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The Gospel for Early Christian Children: A Re-assessment of the Infancy Gospel of Thomas

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The Infancy gospel of Thomas, which tells the childhood story of Jesus from five to twelve and consists of a number of miracle stories and discourses, is an enigmatic text. Originating probably in a Greek-speaking context in the second century C.E., it proved popular way up in Medieval times. Due to its complicated transmission history, much effort has been put into attempts at reconstructing an original text. Far less energy, however, has been spent on its contents. This is partly due to the text-historical challenges, but also to perceptions about the story being theologically aberrant and banal, not least because of its seemingly strange depiction of Jesus – he is in some respects described as an *enfant terrible*, who for example curses others to death.

Several scholars have tried to account for the social and theological setting of the story, but usually without any extensive or systematic argumentation. They have situated it within a variety of contexts, such as Gnostic, Ebionite and docetic settings.¹ More recently, however, Ronald F. Hock (1995) and Tony Chartrand-Burke (2001) have argued in favour of its origin within a popular, non-elite context: rather than being heretic, the story reflects theological thinking among common early Christian people. In my opinion, such a view is by far the most plausible, although this is not the place for discussing it.²

Here, however, I shall argue in favour of an even more specific target group for the gospel, viz. that a focal audience for it was *early Christian children*.³ Both external and text-internal evidence can be given in support of this claim; here I will only deal with the latter. These are matters that have been very little studied, and which clearly deserve more attention.

¹ See Tony Chartrand-Burke, *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas: The Text, Its Origins, and Its Transmission* (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Toronto, 2001) for a thorough history of research.

² The question is dealt with in depth in my monograph *The Childhood of Jesus: Decoding the Apocryphal Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (Eugene, OR., 2009). My view is that the story was an entertaining and edifying folktale for early Christian common people, primarily in rural areas, and a story that would usually be performed orally in the homes.

³ To my knowledge this has not been argued before. The most explicit hints at such an idea are by Arnold Meyer, *Erzählung des Thomas*, in: Edgar Hennecke (ed.), *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen* (Tübingen, 1904), 63-73, 64, and by François Bovon, *Évangiles Canoniques et Évangiles Apocryphes: La Naissance et l'Enfance de Jésus: Bulletin des facultés catholiques de Lyon* 104 (1980) 19-29, 25f.

In the following, I shall briefly analyse the story with a view to children's place within it and to children as its probable audience.⁴ Admittedly, there are serious methodological problems with such an approach, particularly as concerns the question of audience. For example, do we know enough about the experiences, thoughts and feelings of children in antiquity so as to relate the story to their lives? Are we in a position to say anything about whether it may have appealed to them? And are we not in great risk of transferring modern ideas about children to the world of antiquity? And so on. In spite of such objections, I believe that we possess enough information and methodological sobriety in order to undertake such a 'child perspective' reading.⁵ After all, other approaches to ancient sources, such as e.g. feminist readings, are wrought with the same challenges, without that preventing us from applying such methods, and applying them successfully.

The story can be structured as follows:

- 1 Prologue
- 2-3 Three miracles:
Cleaning of pools, Vivification of sparrows, Curse on Annas' son
- 4-5 A miracle and responses to it:
Curse on careless boy and Joseph's rebuke of Jesus
- 6-8 First teacher episode:
Teacher wants to teach Jesus the alphabet
- 9 A miracle and responses to it:
Raising of Zeno and parents' dialogue with Jesus
- 10-12 Three miracles:
Carrying water in cloak, Miraculous harvest, Miraculous bed repair
- 13-14 Second and third teacher episodes
- 15-16 Two miracles:
Healing of James' snakebite, Healing of injured foot
- 17 Epilogue:
Jesus in the temple at twelve

There are several ways in which the story appears well adapted to children:

Format and structure

The gospel is a brief story, much briefer than for example its sibling the *Prot-evangelium of James*. If performed orally, the telling would take about thirty minutes, a format well-suited considering children as a potential audience.

⁴ My analysis is based on the oldest preserved Greek manuscript, the codex Sabaiticus 259 (11th c.), which reflects a 4th-5th century archetype.

⁵ See Reidar Aasgaard, *Children in Antiquity and Early Christianity: Research History and Central Issues: Familia (UPSA, Spain)* 33 (2006) 23-46 for a discussion of this and other issues.

Structurally, it consists of narratives interspersed with discourses. The narratives give a high level of tension to the story: something is going on all the time. The discourses serve to communicate central ideas in the gospel, particularly about Jesus' divinity. In character, they are very similar to dialogues and speeches in other antique writings. At the same time, they are briefer, and brief enough so as not to tire children. The frequent alternation between narrative and discourse also provides variation in a way that keeps interest up right to the end.

Setting

The setting of the story very much reflects children's environment. Differently from Hellenistic novels and apocryphal acts which have considerable parts of the ancient world as their scene, the infancy story's locale is limited to everyday surroundings. Its narrative space is taken up by a home, a workshop, houses, public places, a school, a brook, fields and woods – in fact, this is the domestic, small-town, rural setting which would be familiar to a majority of late antiquity children. Such a setting would be of little interest for adults; theirs was the bigger world of the novels and the acts. But for children this would be the biotope which they would recognise and find pleasure in. This was their world, and the world in which they would also like to see Jesus, their special hero.

Characters

Children have a very prominent position in the story – it is in fact inhabited by them. Most important is of course Jesus, who is characterised in a varied and vivid way. Although there is little indication of development in his personality, he nevertheless displays a broad range of emotions and reactions: he laughs, is scornful, and becomes angry – in ways very similar to that of ordinary children.

Apart from Jesus, the main characters – with few exceptions – are also children. Much of Jesus' interaction is with children: they play, quarrel, and harass one another. His playmates even betray him. Nearly all of his miracles are performed on children. Thus, the story has a number of central figures to whom an audience of children were likely to relate, both positively and negatively.

Adults, too, play a part. They hold two roles: those of parents and teachers. As parents, they primarily appear through their children. Jesus' contact is first with children: they serve as primary cast and identification figures for the audience. It is only at a second stage of conflict that parents enter the story. Thus, they stand at the fringes, and are almost only involved when it is necessary for the resolution of conflict.

Jesus' parents, however, are more central, particularly Joseph. He is depicted as both strong and weak, and may from the perspective of a child serve as a

foil for its own father: he defends Jesus, but also corrects him; he takes him to work and school and is in dialogue with teachers. Thus, Joseph is and does what a child might expect from a father.

At the same time, however, the father role is challenged, for example when Jesus commands Joseph in the Miraculous bed repair. But the challenging is only slight, with proper relations being re-established in the end. Thus, some concession is made to children's wish for revolt, but within strict limits and without jolting parent-child relations.

The wish to ventilate revolt against adult authority is markedly stronger in Jesus' conflict with his teachers. This is easily understandable considering their often harsh treatment of pupils. The aspect of revolt is especially clear in the First teacher episode: it ends with total defeat for the teacher, with him shaming himself in front of the spectators. This strikingly developed scene is in fact a comic travesty. It is not difficult to imagine the enthusiasm with which the performing of such a daring story would be met from an audience of children! But here too adult authority is eventually confirmed, through the wisdom of the third teacher.

Events

The ways in which central events are described, also indicate that the story is well adapted to children. The activities of Jesus and his playmates are of a character with which they would identify. For example, the forming of clay birds is a typical children's activity; their vivification may even reflect the fantasy world of children, with the wish of being able to perform the extraordinary. The stories about the High Priest's son destroying Jesus' pools and the boy bumping into Jesus describe situations in which a child would feel its geographical and physical boundaries being infringed upon. In both cases, children's wishful thinking of having one's enemies drop dead comes true.

The miracle stories are among the gospel's most typical elements and also match with children's perspective. Many of the miracles take place in main social settings for children: family activities, and related to children's basic needs: nourishment and rest.

The many healing miracles are worth special notice. In the story they have almost only one focus: on deaths and the rising of dead. This narrow focus has been explained by that it reflects a vulgarising of taste from the NT to later Christian generations. A more reasonable explanation, however, is that this miracle type, which is also prominent in fairytales, had special appeal to children. They would at the age of about five enter a stage in which they became reflective of the phenomena of life and death. Children in antiquity would also have been exposed to much higher death rates than adults. Thus, it is not unlikely that children would be most interested in hearing about children being resuscitated, whereas adults would prefer adults.

The picture emerging from the analyses of these events is that they are very much related to children. In Jesus' actions and experiences and in the descriptions of life conditions the fate and feelings of a young audience are reflected: they would recognise their own daily life, and sense the same joys and fears. They would identify with Jesus' anger, sympathise with his acts of revenge, and dream of having similar powers. This is formulated in ways which for adults may seem exaggerated and even offensive, but which very likely put a voice to the experiences of children.

Social values

Here, only three points will be highlighted. First, the story basically confirms current values related to children, such as their obligations of loyalty and obedience to parents and of conforming to current honour codes, but as noted also with some concession to the wish for revolt.

Second, the story is attentive to children's need of psychological-social affirmation. In the interaction between Jesus and his parents, both parents show their love by hugging and kissing him. Such intimate physicality does not occur in the NT infancy stories. In comparison, our story may on this point have had a more immediate appeal to children.

And third, it is striking that the story is free of adult concerns important in other early Christian sources, for example issues about asceticism, virginity, marriage etc. Although these are not likely to be central matters in a story about Jesus as a child, they may nonetheless have been hinted at if this was a story primarily for adults.

Theology

The story reflects few of the concerns of early Christian doctrinal, polemic, and apologetic debates. Whereas for example Mary's virginity is crucial in the *Protevangelium of James*, it is not an issue at all in our story. Instead, Christology is made its main theme, and the story aims at presenting a picture of Jesus that is credible to its audience – the essence of which is that Jesus is true God and true child.

In this respect, too, the story is well adapted to children. By addressing Christology, it deals with a very central theological issue, for Christian theology probably the most central. By focussing on one issue, the story would have the pregnancy required to get its message through. And by having its theology presented in narrative and dramatic dialogues, it is shaped in a way easy to remember – though not without passages also suited for reflection. Thus, in this gospel theology is formulated in a manner with appeal to children: it is – pointedly stated – theology for children.

Countering criticism

The view defended above is likely to meet several objections. I shall eventually touch upon three.

First, in spite of the arguments above, are not the special traits in the Jesus figure – his cursing in particular – still very problematic if this is a children's story? For our modern taste this may be so. However, it may not have been so for the early Christians. And even if it can have been problematic to some, it may nonetheless have depicted a Jesus with whom most of them were comfortable: this was in fact their view of Jesus.⁶

Second, is not the fictional character of the story a problem? – Not at all. In fact, we cannot know whether the early Christians perceived it to be fictional. Many may indeed have regarded it historical. And if they did not, they may still not have felt it problematic. They were for example familiar with fictional stories about various apostles and probably used to interpret such tales as edifying in their own right.

Finally, why has not the idea of the infancy gospel as a children's story been launched earlier? In my opinion, this is not due to lack of evidence from antiquity/early Christianity or to lack of indications in the story itself. Rather, it is due to neglect within scholarship. Traditionally, early Christianity scholars have focussed on issues such as theological dogma, heresy, gender, and social conflict – important issues indeed, but all marked by the same bias: the adult bias. Our story has had more than its share of this. We now need to widen our scope, at least as far as this story is concerned: it is time to interpret it from a children's perspective. The Infancy gospel of Thomas is likely to be Christianity's first gospel story for children.

⁶ Even the New Testament has stories with similar features, e.g. *Matth.* 21:18-21; *Acts* 5:1-11.

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