

‘The Child as the Face of God’ (Mark 9:36–37)

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journals.sagepub.com/home/itq**Gerald O’Collins SJ**

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Abstract

The high-quality commentary of Joel Marcus on Mark’s Gospel contains at least seven illuminating comments on what he calls ‘the parable of the child’ (Mark 9:36–37). His final comment pushes beyond a mere moral exhortation to welcome or show hospitality to little children. These parables, like others, make Jesus vividly present, and so reveal God, to whom Jesus is ‘strongly connected.’ Marcus should have recognized more clearly the call to recognize in vulnerable, little children the disclosed presence of God who sent his Son into the world. The face of even insignificant children brings us the face of God. The ‘mystery of the child’ reflects the ‘mystery of God.’

Keywords

Child, face, God, hospitality, parable, vulnerable

Joel Marcus unfolds a series of rich observations when commenting on what he calls ‘the parable of the child’ found in Mark 9:36–37.¹ Let us review the most enlightening of these observations, and then against that background explore a remarkable feature of this parable that Marcus barely touches.

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- 1 J. Marcus, *Mark 8–16* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 673–83, at 681–83; hereafter references to this commentary will be provided within the text. Camille Foçant speaks of what Jesus does with the child as ‘a kind of parable in action.’ *The Gospel according to Mark: A Commentary*, trans. Leslie Robert Keylock (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 380. Francis J. Moloney writes of ‘Jesus’ symbolic action and his explanation of it.’ *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 188).

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Seven Illuminating Comments and Questions from Marcus

First, in the Markan narrative the parable of the child was delivered by Jesus when he faced the disciples, or at least the Twelve (Mark 9:35), who had started an arrogant dispute over ‘the greatest’ among them. Marcus recalls a suggestion from Origen that the question arose naturally from their recent experience: Jesus had taken only three disciples (Peter, James and John) to join him when he went up a mountain for the transfiguration (Mark 9:2). Did his choice indicate some ranking among the Twelve (Marcus, 673)? Or had the disciples simply drifted away to a frivolous debate about their personal status? At best the debate betrayed inappropriate attitudes; at worst it revealed self-assertive rivalry.

Second, occasionally in his commentary, Marcus points out how the language of the evangelist is ‘susceptible’ to a double entendre. Here it is a case of the Greek words *pais* and *paidion* denoting ‘both slaves and children.’ The fact that these terms can have both meanings ‘speaks volumes about the status of children in antiquity’ (Marcus, 675; see 681).² This must be kept in mind when Jesus proceeds to emphasize the role that a small child can play in mediating God’s revelation and salvation. Receiving even a neglected little child and offering it loving hospitality involves receiving God and being open to God’s revealing and saving self-communication in Christ.

Third, Marcus draws attention to what could be implied when Jesus embraces a small child, whom Marcus argues to be a boy rather than a girl. Specifying the child’s gender, however, is far less important than what the embrace might well imply: ‘a symbolic act of adoption.’ ‘Ancient adoptions sometimes included the gesture of picking up a child, embracing it, or otherwise bringing it into contact with the adoptive parent’s body’ (Marcus, 675). Jesus may be doing more than welcoming a small child; he may also be adopting it. Jesus provides an object lesson of what he can ask of his followers.³

Fourth, Marcus alerts readers to various implications of Jesus’ words in Mark 9:37 (‘whoever receives one such child in my name receives me’). By proposing that those who receive ‘a humble child’ are ‘actually receiving Jesus,’ these words reflect, for example, ‘the common ancient motif of the incognito hero or god, in which gods visit the earth in disguise and receive good or bad treatment, before finally revealing themselves and requiting their erstwhile hosts with rewards or chastisements.’ A biblical counterpart to this motif showed up in stories of angels being welcomed or treated badly: by Abraham and Sarah (Gen 18:2–15), Lot and the men of Sodom (Gen 19:1–14), Tobit (Tob 12:1–20), and others. The duty of hospitality to strangers could, as Hebrews 13:2 recalls, lead to ‘some [people] entertaining angels without knowing it’ (Marcus, 676).

These undoubted allusions should not lead us to forget what Morna Hooker remarks: ‘The saying [“whoever receives one such child in my name receives me”] reflects the

2 On children in Jewish and ancient society, see Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 444–46; and Warren Carter, *Households and Discipleship: A Study of Matthew 19–20* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 95–113.

3 On Jesus and little children, see Simon Légasse, *Jésus et l’enfant: Enfants, ‘Petits’ et Simples dans la tradition synoptique* (Paris: Gabalda, 1969); and Hans Ruedi Weber, *Jesus and the Children* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980).

Jewish belief that a man's agent or representative should be received as the man himself.⁴ The parable presents any 'such child' as the 'agent or representative' of Jesus, who in turn is the 'agent or representative' of God. This highlights what is done by the child in acting for and representing Jesus. But what does the child do by way of (a) revealing Jesus and (b) through him, of revealing God? Hooker does not want to neglect (b): 'Jesus himself is the envoy and representative of another [namely, God].'⁵ Any authentic prophet could, of course, be called 'the envoy and representative' of God. Is there more to be said?

That same question comes up when Hooker explains that 'in my name probably means simply for my sake.' The standard dictionary of New Testament Greek cites Mark 9:37 and agrees that it suggests receiving a child 'for my (name's) sake.' Yet the dictionary also allows for receiving a child 'when my name is confessed, when I am called upon.'⁶ 'For my sake' focuses on (mere?) motivation, whereas confessing and calling upon the name of Jesus is tantamount to confessing and calling upon Jesus himself—in matters of salvation. This interpretation recognizes his living presence and power, expresses a radical relationship to him, and acknowledges that 'Jesus identifies himself with the little ones.' 'Jesus—and even the Father—will be found,' Eduard Schweizer observes, 'in these little, helpless ones.'⁷

Fifth, Marcus points out that the parable of receiving a small child 'is closely related to' the six works of mercy that Matthew lists as the basis for final judgment (Matt 25:31–46). In particular, the duty of offering hospitality to needy strangers of any age (Matt 25:40, 45) yields a partial parallel to receiving children in the name of Jesus (Marcus, 676, 682–83). Nevertheless, what Jesus says about welcoming children enjoys a richer depth of meaning. Matthew's picture of the final judgment makes no suggestion that those who had offered hospitality to a stranger (Matt 25:35) had done this for God who sent Jesus, or that those who had failed to offer hospitality (Matt 25:43) had failed to do so for God who had sent Jesus. Both groups seem surprised that Jesus identified himself (not God) with those in need. But it was Jesus who remained the sole, invisible (but real) co-recipient of such hospitality. Nothing in the account of the final judgment took matters further and claimed that doing something for Jesus was doing something for God, who sent him.

Sixth, arguing convincingly that 'one such child' (Mark 9:37) is to be understood literally and *not totally symbolically* 'as if the child were [merely] a representative of Jesus' childlike followers,' Marcus asks about the nature of reception that should be offered to little children. He thinks, above all, of welcoming and caring for abandoned and orphaned children. Such children exemplify 'a needy person to be served in concrete, nitty-gritty

4 M.D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (London: Continuum, 2001; orig. ed. 1981), 228.

5 Hooker, *Mark*, 228.

6 See 'onoma,' Walter Bauer, Frederick William Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 711–14, at 714; hereafter BDAG.

7 Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News according to Mark*, trans. Donald H. Madvig (London: SPCK, 1970), 193.

ways,' a person who should be the beneficiary of an 'act of charity' (Marcus, 681–83). Whatever specific examples of needy children we might offer, the notion of 'welcoming' children seems to be literally intended.⁸

Seventh, Marcus concludes that to receive Jesus by receiving such children 'takes on larger dimensions. The one who receives Jesus receives not Jesus alone but God as well.' Such a statement is in line with 'the strong connection' between the figures of Jesus and God that we find 'from the very beginning of the Gospel' of Mark. 'The way of Jesus the Messiah is the way of the Lord' (Mark 1:1–3). Marcus also calls attention to the fact that 'some of the healing stories have implied that where Jesus is acting, there God is powerfully present' (Mark 2:7, 10; 5:19–20). Finally, the two stories of Jesus' exercising his sovereign power over storms at sea have 'portrayed him in ways similar to the depiction of the God of the OT' (Marcus, 683).

Here Marcus expands his reading of the parable of the child to recognize that it says something in response to the questions: What is God like? What should we say about God, in the light of the parable of the child? Specifically, God can be identified as being strongly connected with Jesus. This identification allows Jesus to say in effect about those who receive one such a child in his name: they 'do not so much receive me as receive the one who sent me' (Marcus, 676).

Receiving Little Children Reduced to a Moral Exhortation?

Marcus goes beyond those other exegetes who tend to read the parable of the child as simply a moral exhortation: in the words of Foçant, the followers of Jesus are 'called to serve the most insignificant persons in society.' Foçant quotes Ulrich C. von Wahlde to explain what happens when those followers obey this call: 'by receiving the least significant, the disciple receives the most significant.' The parable seems to become a matter of good deeds and (the highest) reward: 'the reward' is 'to receive not only Jesus himself but [also] the Father who sent him.'⁹

Rightly claiming that well-connected children who behave in exemplary ways are not envisaged here, Luz draws attention to the general 'negative social situation of children in antiquity.' They were not considered 'full human beings with their own integrity,' but 'small, insignificant, and without power.'¹⁰ Orphaned and homeless children, in particular, embodied the way children lacked social and religious standing. Jesus wanted to turn that situation upside down and called for children to be welcomed as he himself should be welcomed. Since he identified himself with these lowly ones, hospitality should be extended to them as well.

A similar moral exhortation comes from Dennis Nineham. Proposing that 'receiving' probably means here 'showing kindness to,' he comments that 'the true disciple achieves greatness not by holding great offices but by doing services to insignificant people such

8 BDAG, 221.

9 Foçant, *Gospel according to Mark*, 380.

10 Luz, *Matthew*, vol. 2, 428–29.

as the child.¹¹ That should be the practice of true disciples, energized by an attitude of service towards lowly and insignificant persons like small children.

John Nolland, commenting on Mark 9:33–37 with the aim of elucidating Matthew's subsequent treatment of this tradition, remarks: 'the challenge' is to disregard 'one's superior status' and 'treat the lowly figure of the child with the respect that would come naturally in relating to Jesus himself.'¹² But could it be that *the* ultimate challenge is to recognize in the lowly, vulnerable figure of a child the image and presence not only of Jesus but also and ultimately the image and presence of God, the One who sent Jesus?

God as a Lowly and Vulnerable Child

Here and there the parables of Jesus yield fresh and startling images of God: for example, the image of a woman mixing yeast in three measures of flour until it was all leavened (Matt 13:33).¹³ While focused on the growth of the divine kingdom in the world, this brief parable presents a woman symbolizing the concerns and activity of God. Three measures of leaven cause a mass of dough to rise and produce 40 litres or 110 pounds of bread. This is much more than the wife of a farmer, if the woman's spouse was that, would normally do. We are asked to imagine some very special occasion, when a relatively tiny amount of leaven changes a large amount of dough. The parable may seem surprising, given the Old Testament's negative associations of leaven (as being infectious and evil) which continue in the books of the New Testament (e.g. Matt 16:6; Gal 5:9). The language about the woman 'hiding' the leaven in the dough (Matt 13:33) could mitigate the reader's surprise, since the hidden leaven enjoys a certain parallel to the treasure 'hidden in a field' (Matt 13:44). In both cases the hidden truth of the kingdom can exercise its powerful impact.

This paragraph has drawn on what Luz has to say about the parable of the woman preparing dough for baking.¹⁴ This notable exegete and the sources he cites (from the early Church to contemporary authors) neglect, however, to note how the woman images the divine agent of the kingdom and God's secret work in making the kingdom grow.

We will see below some of the adult human beings whom the Old Testament introduced as images of God. They included women in the labour of childbirth (Is 42:14) and women caring for their babies (Is 49:15–16; 66:13). This was startling enough, given the patriarchal culture that pervaded the ancient world. Jesus' woman preparing the dough belongs with such surprising Old Testament images of God.

In a sense Marcus points us towards only half of the theological teaching conveyed by the parable of the child: there is (1) a 'strong connection' between the figures of Jesus and God, and God is 'powerfully present' in the activity of Jesus. What might be said

11 D.E. Nineham, *Saint Mark* (London: Penguin, 1992; orig. ed. 1963), 252.

12 J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 733.

13 Ulrich Luz endorses the consensus that the parable 'goes back to Jesus': *Matthew 8–20*, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 258.

14 *Ibid.*, 257–64.

about (2), the connection (via the figure of Jesus) between a small child and God? Does a tiny, vulnerable child image forth the very mystery of God?

Apropos of (1), this comment leaves us, of course, with the question: does the witness of Mark lead us to say more about Jesus than we would say about the Elijah and Moses, both present with Jesus at the transfiguration (Mark 9:2–8)? The biblical record attests a ‘strong connection’ between these two Old Testament personalities and God.¹⁵ It is also fair to say that God was pictured as ‘powerfully present’ in their activity. What more could Marcus have said about this ‘connection’ with God and the ‘powerful [divine] presence’ in the case of Jesus?

At the close of his comments on the Parable of the Child, Marcus would have been better advised to recall what he had said of the transfiguration. ‘The divine voice from the cloud’ identifies Jesus as God’s Son; this is to make it clear that Jesus is more than Elijah and Moses. This title of Son ‘hints at an identity greater than that of Moses and Elijah’ (Marcus, 640). Those who in the name of Jesus welcome a small child are doing more than merely welcoming someone who has a ‘strong connection’ with God and in whose activity God is ‘powerfully present.’ They are welcoming the Son who has been sent by God and divinely identified as God’s Son,

Old Testament Images of God

The books of the Old Testament picture God in a variety of ways—as warrior king, shepherd, the creator who gives life through his powerful word, the redeemer who rescues his people and individuals, as the righteous judge, as the loving spouse of his people, as loving father (occasionally), as a woman in childbirth or a nursing mother (see above), and so forth.¹⁶ A mysterious transcendence may hide the face of God as in the divine self-presentation in Exodus 3:14 (‘I am who I am’), or else God is presented with the tender intimacy of a parent who lovingly educates wayward children (Hos 11:1–11) or of a spouse who is eternally faithful to an adulterous people (Hos 2:19).

Like others, Ryan P. Bonfiglio goes beyond talking of divine titles and names to distinguish between ‘*metaphors of governance* for God’ (king, judge or warrior) and ‘*metaphors of sustenance*’ (gardener, parent or shepherd). Bonfiglio also points to the language that conveys the divine activity in the world (as the God who delivers, creates, and blesses) and the divine character (as gracious, merciful, holy, jealous, or hidden and elusive).¹⁷

In all these metaphors or images God remains an adult figure: as king, shepherd, spouse, parent, mother, and so forth. By way of exception, we have the language of

15 Rather than ‘a strong connection,’ Moloney speaks of ‘an intimate link’ between receiving the child, receiving Jesus, and receiving the one [God] who sent Jesus (*The Gospel of Mark*, 188). This observation leaves it open, of course, as to what the intimate link is between Jesus and God, not to mention the direct link between (receiving) the child and (receiving) Jesus and the indirect link between (receiving) the child and (receiving) the One who sent Jesus.

16 See John J. Scullion, ‘God in the OT,’ in David Noel Freedman (ed.), *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1041–48.

17 R.P. Bonfiglio, ‘God and gods,’ in Samuel B. Balentine (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Bible and Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 412–26.

Isaiah concerned, apparently with the birth of Hezekiah (Is 7:14–16). Celebrating seemingly the birth of an heir to the throne, the prophet speaks in exalted terms of ‘the child born to us’ and ‘the son given to us’: ‘Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace’ (Isa 9:1–7). The prophet uses the newborn child to describe God. But it remains exceptional in the Old Testament to associate children with God. Isaiah does so when an heir to the throne is born.

Jesus, however, proposes something startlingly different when he presents a child as, at least indirectly, representing God. Normally understood to be the last or least of all, children are reckoned in Jesus’ parable, albeit indirectly but without qualification, as the greatest of all. Whoever they are, they image forth God. Jesus bears witness to what he has experienced and understood of God: a weak and vulnerable child can be a metaphor for God, and welcoming such a child can be a metaphor for welcoming God. At the end, the parable of the child proves even more startling than the picture of the last judgment, in which Jesus simply identifies himself with the suffering and the vulnerable (Matt 25:31–46). Holding a small child in his arms, Jesus goes further, and speaks of God as making himself vulnerable and the least. ‘Those that welcome a little child in my name welcome me; and those who welcome me welcome the One who sent me.’

Jesus appeals to the God of his ancestors (Mark 12:26–27), but he radically modifies the divine image, right through to the intimate ‘*Abba*’ of the Garden of Gethsemane. No longer a divine warrior who could supply effective military defence, God is the loving Father (Mark 14:36) with whom Jesus struggles in prayer.

Jesus preached and practiced other such modifications. They included the metaphor of God as found in the person of a small child. This startling feature of the parable of the child should not be missed. The face of a vulnerable child, who might be dismissed as belonging to the lowest class in society, is the face of God. To adapt the language of St Paul (2 Cor 4:6), Jesus invited us to recognize the glory of God on the face of insignificant, weak, little children.

Few have done more than Karl Rahner to spread the language and notion of ‘the mystery of the child.’¹⁸ The parable of the child challenges us by suggesting that the mystery of the child reveals the very mystery of God.

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18 Jessie Rogers, ‘Karl Rahner and Children,’ *Irish Theological Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (2021): 111–26.