformative forces, and cause men also to "increase spiritually."

Who has so childish a mind as to suppose that the Divinity passes on to perfection by way of addition? But as to the Human Nature, such a supposition is not unreasonable, seeing that the words of the Gospel clearly ascribe to our Lord increase in respect of His Humanity: for it says, "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and favour."³⁴ Which, then,

³³ Origen, *Commentary On the Gospel of Matthew*, XXVI. Online:<<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf09.xvi.ii.vi.xxvi.html>>.

³⁴ Luke 2:52

is the more reasonable suggestion to derive from the Apostle's words?— that He Who was God in the beginning became Lord by way of advancement, or that the lowliness of the Human Nature was raised to the height of majesty as a result of its communion with the Divine?³⁵

In multiple references to the Luke passage, we have seen the Church Fathers extend the idea of Christ Child's ability to grow to man's ability to grow spiritually, and in this way indicate a value in Jesus' childhood for all of humanity, not just human children. Human growth is harnessed by the Christ Child for good. Like a plant that has been in the dark, humanity now grows toward the Light. What the Christ Child accomplishes by his very nature, humanity can now accomplish by grace.

Only-begotten, the equal of the Father, is not of grace, but of nature; but the assumption of human nature into the personal unity of the Only-begotten is not of nature, but of grace, as the Gospel acknowledges itself when it says, "And the child grew, and waxed strong, being filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was in Him." But to others He is given by measure,—a measure ever enlarging until each has received his full complement up to the limits of his own perfection.³⁶

The whole of Christian life comes to be characterized by the Christ Child's "increase" by certain Fathers. Basil states that

For instance, whenever the Lord is called the Way, we are carried on to a higher meaning, and not to that which is derived from the vulgar sense of the word. We understand by Way that advance, where it is said that our Lord increased, i.e., "continued to cut His way forward" to perfection which is made stage by stage, and in regular order, through the works of righteousness and "the illumination of knowledge"; ever longing after what is before, and reaching forth unto those things which remain, until we shall have reached the blessed end, the knowledge of

³⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, VI.4. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf205.viii.i.viii.iv.html>>.

³⁶ Augustine *Tractate LXXIV*.xiv.15–17. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf107.iii.lxxv.html>>.

God, which the Lord through Himself bestows on them that have trusted in Him.³⁷

Ephrem the Syrian links growth to the ability to repent, stating that just as Christ changed against his Divine Nature, so a man by his will can grow to any spiritual height.

Let us open also gates to supplicants that have transgressed,
and of us have asked [forgiveness].
Today the Lord of nature was against His nature changed;
let it not to us be irksome to turn our evil wills.
Fixed in nature is the body; great or less it cannot become:
but the will has such dominion, it can grow to any measure.
Today Godhead sealed itself upon Manhood,
that so with the Godhead's stamp Manhood might be adorned.³⁸

Finally, Gregory Nazianzen, in his funeral oration, uses the imagery of the gradual revelation of Christ's wisdom and favor as the template for the gradual revelation of Basil's virtue.

Or rather to treat this question more satisfactorily, I think that the result is the same as I see in the case of our Saviour, and of every specially wise man, I fancy, when He was with us in that form which surpassed us and yet is ours. For He also, the gospel says, increased in wisdom and favour, as well as in stature, not that these qualities in Him were capable of growth: for how could that which was perfect from the first become more perfect, but that they were gradually disclosed and displayed? So I think that the virtue of Basil, without being itself increased, obtained at this time a wider exercise, since his power provided him with more abundant material.³⁹

³⁷ Basil, *In how many ways "Through whom" is used*, VIII.18. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf208.vii.ix.html>>.

³⁸ Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on the Nativity*, Hymn I. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf213.iii.v.ii.html>>.

³⁹ Gregory Nazianzen. *Oration XLIII*.38. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf207.iii.xxvi.html>>. Again, this sense of fixed, already established and defined amount of wisdom/virtue, being gradually revealed or given wider exercise by the experience of change.

Christ Child as ethical example

While the vast majority of the Church Fathers treat Luke 2:40–52 as a revelation of the Christ Child’s true nature, as sourced in both his humanity and divinity, Jerome is the one father who also consistently uses Jesus’ behavior in the passage as a direct ethical example to teach others. Interestingly enough, however, he only ever does so in private letters and in all cases is directing his instructions at adults (often monastics).⁴⁰ In three letters he instructs his correspondents to “follow the example” of Jesus by being subject to his or her parents or grandparent,⁴¹ using the text in the way that many of our feminist colleagues might consider oppressive as it imposes a standard of behavior not sourced in the hearer’s immediate, particular reality.

However, Jerome’s letter *On Paula* accomplishes the stunning, narrative task of bringing us full circle to show how the Christ Child’s “Christology from above” defies Reuther’s accusation that it is only “Once the mythology about Jesus as Messiah or divine Logos, with its traditional masculine imagery, is stripped off,” that “the Jesus of the synoptic Gospels can be recognized as a figure remarkably compatible with feminism.”⁴²

When Paula comes to be a little older and to increase like her Spouse in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and man, let her go with her parents to the temple of her true Father but let her not come out of the temple with them. Let them seek her upon the world’s highway amid the crowds and the throng of their kinsfolk, and let them find her nowhere but in the shrine of the scriptures, questioning the prophets and the

⁴⁰ I could find no example of a church father suggesting that adults use this passage as a means to teach children about appropriate submission to their parents.

⁴¹ Jerome, *Letter XXII.17*; *Letter CXXX*; *Letter CXVII.2*. All online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.html>>.

⁴² Reuther, 135.

apostles on the meaning of that spiritual marriage to which she is vowed.⁴³

The ability to “increase like her Spouse in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and man” is open to Paula, a young girl. God the Father is also “her true Father” and she is free to dwell in his presence (“the temple”) without her earthly parent’s chaperonage. She needs neither the world’s highway with their crowds nor the throng of her kinsfolk, but can seclude herself in the “shrine of the scriptures,” questioning the prophets and the apostles (i.e. the authors of the Scriptures and the Epistles themselves, assumingly through prayer) about the significance of her monastic life. Paula too can attain “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

⁴³ Jerome, *Letter CVII.7*. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.v.CVII.html>>.

V.

THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS: NON-CANONICAL INFANCY GOSPELS

We find what follows in the book of Joseph the high priest, who lived in the time of Christ. Some say that he is Caiaphas. He has said that Jesus spoke, and, indeed, when He was lying in His cradle said to Mary His mother: I am Jesus, the Son of God, the Logos, whom thou hast brought forth, as the Angel Gabriel announced to thee; and my Father has sent me for the salvation of the world.¹

For contrast's sake, let us look briefly at the accounts of the Christ Child found in non-canonical sources. The most famous of these is the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, examples of which exist in a number of different versions and languages. Conveniently for our purposes, the *Infancy Gospel* includes the account of twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple—but with some revealing variations. If the canonical texts are examples of what the Church chose to include in her portrait of Jesus' childhood, the non-canonical texts hint at what the Church chose to exclude and why. Having both the positive image and its surrounding, negative space, so to speak, give us a much more complete picture of exactly how the Church

¹ *Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Savior*, 1, found at <http://wesley.nnu.edu/biblical_studies/noncanon/gospels/infarab.htm>.

understood the childhood of Christ.² Further, the non-canonical texts showcase brilliantly why that portrayal had to be so carefully constructed.³

As we have seen, so often scholars avoid the gospel material on Jesus' childhood because it is so spare—the suggestion being that there is just not enough material. Feminist theologians, working from a model of “overlooked histories,” sometimes attribute the paucity of detail as indifference towards Jesus' childhood, the result of ancient world ageism. It is not often considered that the paucity of the canonical accounts might be intentional, that the background to the spare nature of the Lukan text is not indifference but an intense, deliberate focus. For what the non-canonical texts reveal, in their contrasting opulence, is that the challenges in depicting a christologically consistent Christ Child are legion.

It is interesting to consider the possibility of the Church constructing, or even just accepting into pious use, a much more elaborate account of Jesus' childhood than is contained in the canonical gospels. Arguably, it did so on behalf of Mary; the *Protevangelium of James*, while not scriptural, was heavily relied upon in the development of Marian theology and devotion. Three of the

² Another reason to examine these texts is to be preemptively pragmatic. Non-canonical texts are increasingly the focus of study in academic circles; they are often seen as the source of fresh material able to sustain a more diverse vision of early Christianity than has been traditionally allowed in more orthodox circles. In particular, gnostic and similar texts are popular amongst feminist theologians and historians. It seems likely that if this material is being mined by feminist scholars for new perspectives on women, it will also eventually be mined for new perspectives on childhood, especially the childhood of Jesus.

³ I think it also appropriate to note that content was surely not the only determining factor in whether or not a text was considered appropriate for canonical status. A text's "lineage," or what author or group was associated with the text's origin and its promotion was also surely a factor. But the phenomenon of Church Fathers mocking gnostic and other non-canonical texts on the basis of their content alone is widespread.

major feasts of Mary, her conception, nativity and entrance into the temple, derive from the *Protevangelium's* accounts rather than material in the canonical gospels.

Although their source is hidden in history,⁴ it is likely that the various *Infancy* gospels are the fruit of a similar urge to elaborate on the canonical accounts, this time as applied to Jesus' childhood. Yet, unlike in the case of Mary, very little of the non-canonical material developed about Jesus' childhood succeeded in securing a place in the Orthodox tradition.⁵ No, despite all the possibilities for extrapolation and embellishment, the Church consistently put forth a very restrained version of Jesus' childhood. Likely one reason for this was a concern for historicity. Accounts as elaborate as the *Infancy* gospels would have been prime targets for those seeking to disprove the Church's assertions about Jesus and would have likely been indefensible. So in this way, the restraint shown by the Church can be seen as a measure against skeptics. However, as Chapter IV sought to show, the Fathers considered that much positive, constructive theology was packed into those few verses. As we shall see, restraint proves the mother of virtue.

⁴ There is evidence in Irenaeus' *Against the Heresies* of at least their use by a group called "the Marcosians": "Some passages, also, which occur in the Gospels, receive from them a colouring of the same kind, such as the answer which He gave His mother when He was twelve years of age: 'Wist ye not that I must be about My Father's business?' Thus, they say, He announced to them the Father of whom they were ignorant," Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I.xx.2. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.ii.xxi.html>>.

⁵ There are a few exceptions. The description of Jesus' birthplace as a cave, which does not appear in the canonical gospel accounts but was probably part of an oral tradition, and which took root in both hymnography and iconography very early, is a very prominent feature of some of the *Infancy* gospels. Another example is the story of the skeptical midwife whose hand is burned when she dares try to confirm Mary's virginity. Though not a feature of the canonical gospel accounts, her image sometimes appears in iconography of the Nativity.

The first Greek form of the *Infancy Gospel* is a fine example of what all the various Greek forms of the text are like. Initially following the canonical account quite closely, its few embellishments might seem inconsequential at first glance.

And when He was twelve years old His parents went as usual to Jerusalem to the feast of the passover with their fellow-travellers. And after the passover they were coming home again. And while they were coming home, the child Jesus went back to Jerusalem. And His parents thought that He was in the company. And having gone one day's journey, they sought for Him among their relations; and not finding Him, they were in great grief, and turned back to the city seeking for Him. And after the third day they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both hearing the law and asking them questions. And they were all attending to Him, and wondering that He, being a child, was shutting the mouths of the elders and teachers of the people, explaining the main points of the law and the parables of the prophets. And His mother Mary coming up, said to Him: Why hast thou done this to us, child? Behold, we have been seeking for thee in great trouble. And Jesus said to them: Why do you seek me? Do you not know that I must be about my Father's business? And the scribes and the Pharisees said: Art thou the mother of this child? And she said: I am. And they said to her: Blessed art thou among women, for God hath blessed the fruit of thy womb; for such glory, and such virtue and wisdom, we have neither seen nor heard ever. And Jesus rose up, and followed His mother, and was subject to His parents. And His mother observed all these things that had happened. And Jesus advanced in wisdom, and stature, and grace. To whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.⁶

The first colorful deviation from the canonical version is the phrase "they were in great grief." In general, throughout the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* emotions run high. This is unsurprising given the extreme events the text showcases. In the short span of the first fifty verses, Jesus withers, damns, causes to fall dead, blinds and knocks unconscious several children and adults. Many of his victims are later restored, and in the latter half of the text he heals or raises up several

⁶ *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, First Greek Form, Roberts-Donaldson English translation, 19, found at <<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/infancythomas-a-roberts.html>>.

people without first having harmed them, but this only serves to add to the emotional roller-coaster feel of the text.

Once past the initial shock at Jesus' "unChrist-like" behavior, one guesses at what the author is trying to do. While commentators have pointed out the similarities with accounts of young Greek gods, the mayhem might also be the result of a kind of literary logic. If one were to take the miraculous power witnessed in the adult Jesus and extrapolate how it might manifest in the life of a child Jesus, one with little to no self-control or other constraints of maturity, one might indeed expect the monster that appears in the *Infancy Gospel*. Limitless cosmic control in the grip of the "terrible twos" is a grim scenario. Time and again, Jesus is "angry," and his anger explodes in disproportionate and deadly tantrums. There is even an instance of him killing a child who accidentally bumps into him. While no justification is articulated, the imagery is clear: just as the God of Israel smote dead someone who accidentally touched the ark of his presence,⁷ he delivers death to someone who accidentally touches his five-year-old person. This the *Infancy Gospel* author's version of Christ "according to the Scriptures." Of course the problem with this approach is that in this Christ Child we see no submission to the scandal of human weakness. This Jesus will be vulnerable to no one, not even by accident.

Another element showcased in the *Infancy Gospel* is Jesus' omniscience; we see the pre-pubescent Jesus exhibiting various kinds of premature knowledge. In this Greek form, examples of this are legion. Jesus, age five, uses certain of his

⁷ 2 Sam 6:7.

adult theological formulas in exchanges with others; angry at Joseph for pulling him by the ear, he says "It's one thing for you to seek and not find."⁸ In interactions with various tutors, Jesus not only shows apparently miraculous knowledge of the Greek alphabet, but also unpacks its theological significance in relation to his own person.⁹ His exchanges with the elders in the temple are elaborated on with the phrase, "He, being a child, was shutting the mouths of the elders and teachers of the people, explaining the main points of the law and the parables of the prophets."

In the Greek form all of this results in the Pharisees' lauding of Mary: "Blessed art thou among women, for God hath blessed the fruit of thy womb; for such glory, and such virtue and wisdom, we have neither seen nor heard ever." Obviously an echo of Gabriel's annunciation, here the Pharisees are depicted as coming to faith, with the episode in temple a theophany or transfiguration experience of sorts. In Luke, while Jesus' oral confession of being the Son of God could also be described as such, it is not met with conversion but confusion. The doctors are "astonished," his parents are "amazed," and after all "they understood not the saying which He spoke unto them."

The *Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Savior* goes even further in this regard. There is a fascinating transposition of the adult Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees in Matthew 22:42–45; he initiates the entire conversation with the question "'Whose son is the Messiah?' They answered Him: 'The son of David.' 'Wherefore then,' said He, 'does he in the Spirit call him his lord, when he says,

⁸ *Infancy Gospel*, 5.

⁹ *Infancy Gospel*, 6.

“The Lord said to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, that I may put thine enemies under thy footsteps?’”¹⁰ is an elaboration on Jesus’ answering questions about the law, clearly with an eye toward establishing Jesus’ identity as the God of Israel himself, rather than a mere creaturely student of the scriptural tradition.

Again the chief of the teachers said to Him: Hast thou read the books? Both the books, said the Lord Jesus, and the things contained in the books. And He explained the books, and the law, and the precepts, and the statutes, and the mysteries, which are contained in the books of the prophets—things which the understanding of no creature attains to. That teacher therefore said: I hitherto have neither attained to nor heard of such knowledge: Who, pray, do you think that boy will be?¹¹

Hereafter, however, Jesus goes on to display extensive amounts of scientific and philosophical knowledge, amazing a string of teachers. While the account bears resemblance to some of the interrogations we find in the lives of the saints,¹² it moves far beyond them. Jesus, as creator of the universe, has access to all of its secrets, regardless of his human age.

And a philosopher who was there present, a skillful astronomer, asked the Lord Jesus whether He had studied astronomy. And the Lord Jesus answered him, and explained the number of the spheres, and of the heavenly bodies, their natures and operations; their opposition; their aspect, triangular, square, and sextile; their course, direct and retrograde; the twenty-fourths, and sixtieths of twenty-fourths; and other things beyond the reach of reason. There was also among those philosophers one very skilled in treating of natural science, and he asked the Lord Jesus whether He had studied medicine. And He, in reply, explained to him physics and metaphysics, hyperphysics and hypophysics, the powers likewise and humours of the body, and the effects of the same; also the number of members and bones, of veins, arteries, and nerves; also the effect of heat and dryness, of cold and moisture, and what these give rise to; what was the operation of the soul upon the body, and its

¹⁰ The editor has a note here: “The Latin reads: *vestigii pedum tuorum*, ‘the footsteps of thy feet.’ The original term, ‘footstool,’ has evidently been misunderstood by some transcriber.”

¹¹ *Arabic Infancy*, 50.

¹² The life of St. Catherine comes to mind particularly.

perceptions and powers; what was the operation of the faculty of speech, of anger, of desire; lastly, their conjunction and disjunction, and other things beyond the reach of any created intellect. Then that philosopher rose up, and adored the Lord Jesus, and said: O Lord, from this time I will be thy disciple and slave.¹³

In the case of the first philosopher, Jesus' knowledge is described as "beyond the reach of reason," and in the case of the second philosopher, as "beyond the reach of any created intellect." In response to this precocious display, the final philosopher rises up and adores Jesus, saying "O Lord, from this time I will be thy disciple and slave." Clearly the devotion arises on account of the knowledge, and what that knowledge intimates that Jesus' identity must be. One who reaches beyond reason and created intellect must be divine.

In the face of the intensive portrayal of the wisdom of Jesus that we see in the *Infancy* gospels, one realizes how ridiculous it is for commentators to consider that the point of the Lukan episode is to showcase the same wisdom. If that was truly Luke's intent, he fails utterly in comparison.

But, again, like the examples of Jesus' power, the examples of his wisdom and knowledge fail the critical christological test: there is no submission to the scandal of human ignorance. This Jesus grasps and presents himself so comprehensively, that he is already attracting disciples and slaves. He shames the teacher Zacchaeus into despair with his superior knowledge, a fact the text indicates is made worse because he is a child: "My mind is filled with shame, my friends, because I, an old man, have been conquered by a child. There is nothing for me but despondency and death on account of this boy, for I am not able at

¹³ *Arabic Infancy*, 51-2.

this hour to look him in the face; and when everybody says that I have been beaten by a little child, what can I say?"¹⁴ This is a far cry from Gregory the Great's interpretation of the Lukan account:

Hence it is that the same our Redeemer, though in heaven the Creator, and even a teacher of angels in the manifestation of His power, would not become a master of men upon earth before His thirtieth year, in order, to wit, that He might infuse into the precipitate the force of a most wholesome fear, in that even He Himself, Who could not slip, did not preach the grace of a perfect life until He was of perfect age. For it is written, 'When he was twelve years old, the child Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem' (Luke ii. 42, 43). And a little afterwards it is further said of Him, when He was sought by His parents, 'They found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, hearing them, and asking them questions' (Ibid. v. 46). It is therefore to be weighed with vigilant consideration that, when Jesus at twelve years of age is spoken of as sitting in the midst of the doctors, He is found, not teaching, but asking questions. By which example it is plainly shewn that none who is weak should venture to teach, if that child was willing to be taught by asking questions, who by the power of His divinity supplied the word of knowledge to His teachers themselves.¹⁵

We also see a repudiation of human dependency, as found in care and community. Though the *Infancy Gospel* temple episode echos Luke in its ending, "And Jesus rose up, and followed His mother, and was subject to His parents," it seems an artificial and superficially-applied coda after the extensive negative interactions we have witnessed between Jesus and Joseph and Jesus and their wider community. In particular, unlike in the patristic commentary, we see no honoring of Joseph whatsoever.¹⁶ In fact he is portrayed rather poorly: "Joseph rose and took hold of His ear, and pulled it hard. And the child was very angry,

¹⁴ *Infancy Gospel*, 7.

¹⁵ Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Rule*, XXV. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf212.iii.iv.xxvi.html>>.

¹⁶ Although, under these circumstances, perhaps we should consider the fact that Jesus does not kill Joseph a sign a honor!

and said to him: It is enough for thee to seek, and not to find; and most certainly thou hast not done wisely. Knowest thou not that I am thine? Do not trouble me.”¹⁷ “And the child returned to Joseph's house; and Joseph was grieved, and gave orders to His mother, saying: Do not let him go outside of the door, because those that make him angry die.”¹⁸ The rift between foster-father and son extends out into the community as well:

And Joseph called the child apart, and admonished Him, saying: Why doest thou such things, and these people suffer, and hate us, and persecute us? And Jesus said: I know that these words of thine are not thine own; nevertheless for thy sake I will be silent; but they shall bear their punishment. And straightway those that accused Him were struck blind.¹⁹

Jesus will not accept any guidance from either his parents or the wider community.

Mutability is the one aspect of human nature that we see Jesus suffering from in these accounts. His behavior is extremely erratic. There is no sense of development or directional growth, but rather psychosis. All sense of normalcy is lost—and with it any sense of redemption. In the total lack of consistent character, all relationship breaks down, even with himself. Ultimately, the ending of the Arabic Infancy Gospel rings extremely hollow:

This is He whom we adore with supplications, who hath given us being and life, and who hath brought us from our mothers' wombs; who for our sakes assumed a human body, and redeemed us, that He might embrace us in eternal compassion, and show to us His mercy according to His liberality, and beneficence, and generosity, and benevolence. To

¹⁷ *Infancy Gospel*, 5.

¹⁸ *Infancy Gospel*, 14.

¹⁹ *Infancy Gospel*, 5.

Him is glory, and beneficence, and power, and dominion from this time forth for evermore. Amen.²⁰

For in the Infancy gospels “He who for our sakes assumed a human body” constantly wars against the realities of it and us. Instructing his mother in his divine mission even as he is a babe in the cradle, he suffers no truly human childhood. And consequently his divinity attracts not friends but slaves. Any sense of redemption is lost as his “eternal compassion” is shown to be extremely arbitrary, and his liberality, beneficence, generosity and benevolence like that of any despot—dispensed at his pleasure, withheld at his leisure. Any human child acting as he acts would rightly be considered a freak and a menace. Fear and hatred flow in his wake, even from his earthly parents. The narrative and historical difficulty that this poses is not lost on John Chrysostom, who was likely thinking of one of the Infancy accounts as he reflected on the question of whether or not Jesus’ transformation of the water into wine at Cana was indeed his first miracle.

Now if any say that this is not a sufficient proof that it was the “beginning of His miracles,” because there is added simply “in Cana of Galilee,” as allowing it to have been the first done there, but not altogether and absolutely the first, for He probably might have done others elsewhere, we will make answer to him of that which we have said before. And of what kind? The words of John (the Baptist); “And I knew Him not; but that He should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come, baptizing with water.” Now if He had wrought miracles in early age, the Israelites would not have needed another to declare Him. For He who came among men, and by His miracles was so made known, not to those only in Judæa, but also to those in Syria and beyond, and who did this in three years only, or rather who did not need even these three years to manifest Himself (Matt 4:24), for immediately and from the first His fame went abroad everywhere; He, I say, who in a short

²⁰ *Arabic Infancy*, 55.

time so shone forth by the multitude of His miracles, that His name was well known to all, was much less likely, if while a child He had from an early age wrought miracles, to escape notice so long. For what was done would have seemed stranger as done by a boy, and there would have been time for twice or thrice as many, and much more. But in fact He did nothing while He was a child, save only that one thing to which Luke has testified (Luke 2:46), that at the age of twelve years He sat hearing the doctors, and was thought admirable for His questioning. Besides, it was in accordance with likelihood and reason that He did not begin His signs at once from an early age; for they would have deemed the thing a delusion. For if when He was of full age many suspected this, much more, if while quite young He had wrought miracles, would they have hurried Him sooner and before the proper time to the Cross, in the venom of their malice; and the very facts of the Dispensation would have been discredited.²¹

²¹ Chrysostom, *Homily XXI*, 2, John 1:49, 50. Online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf114.iv.xxiii.html>>.

VI.

CONCLUSION

In his book, *When Children became People*, O.M. Bakke does an admirable job describing and documenting how the status of children in the ancient world evolved as a result of the introduction of Christianity. He concludes by saying that in the ancient, Greco-Roman world, children in Christian families were probably less likely to be aborted, exposed, used as sexual objects or put work as prostitutes and have their parents actively involved in their nurture and upbringing than their pagan neighbors.¹

However, Bakke's work suffers as a book by what is left unsaid. While the "how" of societal evolution is impressively presented, the "why" seems elusive—despite pages and pages of examples from the Fathers addressing some or another aspect of childhood. Bakke does an excellent job assembling an array of sources, but exhibits a certain deafness to their inner, animating theme. How is it possible to have a fifty-three page chapter entitled "Patristic Teaching About the Nature of Children and Their Characteristics,"² and not once explore the Fathers' views on the childhood of Jesus, or even mention the word "Christology"?

¹ Bakke, 284–5.

² Bakke, 56–109.

What exactly about Christianity caused such a seismic shift in understanding, attitudes and behavior? Was it, as the emphasis in contemporary theology seems to suggest, Jesus' direct articulation of the worth of children, his putting them forward as a model and his warning to followers regarding their treatment? Perhaps. It would certainly be a fascinating companion project to examine, in the same way that we have examined Luke 2:40–52, the passages in which Jesus does these things and to look for clues within the patristic commentary about their significance in the early church. But that is for another day.

This project has taken another approach. It has tried, through the lens of one key text, to uncover the new way the early church came to see children and childhood, not because Jesus gave them a new set of rules for their interaction with children, but because they saw that new childhood themselves in the Christ Child of the Gospels. This vision resonates with a simple but profound intuition: that direct moral and ethical dictates are perhaps the most fragile of theological forms. Their strength is sustained only by the willingness of people to accept and obey them. The kind of all-encompassing, lasting social and moral revolution described by Bakke is more likely to be wrought by theological vision. You look through the window and see the sun; you know it is the day. To summon the day when a winter sun still hides below the horizon is a much more difficult and artificial feat.

The theological vision of the Christ Child, the Christ Child's "theology of childhood," wrought a Christology and a theological anthropology that changed the world—and not just for children. For all weak, ignorant, dependent and still-

growing, partially-formed things, there came a new dawn. As Robin Maas articulates,

Christians claim that the Incarnation changes the meaning of everything. From the very moment the Word takes flesh and comes to dwell among us, even in *embryo*, all reality is altered at its root, that is, in its *significance*. In particular, for those who have eyes to see, with the coming of Christ all things human are illumined to the point of transparency.³

And what we see through that transparency is that all the “scandals” of the human condition are no longer a source of shame since Christ can be in them all:

It is only when, in the darkness of this world, we discern that Christ has already “filled all things with Himself,” that these things, whatever they may be, are revealed and given to us as full of meaning and beauty. A Christian is the one who, where he looks, finds everywhere Christ, and rejoices in Him. And this joy transforms all his human plans and programs, decisions and moves, makes all his mission the sacrament of the world’s return to Him, who is the life of the world.⁴

What might it mean if we were to discern the Christ Child in all children, and find them full, not of problems to be solved, but meaning and beauty? How would that discernment and its resulting joy transform all our human plans and programs, decision and moves, and as adults in the lives of children make our mission the sacrament of their return to Him? How would that discernment take shape in our behavior? How would we guide them and ourselves through this new landscape that we find ourselves in?

³ Robin Maas, “Reflections on the Meaning and Mission of the Child,” *Theology Today* 56 No. 4 (2000): 456.

⁴ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, New York: SVS Press, 1997), 86.

Defining a theology of childhood is not about defining a set of rules for our interactions with children, but rather defining a vision, a vision in which we see and understand children correctly and are therefore able to make good choices about and for them. It was never the intent of this project to formulate a set of Orthodox directives for use with children, to come up with a set of guidelines on how, for example, Orthodox parents should raise their children. It merely set out to explore one theological vision of childhood that, because of methodology and sources, could be called Orthodox. But it did so in the conviction that “without a vision the people perish,” and that once in possession of a vision, Orthodox adults will be able to make more deliberate, informed decisions for and about their children. In the words of Rahner as he tried to initiate this discussion almost forty years ago:

In the intention of the Creator and Redeemer of children what meaning does childhood have, and what task does it lay upon us for the perfecting and saving of humanity? That is the question before us. It may be that in the course of answering it we shall be able to throw fresh light not only upon our own lives but also such as will be of assistance to those whose daily lives are spent in working for children, loving them, watching over them, estimating their progress and always and in all circumstances loving them.⁵

⁵ “Ideas for theology of Childhood,” in *Theological Investigations VIII: Further Theology of the Spiritual Life 2*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 33.

VII.

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