

**'RECEIVING THE CHILD'  
IN THE FAVELAS OF SÃO PAULO  
AND THE GOSPEL OF LUKE:  
A MISSIOLOGICAL DIALOGUE**

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# ABBREVIATIONS

ABIAH	A Associação Batista (later Brasileira) de Incentivo e Apoio ao Homen. [The Baptist (Brazilian) Association for Human Incentive and Support]
BMS	Baptist Missionary Society / BMS World Mission.
DIEESE	Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Socio-econômicos. [Inter-union Department of Statistics and Socio-Economic Studies]
FTBSP	Faculdade Teológica Batista de São Paulo. [Baptist Theological Faculty of São Paulo]
FIPE	Fundação Instituto de Pesquisas Econômicas. [Institute of Economic Research Foundation]
IBGE	Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. [Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics]
IEx	Index of Social Exclusion.
IPEA	Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada. [Institute of Applied Economic Research]
PEPE	Programa de Educação Pré-Escolar. [Pre-school Education Programme]
PMSP	Prefeitura Municipal de São Paulo [São Paulo Municipal Prefecture]
SEADE	Sistema Estadual de Análise de Dados. [State System of Data Analysis]
SEMPLA	Secretaria de Planejamento, Orçamento e Gestão. [Secretariat of Planning, Budget and Management]
Trans.	Translation. (In all instances where translations from Portuguese or Spanish are given, they are my own.)

# ABSTRACT

The study undertakes a missiological dialogue between the ‘child-reception’ texts of Luke 9:46–48 and 18:15–17, explored in the context of a proposed Lukan ‘child-motif’, and missional experiences catalyzed by children during the time my wife, Georgie, and I spent as workers for BMS World Mission in the favelas of São Paulo, Brazil.

The process of bringing text and recalled experience of ‘receiving the child in the name of Jesus’ into a critically constructive dialogue is grounded in the epistemological and methodological framework proposed by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. Recognizing the differing qualities of knowledge-sources being brought into dialogue, appropriately differing methods of critical analysis are employed to enable the Ricoeurian processes of ‘ex-planation’ and retrieval: autoethnographical, in regard to my personal engagement with the favela mission context; sociological, in regard to the life-experience of children in the favelas of São Paulo at that time; and literary critical in regard to the Lukan use of child related texts, supplemented by reception-transmission and historical-cultural analyses as appropriate.

Guided by insights drawn from the work of the Brazilian educationalist and social activist Paulo Freire, the critically evaluated sources of experience and text are then explored in dialogue with each other from the perspectives of the generative themes of abandonment, powerlessness and hopelessness. This dialogical process offers insights into the paradigmatic significance of the child and her reception in Luke’s presentation of Jesus’ mission, and for the response of the reader-disciple called to emulate that mission ‘in his name’ towards the ‘little-ones’ of communities characterized by the deprivation typical of the favela slums in which we worked.

The study concludes by suggesting two pathways for future research: a further iteration of Ricoeur’s hermeneutical cycle, bringing into dialogue experiences from different cultural contexts of social deprivation, and the appropriation of the methodology of biblical/experiential dialogue, to bring a fresh perspective on Luke’s presentation of the mission to the Gentiles in the Acts of the Apostles.

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To the hundreds of children, only a very few of whom are recalled individually in the pages of this study, who, despite the distance of culture and context that separated them from this gringo, conquered my heart, enlightened my mind and helped me to discern more clearly the way of Jesus and the call to live out my small part in the mission purposes of our heavenly Father.

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# INTRODUCTION: RECEIVING THE CHILD

As we walked along the streets of that abused and offended world I began to recall experiences of my youth in other favelas of Olinda or Recife, of my heart-wrenching conversations with men and women of the favela. Stumbling through the human pain we questioned ourselves about innumerable problems. What to do, as educators, working in such a context? Was there in fact anything that could be done? How to do what might be done? What did we, so-called educators need to know in order to make possible even our first meetings with the women, men and children whose humanity was being denied, whose existence was being crushed? <sup>1</sup>

As I began to walk the *Caminho das Lágrimas*, the Way of Tears<sup>2</sup> of the favelas of São Paulo, and in particular the coincidentally named Jardim Olinda,<sup>3</sup> Freire's questions echoed in my own mind: what to do, as a Baptist mission worker, in such a context?

This question caused me both to revisit the gospels that provided the prime motivation and direction of my missional commitment and also, like Freire, to seek insights from the life experience of those communities. This study represents my missiological reflections upon the mission experience that resulted from that quest.

A 'Community and Church' questionnaire was in my hand as I approached a woman walking slowly along the sewer-side path at the bottom edge of the favela. She did not let me finish my introductory spiel, however. Having mentioned that I was from a Baptist church she simply broke in with the words, 'Just another of those churches that say a lot but do nothing!' She would no doubt have shared James' view on the value of 'faith without works' if she had had the ability to read what he had written! That my

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<sup>1</sup> 'Enquanto andávamos pelas ruas daquele mundo maltratado e ofendido eu ia me lembrando de experiências de minha juventude em outras favelas de Olinda ou do Recife, dos meus diálogos com favelados e faveladas de alma rasgada. Tropeçando na dor humana, nós nos perguntávamos em torno de um sem-número de problemas. Que fazer, enquanto educadores, trabalhando num contexto assim? Há mesmo o que fazer? Como fazer o que fazer? Que precisamos nós, os chamados educadores, saber para viabilizar até mesmo os nossos primeiro encontros com mulheres, homens e crianças cuja humanidade vem sendo negada, e traída, cuja existência vem sendo esmagada?' Paulo Freire, *Pedagogia da Autonomia*, 31<sup>st</sup> edn., 74, (São Paulo, Brazil: Coleção Leitura, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> One of the main thoroughfares of the enormous Heliópolis favela in São Paulo bears this name and provides the setting for some of the missional encounters that inform this study.

<sup>3</sup> The 'Garden of Olinda'.

missional faith needed to be translated into missional action was clear, but faced with such varied and overwhelming social and spiritual deprivation, the question remained: what action?

It was my wife Georgie's experience as a teacher that identified the particular and strategic disadvantage of pre-school aged favela children as a focus for transformative action in the name of the Jesus who had warmly received the children brought to him for blessing. The Programa de Educação Pré-Escolar, [pre-school educational programme], PEPE, was born. For Freire it was his commitment to adult literacy that provided the laboratory of action-reflection that fuelled the development of his agenda for social transformation. The doorway to the missional-missiological action-reflection presented in this study has the 'shape of a child'.

The identification of an epistemology able to support a methodological framework for bringing faith words on the one hand, and faith experiences on the other, into critically constructive dialogue is the *sine qua non* of such an investigative exercise. For this reason, I present, in the opening chapter of this study, the work of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur as offering such a basis.

Ricoeur's requirement for a critical 'ex-planation', or critical examination, of knowledge sources is realized through the application of methods drawn from the fields of autoethnography and sociology as I present and discuss first my personal experience as researcher and then that of the child-catalysts of the experiences recorded, in the context of favela life in São Paulo in the early 1990s. In the discussion of the scriptural material that has informed the action-reflection process, I have focused on the Gospel of Luke because of its socially transformative missional focus. I critically explore the treatment of the 'child', with specific attention to what I describe as the 'child-reception' events presented in 9:46–48 and the co-text of 18:15–17.<sup>4</sup> A study of the transmission-reception history of these texts informs my discussion of what, in Ricoeurian terms, was my, the researcher's, 'first *naïveté*' or pre-critical

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<sup>4</sup> Wherever scriptural references are made without an indicator of the particular book that is in view, then the references refer to the Gospel of Luke.

understanding, whilst their function within the Lukan narrative is explored from a literary critical perspective informed by appropriate historical-cultural insights. The Ricoeurian process of post-critical 'retrieval', through dialogical interaction between the critically evaluated sources from text and experience, is then taken forward informed by methods developed by Freire to assist what he designates as the process of 'conscientization'.<sup>5</sup> A number of child-catalysed experiences that proved influential in the development of my missional reflection and practice are recounted and discussed as they speak into three key aspects of the community's experience of deprivation and marginalization:<sup>6</sup> abandonment, powerlessness and hopelessness.

In a concluding section, insights arising from the hermeneutical process are identified as they bring fresh perspective and missional understanding to both text and experience in the context of social deprivation. From the basis of this 'second *naïveté*', the potential for further investigation is suggested, offering a fresh hermeneutical perspective on Luke's presentation of the material of his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, and also upon the potential of the methodology employed to bring a relevance to the missional and missiological insights that might reach beyond the specifically Brazilian cultural context.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Conscientização* is a process identified by Freire as necessary for deprived communities to transition from a state of being victims of socio-political oppression to that of awareness and subsequent transformative liberative action.

<sup>6</sup> Freire described such issues as 'generative' words and themes, as their discussion had the potential to catalyse the process of conscientization.

<sup>7</sup> This exploration of the hermeneutical potential of 'the child received by Jesus' has taken place recognizing the developing field of Child Theology and might hopefully contribute to its ongoing relevance as it touches upon missiological as well other theological disciplines. For an overview of the origins and perspectives of Child Theology, see *An Introduction to Child Theology*, edited by Keith White and Haddon Willmer (London: Child Theology Movement, 2006), and *Toddling to the Kingdom* edited by John Collier (London: Child Theology Movement, 2009).



# SECTION 1: BRINGING THE CHILD OF THE FAVELAS INTO CONTACT WITH THE CHILD IN LUKE

## EPISTEMOLOGY AND METHODOLOGY

### **An Appropriate Epistemological Framework: Postmodernism and Paul Ricoeur**

The investigative proposal outlined above demands an epistemological framework that affirms the legitimacy of bringing into dialogue two quite distinct knowledge sources: the recollection of personal experience, and the biblical text, and to do this in such a way that the distinctive perspective of each can stimulate fresh understanding of the other.

The appreciation of the value of varied sources and types of knowing is a characteristic of the postmodern movement. Unlike those approaches that are grounded in the presumptions of 'universal truths' or definitive interpretations, that tend to be determined from the perspective of the dominant societal group, the proposed philosophical framework offers the potential for a more emancipatory approach, appropriate to the study of socially deprived communities.

Dialectic hermeneutical interaction between interpreter and text, each located in its particular experiential-historical context or horizon, was advocated by Hans-Georg Gadamer and set out in his seminal work, *Truth and Method*.<sup>8</sup> This interaction he described as a 'fusing of horizons', a process whereby the interpreter can open him/herself up to new 'worlds' of meaning that reach beyond the meaning perceived in either of the previous horizons of knowing. For Gadamer, it was this hermeneutical event, or 'fusing of horizons', that offered the potential for an 'expansion and

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<sup>8</sup> Hans-George Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. edn., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 2004).

transformation'<sup>9</sup> of knowledge and meaning, and consequently social praxis. Whilst Gadamer's philosophical approach to knowing was to understand it as a hermeneutical 'event', the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur,<sup>10</sup> following more in the tradition of Schleiermacher,<sup>11</sup> addressed the hermeneutical question from the standpoint of process, or methodology.

Ricoeur, like Gadamer, took language as central to his epistemology. For Gadamer the value of language was primarily that it offered a communicative common ground between different life-historical contexts or horizons, whose 'fusion' can subsequently lead to the generation of fresh existential knowing. For Ricoeur, however, it was language itself, understood as *parole*, communication, that provided the possibility of understanding life-experience through the process of narration.<sup>12</sup> The metaphorical quality inherent in narrative endows written text with what Ricoeur describes as 'surplus of meaning', has a 'parabolic' potential to reconstruct the reader's understanding of the prevailing reality and opens ways for fresh understanding or

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<sup>9</sup> In a helpful review, Kemel Ataman writes of how Gadamer's doctrine of the fusion of horizons 'illustrates the expansion and transformation that occurs on both sides when two horizons fuse as an event or happening of truth', on page 2 of 'Understanding Other Religions: Al-Biruni and Gadamer's "Fusion of Horizons."' Vol. 19, *Cultural Heritages and Contemporary Change Series 2a, Islam* (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2009). <http://www.crvp.org/book/series02/iia-19/ch2.htm>. Accessed July 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Both Gadamer and Ricoeur published their first works in the area of what each independently describe as philosophical hermeneutics in the same year, 1960, and according to Jensen, this was without Ricoeur having knowledge of Gadamer's work. Alexander Jensen, *Theological Hermeneutics* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 144.

<sup>11</sup> In 'The Task of Hermeneutics,' in *Hermeneutics and the Social* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 43–62, Ricoeur traces the evolutionary trajectory of hermeneutics from Schleiermacher, whom he describes as "the founder of hermeneutics" (47), through Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger and Hans Gadamer to define the conceptual landscape within which he has developed his own perspective of philosophical hermeneutics.

<sup>12</sup> Metaphor lies at the heart of Ricoeur's hermeneutical approach. Metaphor, 'brings together things that do not go together and by means of this apparent misunderstanding it causes a new and hitherto unnoticed, relation of meaning to spring up between the terms that previous systems of classification had ignored or not allowed'. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 51. Poetic text even more explicitly displays this quality of 'the layering of meaning and forming of connections, previously not perceived', Brian E. Wakeman, *Knowing through Poetic Reflection* (Brighton: Pen Press, 2013), 158.

vision.<sup>13</sup> When the prevailing condition is understood to be in need of transformation, as in the case of Luke's gospel, then narratives addressing the issue offer the potential for liberative transformation and, as such, become vehicles of hope.<sup>14</sup>

The philosophical call for 'a redefinition of knowledge as hermeneutic',<sup>15</sup> and the consequent 'permission' to value the experiential perspective of previously marginalized and muted social groups, created a space for renewed theological exploration. In Latin America, Paulo Friere in Brazil, Gustavo Gutierrez in Peru, and many others<sup>16</sup> articulated the validity and liberative potential of 'conscientization'<sup>17</sup> or experience-based socio-critical dialogical reflection.<sup>18</sup> In North America, James Cone argued for the theologian as 'before all else an exegete simultaneously of both

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<sup>13</sup> Ricoeur writes of the potential of parables within narrative discourse: '[parables] bring reorientation by disorientation, to listen to the parables of Jesus...is to let one's imagination be opened to the new possibilities disclosed by the extravagance of these short dramas'. Paul Ricoeur, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of his work* edited by Charles Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 234–5. See also Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 149–150.

<sup>14</sup> See Don Idhe, editor's introduction to Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston: North Western University Press, 1974), xxii, where he characterizes the hopefulness inherent in Ricoeur's hermeneutical approach as 'the "answer" to evil'.

<sup>15</sup> Susan Hekman, *Gender and Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 135, cited in Daniel Stivers, *Theology after Ricoeur: New Directions in Post Modern Hermeneutics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster /John Knox Press, 2001), 8.

<sup>16</sup> Typical of the expression of the validity and imperative of the personal experiential-textual dialectic is the analysis presented by Carlos Mesters, the Dutch theologian working in Brazil, 'the only tool[s] they have to hand [are] their own lives ,experiences and struggles', 'The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Common People', in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, edited by Norman Gottwald, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 125.

<sup>17</sup> 'Conscientization: The process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action. Action is fundamental because it is the process of changing the reality. Paulo Freire says that we all acquire social myths which have a dominant tendency, and so learning is a critical process which depends upon uncovering real problems and actual needs.' "Conscientization", The Freire Institute, accessed November 11, 2015, <http://www.freire.org/paulo-freire/concepts-used-by-paulo-freire>.

<sup>18</sup> Both Friere and Gutierrez assume that oppressed people can come to understand, or 'read', their actual condition of oppression and through that understanding find the motivation and potential to act to free themselves from dominance. Roberto Rivera defends Ricoeur in the face of other postmodern criticism, and concludes, 'if one accepts his framework, then within that framework, Freire's and Gutierrez's main methodological assumptions are appropriate'. *A Study of Liberation Discourse — The Semantics of Opposition in Freire and Gutierrez* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 11.

Scripture and existence'<sup>19</sup>, whilst some years later, Rosemary Radford Ruether, giving voice to those doing theology from a feminist perspective, in her essays 'Feminist Interpretation' and 'The Future of Feminist Theology in the Academy', 'asserts that "women's experience", provides a critical hermeneutical key for feminist liberation'.<sup>20</sup>

Jesus' act of taking a child and setting her at his side in response to the disciples' wrong-hearted discussion about greatness well fits the model of an enacted parable, and by virtue of its figurative quality, readily meets Ricoeur's hermeneutical presupposition of being a narrative of metaphorical potential. Indeed, the event points dramatically beyond itself to another reality – a world-view in which greatness and status are to be understood in the context of the messianic Kingdom being announced by Jesus.<sup>21</sup> Such is the challenging quality of this perspective that the event might

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<sup>19</sup> Cone, James. *God of the Oppressed*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 16.

<sup>20</sup> *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 53 (1985): 703–716, cited in *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, edited by Anthony C. Thiselton (London: Harper Collins, 1992), 441.

<sup>21</sup> The concepts of Kingdom, eschatology and mission as employed here are determined by the missional perspective of the study and the resonances that I identify and explore between my personal experience and my understanding of the mission of Jesus as presented by Luke. For a concise review of the interpretative position that I adopt, see Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 117–121.

The concept of Kingdom is presented in the introductory chapters of Luke's gospel as a prophetically announced refiguring of the current world order or kingdom, through the intervention of God's chosen, messianic agent. The human condition, currently characterized by social injustice and exploitation of the poor and humble and weak, is to experience a God-centred, social-status inversion in which the high-and-mighty will be brought down and the 'little-ones' raised up. This prophetic vision is cast in terms of a restored Davidic kingdom and grounded in God's covenant with Abraham. The envisaged 'redemption of Jerusalem' will also extend the blessings of God's peace and divine revelation to the gentiles, the focus of Luke's second volume.

At Nazareth, Luke presents Jesus confirming the angelic and Spirit-inspired announcements of his mission, as he personally announces his agency in the fulfilment of this divinely promised salvific intervention. The subsequent narrative exemplifies the 'ultimate', eschatological quality of his ministry, presenting instances of the Kingdom's 'in-breaking' typified in the Nain declaration that 'God has visited his people!' and Jesus' instruction to his missionary disciples to proclaim that the Kingdom of God has come near. However, Luke takes pains to warn the reader-disciple that such Kingdom-acts of personal and social transformation will also bring them into confrontation and conflict with the religious and political powers-that-be, a conflict that will ultimately be played out in the drama of his death and resurrection in Jerusalem. The nature of the coming, or future consummation, of the Kingdom, is a dimension debated amongst scholars (e.g. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1978), 378ff), but in the perspective of the current study this is seen primarily as creating narrative space for the reader-disciple to comprehend and become part of the overall eschatological drama — the realization in human

properly be understood to have the imperative force of a prophetic sign for the reader-disciple.<sup>22</sup>

Exploring the potential of dialogue between narratives from two distinct perspectives, where Gadamer employs the metaphor of fusing horizons, Ricoeur draws upon the hermeneutical dynamic of Intertextuality. Originating from insights of the French structural school of semiotics, Ricoeur understands the hermeneutical process involved as ‘the work of meaning through which one text, in referring to another text, both displaces this other text and receives from it an extension of meaning.’<sup>23</sup>

Relating these insights to his understanding of language as implicitly metaphoric, he writes of the process of ‘metaphorization through the agency of intertextuality’,<sup>24</sup> contending that two narratives in dialogue generate possibilities beyond either text separately, in a manner comparable to the way a metaphor draws its potential from when the semantic fields of two words collide within a sentence. Thus, the hermeneutical dialogue stimulates fresh understanding by exposing the participants to the ‘surplus of meaning’ implicit within the language of the discourses or narratives of each. In so far as Ricoeur considers that all meaningful historical action can be

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experience of the divine salvific mission. ‘In Lk. the Kingdom of God is his activity in bringing salvation to men and the sphere which is thereby created; God is active here and now in the ministry of Jesus and will consummate his rule in the future’. Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 198. The adjective ‘eschatological’ is therefore broadly used to describe that quality of experience or event, present or future, associated with the outworking of God’s commitment or mission to establish his Kingdom. The mission of Jesus and of the reader-disciple is understood as a descriptor of this Kingdom agenda embraced by Jesus, and one into which the reader-disciple is called to participate as his agent, ‘in his name’, in confrontation with the prevailing dominant, exploitative culture. ‘... “Kingdom of God” refers to both God’s saving activity and...to the community and practices that embody God’s saving purposes.’ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 227.

<sup>22</sup> Uruguayan Juan Luiz Segundo, echoing the vocabulary of Ricoeur, discussed the potential of Scripture to challenge the socially oppressive status quo: ‘Ideological suspicion reveals that some biblical interpretations serve to maintain exploitation by the ruling classes; others become a weapon in the class struggle’, *The Liberation of Theology*, 32, (New York: Orbis, 1976).

<sup>23</sup> Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 148.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

understood as analogous to text,<sup>25</sup> then recalled experience, or testimony to past action, can legitimately be invited into hermeneutical dialogue with traditional religious texts, in the expectation of fresh insights.<sup>26</sup>

Kay Llovio, in the introduction to her doctoral thesis dissertation entitled 'A Spiritual Dimension of Leadership: Hermeneutic Encounters within Cultural Milieu', explores some applications of this 'hermeneutics of action':

Ricoeur's work on testimony and mimesis provides the framework for a discussion of the spiritual dimension of action...The hermeneutics of testimony allows a place for a religious nature of the stories...The power of imagination in the narrative and interpretive aspects of testimony offers a clearing in which new worlds are opened by new understanding through conversation.<sup>27</sup>

As an illustration of this process, interestingly also relating to the field of leadership, Henri Nouwen, the Catholic psychologist and theologian, wrote of his experience of renouncing a life of academia for the controlled and limited life of an institution for the learning-disabled, and made the observation that 'the small, hidden life with people of broken minds and bodies...is offering me new words to use in speaking about Christian leadership'.<sup>28</sup>

The possibility of the generation of 'new worlds' and 'new words' through narrative interaction lies at the heart of Ricoeur's hermeneutical proposal.<sup>29</sup> Identifying

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Ricoeur, 'The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text,' in *Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences*, 43–62.

<sup>26</sup> 'I shall adopt the following working definition of hermeneutics: Hermeneutics is the theory of the operations of understanding in their relation to the interpretation of texts.' Paul Ricoeur, 'The Task of Hermeneutics,' in *Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences*, 43.

<sup>27</sup> Kay Llovio, 'A Spiritual Dimension of Leadership: Hermeneutic Encounters Within Cultural Milieu' (EdD diss. University of San Francisco, 1998), abstract. Accessed February 29 2017. <http://www.philpapers.org>.

<sup>28</sup> Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1989), 11–12.

<sup>29</sup> 'For Ricoeur, interpretation is the appropriation of a text's meaning for current understanding', and although 'autonomous from the author, [the text] is still referential in a second order sense by disclosing its own reality and giving the reader a new way to look at the world'. Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Westmont, IL: IVP, 2006), 492.

appropriate methodologies for elucidating such mutually generative narratives derived from my missional experiences involving favela children, and those potentially present in Luke's treatment of 'children', is the issue to which I shall now turn.

### **Methodology and the Lukan Narrative: A Literary Critical Approach**

Ricoeur's epistemology is grounded in his understanding of the primacy of language, and an appreciation of the polysemic quality of words with their consequent metaphorical potential in narrative composition. From this perspective he recognizes the significance of both literary and reader context within the interpretative process:<sup>30</sup> 'Sensitivity to context is the necessary complement and ineluctable counterpart of polysemy.'<sup>31</sup>

From 1960, the writings of Gadamer and Ricoeur contributed fresh epistemological insights to the field of biblical hermeneutics,<sup>32</sup> and to the growing appreciation of biblical texts as works of literary and theological composition. Hans Conzelmann, 1960, identified theological motivation in Luke's authorial activity,<sup>33</sup> whilst William Childs Robinson, 1962, recognized the evangelist's narrative intentionality.<sup>34</sup> This development was affirmed by Charles Talbert, who from 1974 onwards argued for discarding source theory as a guiding interpretive principle in favour of an approach which treated Luke's work as a single literary composition with its own integrity, the work of 'a literary architect...[who] draws readers into active participation in a narrative emplotment that effects individual and communal formation'.<sup>36</sup> In 1977, Luke Johnson's literary evaluation of the gospel, that 'The general category...is that of

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<sup>30</sup> 'The right of the reader and the right of the text converge in an important struggle that generates the whole dynamic of interpretation.' Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 32.

<sup>31</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences*, 44.

<sup>32</sup> See Anthony Thiselton's comment in reference to the work of Joel Green: 'Much of what he [Ricoeur] says gives added point and added power to the arguments of Joel Green. Throughout his long career of writing Ricoeur emphasized the creative power of texts, metaphors, symbols and narrative'. 'The Hermeneutical Dynamics of "Reading Luke"', in Green, *Reading Luke*, 20.

<sup>33</sup> Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St Luke* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960).

<sup>34</sup> William Childs Robinson, *The Way of the Lord: A Study of the History and Eschatology in the Gospel of Luke* (A doctoral dissertation accepted by the University of Basel, 1962).

<sup>36</sup> Charles Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes, and the Genre of Luke-Acts*. Vol. 20, Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1974), 8.

story',<sup>37</sup> was echoed in Robert Tannehill's 1986 *The Narrative Unity of Luke–Acts: A Literary Interpretation*,<sup>38</sup> and added to the growing consensus around the appropriateness of a literary critical approach to the Lukan narrative. Continuing this trend, Joel Green, from the early 1990s, affirmed that 'The third gospel presents its message in the form of a narrative',<sup>39</sup> and took Luke's self-characterization of his writing as διήγησις, 1:1, as an indication of the mode of reading most appropriate to it.<sup>40</sup>

The approach to the Lukan narrative adopted in the current study affirms and stands within this broad sweep of contemporary Lukan scholarship, recognizing that such a literary critical treatment of the biblical text also readily offers analysis that is most appropriate to the proposed intertextual dialogue with the recalled child-focused experiential narratives within an overall Ricoeurian epistemological framework. This literary critical approach will be supplemented by detailed linguistic or socio-cultural analysis where such analysis is helpful in illuminating the hermeneutical potential of particular texts.

The critical examination of texts will be carried out under the following headings:

Children in Luke's Gospel: A Motif of Hermeneutical Significance;

The Setting of the Child-Reception Events in Luke's Gospel;

Luke's Narrative Use of the Child-Reception Event at 9:46–48, as a 'Sign-Act';

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<sup>37</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke–Acts* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977), 21.

<sup>38</sup> Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke–Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 2 Vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986, 1990).

<sup>39</sup> Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, 15.

<sup>40</sup> In his 1997 gospel commentary, Green's literary critical starting point is that, 'Luke consists of a series of event-accounts...Each must be read with reference to its narrative location...Hence the order of the narrative, Luke's staging of events in their meaning...perspective, characterization, setting, theme and the like are immediately relevant to our reading of the third Gospel'. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 11.



Greatness and the Child-Reception Sign-Act in First-Century Mediterranean Society;

The Symbolic Potential of Children to represent the Lowly, the Poor, and the Little-Ones, in Luke's Narrative;

Receiving this Child and Receiving Jesus and the One who sent Him, 9:46–48.

Ricoeur also recognizes that initial interpretative interaction with text, the first *naïveté*, is coloured by reader prejudice and pre-critical understanding of the content influenced by traditional interpretations and social perspectives to which the reader has been exposed.<sup>41</sup> The examination of the relevant texts within the literary context given to them by Luke will therefore be preceded by a study of their interpretation, especially during periods of development in societal understanding of children and childhood. This is carried out in a final section under the heading:

A Review of the Interpretation History of the Child-Reception Events in Luke's Gospel.

### **Methodology and the Experiential Narratives: An Autoethnographical Approach**

Autoethnography, as the components of the title suggest, is a pattern of research that, beginning with personal experience, 'auto', aims to more fully understand cultural experience, 'ethno', through critically grounded dialogue and analysis 'graphy'. The current reflexive academic study is grounded in my personal experience of vocation and commitment to missional service amongst favela communities of São Paulo, and in particular their children, in the context of the missional outlook and practice of the Brazilian Baptist Convention. This 'missio-culture', initially uninformed by experience or a critical social and biblical hermeneutic, constituted my Ricoeurian first *naïveté* and formed the starting point of my journey of missional experience. To analyze and draw

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<sup>41</sup>'What is characteristic of the first naïveté is immediacy of belief, and this immediacy always adheres to poetic texts (and therefore most especially religious texts). Characteristic of critique is the mediation of the context of the assertions through the application of the criteria for knowledge established in critical idealism.' David Klemm, *The Hermeneutical Theory of Paul Ricoeur — A Constructive Analysis* (Lewisberg, PE: Bucknell University Press, 1983), 160.

meaning from child-catalyzed events that subsequently had a transformative impact upon my missio-cultural outlook, and significantly influenced the outworking of this service, a methodological approach is proposed whereby these experiential narratives are brought into dialogue with the child-reception texts narrated in Luke's gospel. This dialogue then forms the basis for a missiological critique of the missional and hermeneutical cultures that had previously determined my attitudes, understandings and practice, and that continue to influence the outlook of many church communities faced with the missional challenge of deprived communities and their children.

It is proposed that postmodern developments in the field of ethnographic study offer a fruitful way forward.<sup>42</sup> Charlotte Davies, whilst not specifically referring to Ricoeur, echoes his commitment to 'suspicious', critical explanation of narrative sources when she writes:

ethnographers must seek to utilize creatively the insights of these postmodernist perspectives — insights that encourage incorporation of different standpoints, exposure of the intellectual tyranny of metanarratives and recognition of the authority that inheres in the authorial voice.<sup>43</sup>

The recognition of the potential of the researcher's personal experience and perspective to enrich ethnographical inquiry is expressed in the descriptor given to this approach: autoethnography.<sup>44</sup> The epistemological space and incentive for this development is recognized by Margot Duncan in her paper 'Autoethnography: Critical Appreciation of an Emerging Art':

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<sup>42</sup> For a helpful review of differing approaches to phenomenological inquiry in a postmodern epistemological environment, see Linda Findlay, 'Debating Phenomenological Research Methods,' *Phenomenology & Practice* 3, no. 1 (2009): 6–25.

<sup>43</sup> Charlotte Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Routledge, 2008), 5–6.

<sup>44</sup> For an introduction to autoethnography, its varieties, epistemological foundations, methods and place within the sphere of academic research, see: Walton, *Writing Methods*, esp. 4–8; Kim Etherington, *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2004); Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2008); Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*; Sarah Wall, 'An Autoethnography on Learning about Autoethnography,' *Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5, no. 2 (2006), [http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5\\_2/HTML/wall.htm](http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5_2/HTML/wall.htm); Stanley Witkin, 'Autoethnography: The Opening Act,' in *Narrating Social Work through Autoethnography*, edited by Stanley Witkin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ethnographic approaches are being acculturated into a postmodern academic world...The narrative approaches typical of ethnography are now changing to facilitate a more personal point of view by emphasizing reflexivity and personal voice.<sup>45</sup>

In considering the relationship between autoethnography and other personally focused genres of writing, such as autobiography, Chang emphasizes the distinctive outward looking, intertextual potential and interactive intention of autoethnographical study: 'Autoethnographical writing does not merely tell stories about yourself garnished with details, but actively interprets your stories to make sense of how they are connected to others' stories'.<sup>46</sup>

It is precisely such a critically conducted connecting of narratives drawn from experience and text that is sought in the current inquiry. Citing the work of Tami Spry,<sup>47</sup> Heather Walton emphasizes that the particular characteristic of an autoethnographical approach is that it is not limited to analysis of experience solely within the cultural world of the researcher, which might adequately be described as autobiographical or other forms of reflexive writing, but one that makes use of this analysis to bring creative particularity into the dialogical interaction with, and critique of, related cultural narratives.

Personal experience becomes a data source for 'a critically reflexive methodology...[that] provides a framework to critically reflect upon the ways in which our personal lives intersect, collide, and commune with others in the body politic'.<sup>48</sup>

To complement the narratives arising from recalled experience I will draw upon analyses and commentaries produced in both English and Portuguese, by government agencies, academia and journalistic enquiry, together with journals and personal papers that relate as closely as possible, in time and location, to the realities of the

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<sup>45</sup> Margot Duncan, 'Autoethnography: Critical Appreciation of an Emerging Art,' *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 4, no. 3 (December 2004): 4.

<sup>46</sup> Chang, *Autoethnography as Method*, 14.

<sup>47</sup> Tami Spry, *Body, Paper, Stage: Writing and Performing Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2011), 54.

<sup>48</sup> Walton, *Writing Methods*, 3.

actual favela communities that form the social milieu of the recalled personal child-reception events that are at the centre of this study.<sup>49</sup> To this broad-brush-stroke background I will add a more detailed characterization of certain aspects of favela life-experience making use of photographs that capture encounters with children that proved to be significant in directing my missionary and missiological journey.<sup>50</sup> The variety of contextually related material presented in this study offers a rich autoethnographical framework for the recalled child-focused missional experiences that I bring to the Ricoeurian ‘conference table’. The resulting critical and mutually interpretative interaction with the Lukan child-reception texts will challenge typically ‘received’ understandings, attitudes and practices of missional engagement with deprived communities and their most vulnerable members – the children.

### **Autoethnography: The Knowledge-Potential of Stories to Critique Cultures**

It is the knowledge-value, and culture-critical potential of personal stories that are particularly affirmed and explored in autoethnographical study.

Because there is a complex interaction between the world in which a person lives and their understanding of that world, narratives are particularly suitable for portraying how people experience their position in relation to a culture... Embedded in people’s stories we hear feelings, thoughts and attitudes, and the richness of the narrative helps us to understand themselves and their strategies for living... These voices represent potentially unheard testimony and offer life perspectives that can materially influence listener response and subsequent transformative action.<sup>51</sup>

The stories of recalled experience presented will contribute to the missiological dialogue carried out in a Ricoeurian process of explanation and dialogical retrieval, through both analysis of the data that they contain (an analysis of the narratives), which is allowed to inform and interact thematically with the textual material from

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<sup>49</sup> Unpublished personal archive documents are available for reference with the author.

<sup>50</sup> The value of reflection upon visual representation, canvas or photograph, is described as, ‘...to involve the viewer, as the narrator engages with the reader, in the undercurrents of the plot, Cheryl Exum, introduction to *Between the Text and the Canvas: The Bible and Art in Dialogue*, edited by J. Cheryl Exum and Ela Nutu, *The Bible in the Modern World*. Vol. 13 (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2009), 15.

<sup>51</sup> Etherington, *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher*, 75.

Luke's gospel, and through articulation of the experiential reality of the participants (narrative analysis) that illuminates and is illuminated by the Lukan text. The consequent critically challenged missional culture offers a potential starting point for further iterations of narrative enquiry and reflection that might draw upon the experiences of practitioners from differing socio-cultural contexts.

Stories allow the reader to enter into the narrator's experience and invite questions and hypotheses that might lead to further inquiry. They depict actions and perspectives across social groups that might be used for comparative studies, perhaps with other professions or work settings.<sup>52</sup>

The stories drawn from my personal narrative of child-focused mission in Brazilian favelas will therefore be presented as sources of fresh missiological understanding that not only challenged my personal missional practice and understanding of the Lukan record of Jesus' ministry involving children, but that also offer fresh hermeneutical and missional perspectives to those involved in comparable settings elsewhere.<sup>53</sup>

### **Autoethnography and Validity**

Set as it is within a postmodern epistemological framework, autoethnographical inquiry must identify criteria of validity that allow affirmations of understanding or insight to be appropriately located in respect of both the personal world of the researcher and the universe of experience shared by others.<sup>54</sup> In line with general autoethnographical method, my aim is to locate both the insights arising from the present study and the dialectical process out of which they arise, within critically appreciated contexts of personal and social life experience that are recognizable,

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<sup>52</sup> Catherine Marshall and Gretchen Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999), cited by Etherington, *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher*, 76.

<sup>53</sup> 'Good autoethnographical writing should...unsettle, criticize and challenge taken-for-granted meanings and socially scripted performances.' N. Denzin, *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2003), 123–124, cited in Walton, *Writing Methods*, 9.

<sup>54</sup> Differing criteria for evaluating the validity of autoethnographic studies are proposed by different researchers depending on the nature of the material under consideration, e.g. Wakeman, *Knowing through Poetic Reflection*, 272–5, who highlights the importance of coherence, congruence, credibility, clarity and caution as necessary qualities in the selection and treatment of source material.

comprehensible and credible to practitioners who share comparable worlds of experience and inquiry.<sup>55</sup> It is proposed that appropriate validation is to be found in such recognition in so far as it might be judged to constitute a framework of critically attested plausibility within which the insights of this study might serve as points of reference and reflection for other practitioners.<sup>56</sup>

For the reader to be able to respond with confidence to those inherently subjective recollections and reflections presented, I shall aim to demonstrate qualities of self-awareness and integrity in presenting and interpreting personal experience as well as academic criticality in relation to the treatment of narrative data and analyses.

### **Autoethnography and Credibility: Self-Awareness, Integrity and Criticality**<sup>57</sup>

To narrate and interpret experiences involving ‘others’ with credibility also demands demonstrable competency to hear, comprehend and authentically rearticulate the voices in relation to the context in which they came. This is especially so when that ‘otherness’ is related to a culturally different and un-lived experience of social deprivation in childhood, as is the case in regard to my own involvement with children and their favela communities.<sup>58</sup> This is particularly well recognized in Ricoeur’s concept of hermeneutical distanciation and addressed methodologically within his hermeneutical cycle of ‘suspicion’ and ‘retrieval’, an approach echoed in autoethnographical methodology. A lack of self-awareness of the socio-cultural

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<sup>55</sup> The critical appreciation of material can be seriously compromised by a lack of contextualization, a point well made by P. Atkinson: ‘The narratives seem to float in a social vacuum. The voices echo in an otherwise empty world. There is an extraordinary absence of social context, social action, and social interaction’. ‘Narrative turn or blind alley?’ *Qualitative Health Research*, 7 (1997): 339, cited in Sarah Wall, ‘Autoethnography,’ 5.

<sup>56</sup> Chang summarizes the activities of data analysis and interpretation implicit in the autoethnographic method: ‘This process balances the opposing activities of fracturing data and connecting fragments to create a coherent story and cultural explanation’. *Autoethnography as Method*, 137.

<sup>57</sup> ‘They [ethnographers] write about how they made sense of their experience at the time and how they are making sense now of how they made sense of it then...they strive to be self-aware of how their assumptions, beliefs, understandings, values and commitments influence their descriptions, analyses and representation.’ Witkin, *Autoethnography*, preface.

<sup>58</sup> See Ricoeur, ‘The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,’ *Philosophy Today* 17, no.2 (1973): 130. For a helpful discussion, see Joseph Dorairaj, ‘Paul Ricoeur’s Hermeneutics of the Text,’ *Indian Journal of Philosophy* 27, no.4 (2000): 403–9.

distance from the subjects of the stories, and of personal agendas that can colour recollections and interpretations, represents a potentially disqualifying weakness in any ethnographical study. I have sought to address this issue by being transparent as to the vocational and missional motivations, commitments and ecclesiastical constraints that made up the context of my personal involvement in the events recounted.

In affirming the serious sense of vocation and commitment that underpin the claim to integrity in regard to the stories presented and their treatment,<sup>59</sup> I recognize that integrity of intention cannot not guarantee impartiality. Indeed, partiality is a dimension of the particularity and distinctiveness that bring value to the autoethnographical approach. However, the grounds and influence of that partiality should be appreciated and highlighted so that the reader might be alerted both to its existence and to the manner in which it colours the discussion. In particular, partiality, albeit unintentional or even unrecognized, is all too easily expressed in the selection and development of the narratives associated with the recollections of the happenings presented. It is of the nature of personal knowledge and attribution of meaning that particular and limited personal perceptions, prejudices and agendas will influence the shape of the narratives generated. However, inherent cultural bias or the partiality of knowledge do not necessarily undermine integrity but can rather serve to highlight the limits of the data and any interpretations made. One consequence of this is that the potential knowledge-value of the happenings recalled in the stories recounted is not exhausted by the hermeneutical dialogues conducted in this study. Viewed from other perspectives with different ends in view, the stories have the potential to yield further dimensions of meaning.

I would recognize also that the historic process of developing the personal narratives associated with each recalled event was inevitably influenced by the purpose of the

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<sup>59</sup> An 'external' accreditation of the quality of commitment and practice demonstrated in this vocation is supported by my wife being honoured with an OBE for 'services to the education of deprived children in Brazil'.

recollection process. Specifically, this focused upon the need to develop effective mission strategies that would both direct my own work and would also be in line with the expectations and potentialities of the churches of the Brazilian Baptist Convention, at whose invitation we were working in the country. Behind this figuring of the narratives and their interpretations was my own sense of calling to an holistic expression of Christian mission, grounded in an essentially evangelical missional commitment.<sup>60</sup> In section 2, 'The Researcher in the Favela', the personal context of my missional action and reflection is discussed and reference is made to ways in which these perspectives were challenged or reinforced by the events experienced.

By making the reader aware of as much personal background as seems necessary to appreciate and judge the impact of such background, the intention is to recognize the value of a Ricoeurian 'suspicion' in regard to the recollection and interpretation of the events recounted. In doing so, I aim to offer grounds for an authentic creative retrieval of meaning of the narratives presented, that will commend itself as an interpretive process with which the reader can engage with critical confidence from their own perspective and context.

The plausible credibility of autoethnographical study also demands a thoroughgoing criticality in regard to the treatment of narrative data and analysis. As in the process of judging the authenticity of a work of art, establishing provenance is a legitimate and necessary precursor to the acceptance of personally attested narrative material. Carolyn Ellis, discussing criteria for credibility, suggests the questions, 'Can the author legitimately make these claims for his story?' and 'Will this story help others cope with or better understand their worlds?'.<sup>61</sup> The experiential competency for undertaking such a critical presentation of the social and missiological contexts that form the setting of the narratives is grounded in my twenty years of socio-cultural commitment and acculturation within Brazilian favelas. The present study will therefore include an

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<sup>60</sup> Typically expressed in The Lausanne Covenant, produced at the First International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland, 1974.

<sup>61</sup> Carolyn Ellis, 'Creating criteria: An ethnographic short story,' *Qualitative Inquiry* 6, no.2 (2000): 275.



overview of the background to my involvement in the missional situations from which the narrated stories arise in order to establish the linguistic, cultural and missional credentials that support the authenticity of the stories presented, as well as to provide their context. It is the contention of this thesis that our living, in missional response to and reflective dialogue with the meaning of the text of 9:46–48, during the twenty years of our work with children in the favelas of Latin America, constitutes an authentic expression of Ricoeur's 'living in the aura',<sup>62</sup> and gives substance to our hope of gaining insights that might be helpful to others engaged in similar journeys of missional intent.

The interdisciplinary nature of this process is one for which the integrating character of Ricoeur's hermeneutical approach is particularly well suited.<sup>63</sup> Whilst not purporting to validate the evidential value of the story according to the criteria of scientific investigation, the intention of producing what has been described as a 'thick' narrative,<sup>64</sup> is to anchor the material contextually in such a way that comparisons can be plausibly made with other stories from other contexts. By giving the material 'historical relatedness',<sup>65</sup> the aim is to confer upon the source, and hence offer to other interlocutors, a starting or reference point for their own interaction.

### **Autoethnography: A Methodology Appropriate to the Locus of the Study**

An autoethnographical approach offers two further specific and significant advantages in regard to the focus and the intention of the current study:

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<sup>62</sup> '[N]ever, in fact, does the interpreter get near to what the text says unless he lives in the aura of the meaning he is inquiring after.' Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 351.

<sup>63</sup> This is well summed up by John Thompson in an introductory editorial comment to Ricoeur's *Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences*, 23: 'His work is informed by the contributions of many intellectual traditions, from hermeneutics and phenomenology to analytical philosophy, structuralism and critical theory, and these contributions are moulded into a perspective which is original and unique'. For a recent series of essays on this aspect of Ricoeur's hermeneutical philosophy, see *Literature and Theology* 27, no. 2 (June 2013).

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Wall, *An Autoethnography*, 5.

<sup>65</sup> Wakeman uses this phrase in explaining his intention in providing the reader of his poetry with personal and socio-cultural background to better appreciate the milieu in which the poems have been conceived. *Knowing through Poetic Reflection*, 167.

### Sensitivity to the Voices of the Marginalized

For Paulo Freire, hearing and taking seriously the testimony of deprived communities was fundamental in any process aimed at effecting social change. With reference to his work, Kim Etherington, in her seminal study setting out the grounding and methodology of reflexive research, has written:

Researchers began to encourage voices that had previously been marginalized and oppressed and provided platforms for the stories of minority group members, such as gay men and women, abuse survivors and people of colour. Research was used to effect changes in society and reveal the sources and symptoms of powerlessness as well as promoting the idea that people could work together to change oppressive and unhealthy practices within society.<sup>66</sup>

It has been my experience, and the contention of the present study, that the marginalized voices of children caught up in favela deprivation offer a source of existential knowledge that has the potential to inform, complement and challenge perceptions and hermeneutical outcomes that are more typically the result of analyses conducted from positions of social power, security and relative privilege.<sup>67</sup>

As an alternative method of inquiry, postmodernism invites other, often tentative, marginalized voices to be heard alongside those of the dominant western discourses that value certainty, action and decisiveness. All of these notions have contributed to a greater recognition of the relationship between the knower and what is known, and what each brings with them into the research relationship to create meaning and understanding of the topics under exploration.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Etherington, *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher*, 27.

<sup>67</sup> The appropriateness of the Ricoeurian approach and the value of criticality, specifically in the study of child focused texts, was recently affirmed by the Argentinian theologian Juan José Barreda: 'The method of suspicion can help us greatly to discern the biblical message and provide a key for us to re-read the Bible in an inclusive way, that relates to the whole of life. It will be valuable to observe social conditioning, ideologies that shape biblical texts, as well as exposing the fact that vested interests and power relations are built on certain understandings of childhood.' 'Biblical Hermeneutics from Childhood: Latin American Perspectives,' in *Report on the Second Quito Consultation on Child Theology, 17–21 August, 2015* (London: Child Theology Movement, 2015), 28–29.

<sup>68</sup> Etherington, *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher*, 21.

## Generative of Empathetic Responsiveness in Other Practitioners

Etherington, has observed:

Others, on reading the book, told me that they gained more from the personal, subjective reflexive approach I used to represent these stories than from studies based on traditional methodologies that they found hard to remember or link with practice.<sup>69</sup>

It is the contention and testimony of those engaged in reflexive research that the acknowledgment and affirmation of the personal experience of the researcher gives permission and stimulation to the reader to relate the discussion to their personal situation. 'If I have said as author, "This is who I am in relation to this topic", then the reader/listener is freer to decide who they are in relation to the topic...So, it makes for a more dynamic energy around the research and its ongoing life.'<sup>70</sup>

It is such a desire to broaden the research conversation and engage with others through sharing the missiological dialogue between experience and biblical text that was formative in the development of my missional work in favela communities in Brazil, and a motivating factor in undertaking the present study. A recognition of the value of the 'democratization' of the research process through reflexivity has been well expressed by Etherington: 'in discussion with others we can co-construct new meaning in response to their critical reflections and our own'.<sup>71</sup> Such an ongoing process of reader-researcher engagement represents, within a Ricoeurian framework, a further iteration of the hermeneutical cycle of critical analysis and creative reconstruction. This potential is identified at the close of the study as an avenue for further study.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>70</sup> From a recorded discussion with a fellow practitioner-researcher. Ibid., 49.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 29. She goes on to make reference to a study of the experience of illness by Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995). In his introduction he writes, 'As I tell you my own stories and those of other people, I am also telling them to myself and am changed by them: as I listened to and wrote them down, I had the chance to make sense of my own and other people's experiences in new and different ways. As you read them, perhaps you too will be changed and find new meaning in your life as you resonate with participants' stories of lived experience, both through the content of those stories and the ways in which they are told'. Ibid., 74.

## Autoethnography: The Selection and Narrative Style of Stories

### Selection

As in the case of any inquiry proposing to offer insights that have value beyond the personal experience of the researcher, the autoethnographical researcher must exercise particular care in the criteria adopted for the selection of the material that will be presented as evidentiary. This process must be shown to follow coherent criteria that allow for all relevant voices to be heard.

The selection of the particular stories or recalled events in the present study is therefore grounded in their being characterized by four qualities: community authenticity, personal significance, representativity and collective coherence:

- Authenticity is based on demonstrating their important issues within what Friere described as the community's thematic universe.<sup>72</sup>
- Significance is grounded in the development of the understanding that they generated within my personal journey of mission engagement and the missional response they evoked within the community.
- Representativity is shown by demonstrating their generic relationship to social and missiological contexts within which they arose.
- Collective coherence is observed as the separate experiences represent an 'emplotment',<sup>73</sup> or coherent narrative, of my missiological understanding and missional experience with deprived communities that has the potential to be brought into revelatory and transformative interaction with other missionally engaged actors, both biblical and contemporary.

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<sup>72</sup> 'The people's thematic universe — the complex of their generative themes — [that] inaugurates the dialogue of education as the practice of freedom.' Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1972), 77. In other words, the identification of authentic community concerns is a proper starting point for dialogue in pursuit of understanding that can lead to 'appropriation' (to use Ricoeur's term) for transformative action.

<sup>73</sup> The 'organization of events by emplotment' and the potential that such narrative creation has for becoming both 'revelatory and transformative', lies at the heart of Ricoeur's understanding of the innately metaphorical, and therefore ultimately hopeful, character of the human condition as expressed in narrative. See Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 355.

## Narrative Style

The goal is to write meaningfully and evocatively about things that matter and may make a difference...and to write from an ethic of care and concern. Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner.<sup>74</sup>

For Ricoeur, fundamental to the efficacy of the process of transference or communication of experience is 'empathy', understood as 'the transference of ourselves into another's psychic life...the principle common to every kind of understanding, whether direct or indirect'.<sup>75</sup> Autoethnographic field-experience writing aims to generate 'verisimilitude', to help the reader 'relive' the experience with the writer,<sup>76</sup> but to do so with ethical commitment and within a framework of socio-historical connectedness that responsibly grounds emotional engagement in the world of life-experience beyond the narrative account.<sup>77</sup> I have, therefore, drawn upon a number of socially acclaimed and well-researched works of narrative fiction to inform the social context of Brazilian favelas: Misha Glenny's 2015 *Nemesis: One Man and the Battle for Rio*, and Paulo Lins' widely acclaimed novel, *Cidade de Deus* (City of God), 1996,<sup>78</sup> which presents an impactful social portrayal of favela culture, writing in a style that occasionally approximates to 'free verse', a style that reflects the quality of that genre to generate 'proximity to lived experience by trying to replicate, project or represent perceptual, cognitive, emotional and imaginative processes'.<sup>79</sup>

The guiding principle in material selection and narrative style has been to recount events with a contextualized and empathetic verisimilitude.

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<sup>74</sup> Ellis and Bochner, *Autoethnography*, 213.

<sup>75</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 73.

<sup>76</sup> Laurel Richardson: 'In telling the story, the writer calls upon...fiction-writing techniques. Through these techniques, the writing constructs a sequence of events...holding back on interpretation, asking the reader to emotionally "relive" the events with the writer'. 'New writing practices in qualitative research,' *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 17.1 March, (2000): 5–20, cited in Wall, *An Autoethnography*, 4.

<sup>77</sup> According to Witkin, autoethnographic inquiry, to be done well, should be based on examples of personal experience that 'provide potentially useful accessible information, grounded in the historical cultural and social realities that render experiences and their interpretations intelligible'. *Autoethnography*, preface.

<sup>78</sup> Paulo Lins, *Cidade de Deus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (São Paulo, Brazil: Editora Schwarcz, 1997).

<sup>79</sup> Alex Preminger and Terry Brogan, *The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry*, 427.

### **Autoethnography: Ethical Considerations**

In considering possible ethical implications of the use of narrative stories and photographic imagery involving children, it is important at the outset to clarify the nature of my research relationship with the subjects of these events. The events behind the photos and stories presented were not products of a research programme; rather, the research is a result of the events recalled in the visual and word pictures. The events and people that figure in the reflections were at no time considered or treated as participants in a research process. It is rather my recollections of historical events in which they figured as autonomous actors that is the focus of the present research. Whilst the events provoked a reflective response in me, the events themselves were in every case unprompted and unanticipated, my role being that of an observer or post-event 'hearer'. Similarly, the survival and availability of the photographs employed is, in terms of this research, accidental rather than intentional. The images should not be considered as products of the research programme, but rather more of the nature of artefacts, drawn from personal archives to illustrate particular issues under discussion, in such a way as to assist the reader to enter into the context of the research being presented.

Notwithstanding this important caveat, the question of potential prejudice in regard to the individuals referenced in this study remains a proper concern. A fundamental expression of this concern is formulated in the 'Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association', article 21:

Sociologists have a responsibility to ensure that the physical, social and psychological well-being of research participants is not adversely affected by the research. They should strive to protect the rights of those they study, their interests, sensitivities and privacy.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> "British Sociological Association Statement of Ethical Practice – Visual Sociology Group, Article 21", accessed February, 2017, [http://www.visualsociology.org.uk/BSA\\_VS\\_ethical\\_statement.pdf](http://www.visualsociology.org.uk/BSA_VS_ethical_statement.pdf). See also Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 125.

In regard to the current study, each of these areas of potential ethical tension is largely addressed by the historical, geographical, cultural and social distance existing between the conduct of the research process and the events referred to. The research was conducted twenty to twenty-five years later, in the United Kingdom, not Brazil, in English, not Portuguese, within an academic not an educationally disadvantaged community. In addition to the safeguarding implicit in the differences of time, place, language and educational accessibility, the names of those not involved in the actual missional process, and therefore possibly uncommitted to its goals and methods, have been altered and actual dates not specified.

Edward Diener and Rick Crandall,<sup>81</sup> also raise concerns regarding informed consent and the potential invasion of the privacy of those who are unwittingly made 'participants' in social research. This proper concern is met by the anonymity of the reporting, the predominantly public nature of the events recalled and the fact that many of the events and the missiological reflections provoked by them prior to this research programme, were first shared with the favela communities themselves.

It is also important to recognize that concern regarding the use of visual images articulated by the Economic and Social Research Council is directed toward research in which such material 'figures strongly' and is likely to lead to unauthorized identification. The use of images in the current study is, however, marginal and is, as in the case of the written description of the events, considered to have little or no likelihood of leading to identification due to the 'distances' that exists between image and research.

It is my considered opinion, therefore, that there exists no realistic possibility of the individuals who figure in the events recalled in this study being identified and consequently being prejudicially exploited through unauthorized invasion of private behaviour, or by being put in an uncomfortable social or psychological position.

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<sup>81</sup> Edward Diener and Rick Crandall, *Ethics in Social and Behavioural Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

Furthermore, the characterization of my reporting of events as anonymous should not be considered to compromise the quality of their dialogical potential in relation to the scriptural narrative presented by Luke in the child-reception event. In both sources the child is presented as a real actor within a real-time event, but is given no particular history that might be considered necessary to the understanding of the event, other than that derived from the child's representative, cultural position in society. In fact, this reality and representativity adds to the potential relevance and dramatic impact of the event for readers beyond its original narrative context.

The value of the juxtaposition of reality and representativity, in regard to the central figures of the child-reception events presented, is also significant in evaluating the appropriateness and contribution of the photographs presented in support of the verbal narrations. Luke records, 9:47, that Jesus took 'this child', a real flesh and blood child whom the disciples could see. The 'this' refers to that which stood before them in their sight. No details about the child are given and it is the representative reality rather than the personal qualities of the child that undergird the parenetic potential of the narrative. In the photographs presented, it is not any particularity or personal history of the children that is visualized. Rather it is their embodiment of the vulnerability and marginalization of the favela communities that offers a visual complement to the verbally expressed recollections — a complement that is comparable to the dramatized event nature of the scriptural passage.

The debate over the appropriateness of employing photographs of children, especially those in any form of distress, with a view to eliciting an empathetic and subsequently political or social response from adult viewers, is current and contested. One of the issues, particularly relevant to my use of photographs here, is well illustrated by the event of September 2016, when Facebook temporarily edited the well-known photograph of a naked child, Kim Phúc, fleeing a napalm attack in Vietnam on June 8, 1972. Reinstatement of the original, unedited, image was in response to worldwide protest that editing would represent an alteration to the historical record and diminish the testimony and witness-potential of what should be understood as a material artefact. The photograph was not to be considered as an image of a naked child but as



a symbol of the horror of war.<sup>82</sup> In an interesting parallel to the Lukan use of ‘this’ child, Kim Phúc herself is reported as referring to ‘that little girl in the picture’.<sup>83</sup> Personality has been replaced by a third-party perspective that recognizes the artefactual nature of the image. The image, ‘a Child of Tiquatira’, reflects this perspective and intention.<sup>84</sup> The photographer, in her first and only visit to a favela, caught a perspective that embodies the vulnerability, marginalization and deprivation of favela life as it impacted and challenged her. Whilst the image re-presents a particular perspective of a particular moment, it is included because, in the context of the present study, it has both the representative and symbolic power to extend the viewer’s understanding by adding empathetic depth to the sociological analysis. Perhaps of all of the photos presented, ‘a Child in Tiquatira’ has the dramatic quality and communicative potential of the ‘this’ child of 9:46–48.

It is, then, as artefacts, representing historically grounded symbolism, that the photographs are included to complement the narrated recollections. They are intended to open windows on a reality so as to facilitate a fuller knowing of the social context in which the events described took place.

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<sup>82</sup> Compare the public and political impact, in regard to the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015, of a photograph of a child washed up on Turkish mainland, and of a child in the back of an ambulance in 2016, Aleppo, symbolizing the plight of civilians trapped in the city undergoing Syrian government and Russian bombing.

<sup>83</sup> From an NPR, National Public Radio, interview, ‘The Long Road to Forgiveness’, June 30, 2008, 12:18 pm ET. Accessed February 2017. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91964687?storyId=91964687&t=1536743876064>.

<sup>84</sup> It is, in fact, the only photo not taken by myself, though I was present at the time. Although the child appears alone, like all the photos it was taken in a public place, with all the life of the favela swirling around the moment.

# SECTION 2: EXPERIENCE AND THE CONTEXT OF THE FAVELA

## THE RESEARCHER IN THE FAVELA: THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

### Introduction

The intention of this section is to set child-reception experiences from the favelas of São Paulo, that I shall be bringing into dialogue with the Lukan child-reception events, within the context of the development of my personal missional 'journey', for which they became 'sign-post' events.

These experiences are presented as a series of cameo 'encounters', through which I shall aim to give both a chronological framework and emotional content to our induction into the world of favela mission. I shall indicate that children repeatedly played powerful catalytic roles in this process and from the outset contributed towards shaping the missiological dialogue between text and experience which follows.

Since the narrative presented in this section is essentially a personal one, much of the supporting documentation is also unpublished or of limited circulation and not generally available. These include organizational publicity documents, reports, conference papers, prayer letters and magazine articles. They are available for consultation in my personal archive.

The purpose of citing and quoting from such sources is two-fold: to present accounts of what I consider to be significant missional activity and developments of thinking that are supported by documentary evidence that is contemporary with the child-reception experiences to be recounted and interpreted, and secondly to authenticate the extent of my personal involvement in the missional activities that form this context, attesting to my credibility as an informed narrator and commentator.

### **‘It’s Time to Stop Crying and Do Something’**

Antônio and Sônia Costa were diaconal leaders of the Baptist church of Ferreira, situated in the southwest suburbs of São Paulo. They also ran a commercial woodyard a little further out towards the poorer periphery of the city, in the administrative area of Campo Limpo. From time to time a young adolescent girl, Gilvânia, sometimes accompanied by Isaque, one of her younger brothers, would pass by the yard to ask for any offcuts that they could sell for food. On one such visit, whilst the lives of my family were still centred half a world away around my teaching ministry in Spurgeon’s College, London, Sônia noticed a small plastic bag tightly clutched in Isaque’s six-year-old-hands. ‘It’s for our lunch.’ Gilvânia explained how they had found the leftover rice and scraps of meat outside the back entrance to a restaurant down the road. Sônia was moved: moved to retreat into the little woodyard office, moved to tears and then moved to call Antônio and mouth the words that would, a year later, become our call to respond to the need of families and communities like those where Gilvânia lived a mile further out of town in the favela of Jardim Olinda — ‘It’s time to stop crying and do something!’

### **André and my ‘Moses’ Moment**

In response to an invitation from the Baptist Theological Faculty of São Paulo (FTBSP), we had returned to our previous overseas missionary vocation supported by BMS World Mission,<sup>86</sup> and on the final Saturday of 1991 arrived back in Brazil, temporarily accommodated in a Mission apartment in the São Paulo suburb of Ferreira. Tired from the plane journey, and with the four young children to deal with, it was decided that, the following day, I should put in a ‘token’ appearance at the local Baptist church whilst the rest of the family sorted out suitcases. If the sermon was not particularly memorable, to worship again in Portuguese was an inspiration after the four years

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<sup>86</sup> Whilst unusual for BMS World Mission to send a worker to a large urban centre with an already well developed denominational structure, our previous period of ministry with the Society from 1977 to 1987, church planting in Mato Grosso State, together with my experience as tutor in Spurgeon’s College from 1988–91, was considered to be in-line with a 1992–5 five-year strategic policy document, which prioritized partnerships in holistic mission that would contribute towards urban mission and education. BMS World Mission, ‘BMS Strategy Plan,’ Internal Report, 1995.

away in the more staid ambience of South Norwood Hill — and then came the church notices. It seemed that pastor Abdoral spoke with a certain resignation, ‘I know you’ve heard this before, but I’m repeating it this evening...Antônio and Sônia Costa are asking again for anyone who might like to help them in the new work that they have begun in the favela of Jardim Olinda, to speak with them after the service’. It was as if a voice spoke in my ear, ‘This is why I have brought you back to Brazil!’ The Costas’ reaction to my interest was that they had been praying for a Brazilian ministerial student, but they seemed happy at the thought that a ‘Gringo’ might do!

The following morning, at the wheel of a white VW Kombi campervan, I made my way to what I understood was the entrance to Jardim Olinda. Never having set foot in a favela before and informed only by the popular perception that ‘favela’ implied poverty, criminality and prostitution, I was almost unsurprised when I had to pull up as a bonfire in the middle of the dirt road blocked my passage. Two young adolescent boys wearing only shorts were feeding the flames. Both turned out to be called André.<sup>87</sup> ‘Is this Jardim Olinda?’ I asked, ‘Can you show me around?’

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André ‘number one’  
walking past his home in  
Jardim Olinda, 1992–3.

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So began a journey that was to occupy our mission living and questioning from that moment until after our then three-year-old daughter, Lindy, left home to study law and psychology at the University of Kent. The signpost quality of that moment could not help but recall for me Moses’ moment of call in Exodus 3:1–10. That André ‘number one’ was to die less than two years later, engulfed by the darkness that

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<sup>87</sup> To distinguish them, the more talkative, pictured in the photograph, became known as André number one, and the other, André number two.

constantly threatened the young people of the favela, has added layers of poignant significance to the encounter.

### **'There's No Future in Favelas'**

What might the church look like in such a context of all-pervading social and spiritual deprivation? Despite, not twelve months earlier, having co-authored a book grandly entitled *Planting Tomorrow's Churches Today — A Comprehensive Handbook*,<sup>88</sup> I felt completely at a loss as to how to respond missionally to the challenge of the favela community that bore in on me at every level and from every side.<sup>89</sup> In search of experience and guidance, I was dismayed to discover that no more than a handful of the Baptist churches in the city professed any mission commitment to these communities, even when they were well within their natural catchment area.<sup>90</sup>

In a move to engage my mission students from the Baptist faculty, I mobilized them to assist in conducting a shack-to-shack sociological survey of the Jardim Olinda community.<sup>91</sup> The impact of this personal contact upon the students probably outstripped the statistical merit of the findings, but amongst the results, that came as a surprise to all involved, was the significant presence of a previously unnoticed population: pre-school-aged children.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Stuart Christine and Martin Robinson, *Planting Tomorrow's Churches Today: A Comprehensive Handbook* (Tunbridge Wells: Monarch Books, 1991).

<sup>89</sup> 'What is a favela church like? Ask us again in a year's time', I wrote in an article at the time, 'We really don't know'. Christine, *Brazil — Evangelism and the Poor*, 6.

<sup>90</sup> I would recognize that negativity and indignation at this unresponsiveness by the churches should perhaps be qualified by a realization that it often proves easier for an outsider, unthreatened by the social and economic insecurity of favela poverty, to view these communities with a positive missional attitude.

<sup>91</sup> Christine, 'Programa de Estágio Supervisionado em Missões e Prática Ministerial'. This document outlines the extension of the supervised favela-mission placement programme from the FTBSP to a second Baptist Theological faculty in São Paulo, the Paulistana, in 1998. The programme was subsequently also implemented as a missions' option in a third Baptist Faculty in the Santo André, São Bernardo, São Caetano (ABC) area of the Greater São Paulo.

<sup>92</sup> The community survey of one hundred families in Jardim Olinda revealed that 98% of households had at least one child of pre-school age at that time, up to seven-years-old in São Paulo. Original survey questionnaires, unpublished documents, 1992–3.

Whilst this contact brought insights that lit fires of missional enthusiasm in many of the students, there were sadly those who in a spirit of patronizing ‘realism’ were quick to douse their ardour. Chancing to overhear a comment by another member of the teaching staff enquiring about the future ministerial ambitions of a particular student, I was dismayed to hear his interest in favela mission being dismissed with the comment, ‘There’s no future in favelas’.

Given the lack of both experience and enthusiasm for engaging with the ecclesiastical and evangelistic challenges of favela mission that characterized Baptist denominational outlook in São Paulo, it is testimony to both the social awareness and missional vision of Pastor Abdoral of the Ferriera baptist church, that he not only supported, but actively defended the unconventional style and missiological underpinning of the mission programmes we subsequently developed in Jardim Olinda.

In fact, openness to a more holistic understanding of evangelical mission was gaining ground across Latin America,<sup>93</sup> and as the impact of the missional enterprise in Jardim Olinda became more widely known through the testimony of theological students and the profile that my missionary status afforded me in the life of the Association of Baptist Churches in the city, interest grew in becoming involved in favela-mission programmes.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> The gradual move towards a broader understanding of Brazilian evangelical engagement with questions of social inequality was noted by a colleague, Robert Draycott, writing in the same issue of the BMS magazine that reported our initial response to favela poverty: Draycott, *Brazil: Evangelism and the Poor—An Alternative View*, 6. For a recent and comprehensive overview of the development of Protestant social thinking in the continent, written from a Latin American perspective, see H. Fernando Bullón, *Protestant Social Thought in Latin America* (Eugene, OR: Regnum Books International, 2015).

<sup>94</sup> ‘O Projeto Impacto Urbano’ [The Urban Impact Project] was one such programme. See *Projeto Impacto Urbano adapted for presentation to the churches of the state of Mato Grosso*, November 1998. Adopted by the Baptist Association of São Paulo churches in 1993, it aimed to promote local church mission in favela communities. It brought together the dimensions of culturally appropriate evangelism and social action, with supportive involvement from ministerial formation institutions and a specially created social mission entity. The entity was founded by the Ferreira church and named by Pastor Abdoral, ‘ABIAH: A Associação Batista (later Brasileira) de Incentivo e Apoio ao Homen’. For further information about ABIAH see Katia Lima de Medeiros, *ABIAH*, Unpublished document, September 1998, and *ABIAH: Uma introdução ao seu ministério*, Unpublished document, December 1999.

## PEPE — In a Deprived Community the Doorway to the Kingdom of God has the Shape of a Child

It was Georgie, a trained teacher, who, impressed by the numbers of young children in the community, recognized the significant socio-educational disadvantage that the children of Jardim Olinda were facing.<sup>95</sup> From homes where their parents often had little or no formal education, lacking in books, space, materials and encouragement, their knowledge-base and learning skills were seriously under-developed by the time they could enter state primary school at the age of six or seven. Their typically unstructured family lifestyles also contributed to a lack of the basic social skills necessary to adapt and prosper in the more formal classroom setting. On September 15, 1992, after repainting and equipping a disused room in a local baptist children's home situated adjacent to the favela, Georgie began a simple pre-school educational preparation programme, 'Alô Alô', later to be entitled *Programa Escolar* (PEPE).<sup>96</sup>



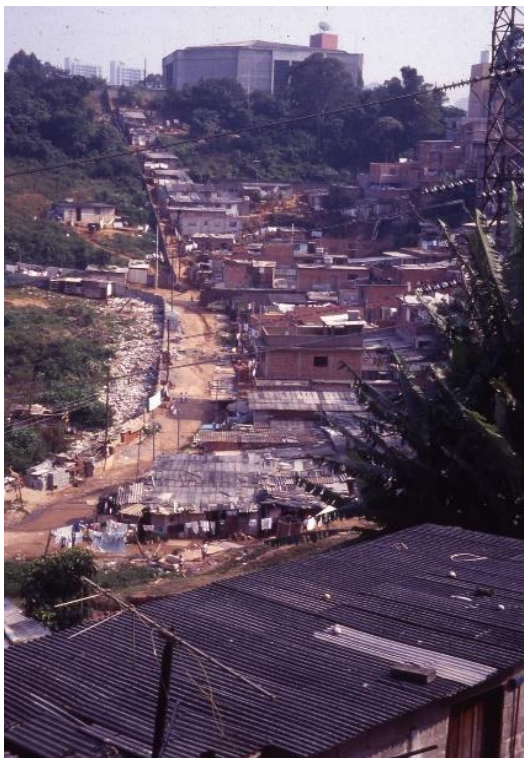
Opening day of PEPE,  
September 15, 1992.

<sup>95</sup> From an article I wrote jointly with Georgie for the BMS World Mission Magazine in 2001, 'The poverty stricken and deprived communities that are spread throughout the cities of the developing world are home to millions of children under seven years of age. In São Paulo, three out of every ten people living in favelas are pre-school-aged children: over a million in that city alone. Because of the conditions in which they live, these children are faced with trying to enter the state-school system quite unprepared to succeed... The result in the lives of these hundreds of thousands of virtually uneducated young people is one of frustration, disillusionment, resentment, and the violence that accompanies the options of petty crime, drugs and prostitution, feeding the whole vicious cycle of poverty that brings so much misery'.

<sup>96</sup> For a review of the development of the missional and educational philosophy of the PEPE programme, see Douglas McConnell, Jennifer Orona and Paul Stockley, eds., *Understanding God's Heart for Children: Toward a Biblical Framework* (Colorado Springs/London: Authentic Media, 2007), 36–42.

By the October 20, the original class of twelve had grown to thirty-four and the relevance and attractiveness of the programme to the community was becoming apparent.<sup>98</sup> It was also becoming known to neighbouring churches.

The following year, the large, professional-class Morumbi Baptist Church, a few kilometres distant from Jardim Olinda, asked Georgie if she could begin a unit of the programme in that community, as previous attempts to establish a missional presence had proved unsuccessful.




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The favela of Vila Andrade, 1993, looked down upon by the imposing Morumbi church seen at the top of the photograph.

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This interest was quickly followed by further requests from across the city and gradually a network of PEPEs was established, each owned and supported missionally by the local church, but enjoying educator training and support from Georgie who continued to be based in Jardim Olinda. It was largely as a result of the access to favela life and mission provided by this network that we found ourselves in challenging and

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<sup>98</sup> See Georgina Christine, 'First PEPE class list', unpublished document September 15, 1992, and 'Class attendance register for Jardim Olinda PEPE,' unpublished document, October 20, 1992.



creative contact throughout the ensuing seventeen years with that unseen population of poverty, the children of favelas.

### **Conclusion**

It was in 2000, eight years after the launch of the programme, during the production of a script for a video promoting PEPE, that I coined the statement, 'in a deprived community the doorway to the Kingdom of God has the shape of a child'.<sup>99</sup> However, from the outset of our experience in Jardim Olinda, the impact of encounters with the children that we found unexpectedly set at the centre of our response to follow Jesus in ministering to 'the little-ones' of society, proved to be catalytic for the development of the exegetical and theological reflection that is the focus of this thesis.

We returned to the UK in 2009, to continue my then role as Team Leader for Latin America for BMS World Mission, based at the headquarters in Didcot, finally ending our time with the BMS in 2012 when we moved to Manchester, beginning the present research project in January 2013.

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<sup>99</sup> See, Stuart Christine. '*Uma Porta Se Abre Para Fernanda*' [A door opens for Fernanda]. Unpublished video, 7:36. São Paulo, Brazil, 2000.

## THE CHILD IN THE FAVELA: THE SOCIOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The intention of this section is to set key child-reception experiences in the context of the development of favelas as communities of social deprivation within the metropolitan area of São Paulo in the early 1990s.

This socio-economic phenomenon, that in less than two decades changed the face of São Paulo and continues to do so in mega-cities across the world, represents a 'staggering ocean of poverty',<sup>100</sup> and particularly impacts the life-experience of the children engulfed by it.

Throughout the construction of this contextual framework, I will pay particular attention to data and insights that illuminate those particular axes of interest or, to use Freire's terminology, 'generative themes', that will form the loci of the subsequent dialogue between experience and text.<sup>101</sup> By means of this limited, but focused, induction to the favela world of the children I met, and through whom I met again the Lord who placed a child before his would-be missionary disciples, my intention is to facilitate an engagement with the experience-narratives that follow, that is both critical and empathetic.

### A Discussion of the Principal Literary Sources

It is important to recognize that even within a given country, the experiences of deprivation in poor communities will be affected by differences in local history, culture, climate and topography. The social dynamics and development of favelas in

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<sup>100</sup> Misha Glenny, *Nemesis: One Man and the Battle for Rio* (London: The Bodley Head, 2015), 251.

<sup>101</sup> Reflect-Action: *Generative themes*. 'Participants explore generative themes which are of interest to them. A generative theme is a cultural or political topic of great concern or importance to participants, from which discussion can be generated. These generative themes are then represented in the form of "codifications" (either represented by a word or short phrase or a visual representation, picture or photograph). Participants are able to step back from these visual representations of their ideas or history and decode or explore them critically by regarding them objectively rather than simply experiencing them. This makes it possible for the participants to intervene and initiate change in society', accessed September 2015, <http://www.reflect-action.org/esol/freire>.

the metropolitan area of São Paulo, that are the focus of the present study, differ in significant particularities from those characterizing favelas in, for example, Rio de Janeiro or Recife. However, Janice Perlman recognizes a legitimate comparability between the experiences of favela-life in different cities:

While each city and each squatter settlement has its own individual historical, cultural, and political/economic specificity, the challenges confronted are sufficiently similar for the findings presented here to provoke a rethinking of informal settlements.<sup>102</sup>

Since the more extensive literature, especially in English, relates to favelas in Rio de Janeiro, reference to these sources has been limited and when made, particular care has been taken to ensure that such commentaries are transferable to the São Paulo context.

The following contemporary São Paulo-focused documentary sources are drawn upon as they directly contribute to elucidating my working context:

**Teresa Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation and Citizenship in São Paulo*.<sup>103</sup>**

Caldeira works as a Brazilian academic who divides her life between New York and her home city of São Paulo. In her introduction, aptly entitled 'Anthropology with an accent', she writes,

My thinking about violence, urban life and spatial segregation is marked by my experience as a resident of these cities and especially by the struggles and tensions provoked by the confluence of these different experiences and the knowledge they generate...Displacement is at the heart of this book, both as lived experience and as epistemological and critical device.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Janice Perlman, *Favela: Four Decades of Living on the Edge in Rio de Janeiro* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), Kindle Edition, 761.

<sup>103</sup> Teresa Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation and Citizenship in São Paulo* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California, 2000).

<sup>104</sup> Caldeira, *City of Walls*, 5.

Even though her study is conducted from the perspective of those who feel threatened by the growth and invasive influence of socially deprived populations,<sup>105</sup> her insights highlight the reality of the social marginalization experienced by favela communities and are presented from her commitment to the epistemological value of experiential reflection which underpins my own study.

**Suzana Taschner and Lucia Bógus, 'São Paulo, o Caleidoscópio Urbano' [São Paulo, the Urban Kaleidoscope].<sup>106</sup>**

Taschner and Bógus, professors in São Paulo's two most distinguished universities, the University of São Paulo and the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, evaluate São Paulo as a prime example of spatial social segregation. The article is a particularly helpful source as the authors have a solid grounding in the study of favela communities within the urban framework,<sup>107</sup> and have full access to the statistical archives of the SEADE Foundation during the time frame of the events recounted. As such their study complements the presentation of demographic data provided by the Atlas of Social Exclusion which draws upon the National Census data from 2000 and also the current edition of the Atlas that evaluates the deprivational trends within Brazilian metropolitan areas in terms of a newly defined, 'Index of Vulnerability'.<sup>108</sup>

**Eduardo Marques, *Opportunities and Deprivations in the Urban South: Poverty, Segregation and Social Networks in São Paulo*.<sup>109</sup>**

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<sup>105</sup> On page 213 she observes that roads become 'nervously shared' spaces and that there is by the middle and upper economic classes an 'abandoning the streets to the poor, the marginalized and the homeless'.

<sup>106</sup> Suzana Taschner and Lucia Bógus. 'São Paulo, o Caleidoscópio Urbano', *São Paulo Perspectiva*, SEADE 15, no. 1 (2001): 31–44.

<sup>107</sup> See Suzana Taschner, 'Squatter Settlements and Slums in Brazil: Twenty years of Research and Policy' in *Housing the Urban Poor* edited by Brian C. Aldrich, Ranvinder S. Sandhu, (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1995), 171-185.

<sup>108</sup> André Campos et. al., *Atlas da Exclusão Social no Brasil*. Vol. 2 (São Paulo, Brazil: Cortez Editora, 2004), and Fundação Sistema Estadual de Análise de Dados (SEADE), 'Atlas da Vulnerabilidade Social nas Regiões Metropolitanas Brasileiras,' IPEA–Instituto de Pesquisa de Economia Aplicada [Institute of Applied Economics], 2015, accessed June 2016. [http://ivs.ipea.gov.br/ivs/data/rawData/publicacao\\_atlas\\_ivs\\_rm.pdf](http://ivs.ipea.gov.br/ivs/data/rawData/publicacao_atlas_ivs_rm.pdf).

<sup>109</sup> Eduardo Marques, *Opportunities and Deprivations in the Urban South: Poverty, Segregation and Social Networks in São Paulo*. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

This book identifies sociability as being central to the understanding of urban poverty conditions. The author argues that social studies up to the present have either been too 'holistic', seeing the main drivers and explanatory factors for Latin American Urban poverty in macro-economic terms, or too 'atomistic', attributing causes and solutions to individuals' attitudes and possibilities. He seeks to find a middle way between macro-and micro-sociological approaches, advocating an approach that recognizes the significant role that relationships play in the experience of deprivation.<sup>110</sup> Although his specific research is conducted in the mid-2000s, some ten years later than the time frame of the events I will discuss, some of the locations of the research are actually favelas that figure in my own accounts. In particular, Marques clarifies a perspective that is pertinent to my study, since when assessing the life-experiences of children, it is important to recognize that their worlds are defined essentially by the *relationships* they experience within the extended family and local community of adults who are responding to the external conditions of their marginalization within society.

Published sources that speak directly to the drama of a child's experience of favela deprivation in São Paulo are, as might be expected, less common. However, I will draw upon three, of diverse genres: a journal, an ethnographic study and a non-linear literary composition comprised of seventy fragmentary 'snapshots' of life in São Paulo on May 9 2000.

**Ute Craemer, *Favela Children*. 2013.<sup>111</sup>**

This is a German mission worker's journal, narrating the experience in the early 1980s of working with the children of the favela community of Monte Azul, only a couple of kilometres from the main location of our own work in Jardim Olinda, and which I

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<sup>110</sup> 'Although I agree with the importance afforded to economic conditions and the labor market, as well as that given to the existence of attributes, credentials and individual behaviors, I nevertheless believe that societal mid-level elements associated with the relational patterns within which individuals are embedded have great importance in the understanding of poverty...' Marquez, *Opportunities and Deprivations*, 2.

<sup>111</sup> Craemer, Ute. *Favela Children*. Kindle Edition. SouthernCrossReview.org ebook, 2013.

visited in the early days of ministry there. Craemer's journal entries both replicate and complement the observations, sentiments and reflections that make up my own experiences and recollections, adding additional nuance and depth to the social background being presented.

**Gabriel de Santos Feltran, 'Trabalhadores e Bandidos na mesma Família' [Workers and Bandits in the same Family].<sup>112</sup>**

Feltran presents an ethnographical study based upon the story of Ivete, a twenty-nine-year-old single mother, and her coming to São Paulo from the city of Salvador in 1987. Although the favela in which she finds refuge, Sapopemba, is situated to the east of the city rather than in the southern periphery that encompasses most of the locations I will focus on, it is not far from the communities of Tiquatira and Heliópolis that are the scenes of some of the events I will recall. The drama of this family, in which some siblings become involved in criminal activities whilst others do not, is typical of the experience lived out by many extended family groups in favelas across São Paulo, and played out precisely during the focus of my enquiry in the early 1990s.

**Luiz Ruffato, *eles eram muitos cavalos* [there were many horses]<sup>113</sup>**

This work is *sui generis* amongst the literary sources that will inform this study, and it is regrettable that it must of necessity be accessed through the partial translation I provide. It is an award-winning work that has established the author as a perceptive and powerful social critic.<sup>114</sup> In the treatment of his subject matter, though not his chosen literary form, Ruffato's work echoes that of Paulo Lins' internationally acclaimed representation of the birth of the City of God favela in Rio de Janeiro, excerpts from which I shall also be citing.<sup>115</sup> These works in particular contribute to the

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<sup>112</sup> Gabriel de Santos Feltran, "Trabalhadores e Bandidos na mesma Família," in eds. Robert Cabanes et.al. *Saídas de emergência : ganhar / perder a vida na periferia de São Paulo*, chapter 19. (São Paulo, Brazil: Boitempo, 2011).

<sup>113</sup> Ruffato, Luiz. *eles eram muitos cavalos*. (São Paulo, Brazil: Boitempo, 2001).

<sup>114</sup> The work won the 2001 APCA Trophy awarded by the São Paulo Association of Art Critics, and the prestigious Machado Assis Prize from the National Library Foundation. In 2016 Ruffato won the International Herman Hesse Prize for Literature.

<sup>115</sup> Lins, *Cidade de Deus*.

potential for empathetic impact that the presentation of social context aims to provide.

In addition to these sources and to occasional references to Brazilian magazine and newspaper articles from the period, I will also cite extracts from contemporary papers and project proposals written by myself, and in particular from a two volume collection of missiological essays published in 1995, to which I contributed the chapter, 'Entrando nas Favelas com Jesus' [Entering Favelas with Jesus], that casts light upon what I judged, after three years of experience in favelas, to be characteristics of favela life that were of particular missiological significance.<sup>116</sup>

Photographic records from the time will also be introduced. Paulo Freire,<sup>117</sup> insists that the particular life-experiences of a deprived community can legitimately be expressed in 'coded' photographic form. In the appendix to his seminal work, *Educação como Prática da Liberdade*, [Education as the Practice of Liberty],<sup>118</sup> he makes reference to his use of photographs in his 'Culture Circles': group sessions aiming at conscientization, specifically to aid the discussion around issues such as housing, food, clothing, health and education. and the rationale for their use is two-fold. I have drawn upon selected photographic records here therefore since in the first instance, they provide records of particular circumstances directly related to the locality, context and time of the experiences being referred to, and do so in such a way as to not only proffer visual information but also to add 'aesthetic depth', supplementing the word pictures being painted. With this aim in view, I have attempted to 'exegete' the photograph of what proved to be a significant early encounter with children in Jardim Olinda, in order to elucidate certain aspects of favela living that impacted their life experience.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Stuart Christine, "Entering the Favelas with Jesus", edited by J. Scott Horrell *Ultrapassando Barreiras* [Overcoming Obstacles]. Vol. 2 (São Paulo, Brazil: Vida Nova, 1995), 153–70.

<sup>117</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 76-77.

<sup>118</sup> *Educação como Prática da Liberdade* [Education as the Practice of Liberty], (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Paz e Terra Ltda, 1967), 144.

<sup>119</sup> For arguments in support of the validity of art in the hermeneutical processes at work within reception history, or *Wirkungsgeschichte*, see Jonathan Roberts and Christopher

However, beyond their potential for communicating the context of the child-reception events to be discussed, photographs have also played a role in forming my own context as researcher, since down the years they have served as a catalyst to the reporting and missiological reflection that has been a requirement of my responsibility to communicate the impact of our missionary work to our sponsoring mission agency and churches. The historical trajectory of their use also speaks to the significant question of provenance, as it relates to the legitimacy of my evoking them as ‘trustworthy’ sources to inform this study.<sup>120</sup> As such, the photographs presented can also be understood to function both passively and actively as sociological and autoethnographical source elements.

### **A Sociological Perspective on São Paulo Favelas in the Early 1990s**

#### **Favelas: Introducing the Phenomenon** <sup>121</sup>

In 1994, two years after our arrival in the city in response to an invitation to join the Department of Mission of FTBSP, I wrote the following in the introduction to a proposal for a joint Baptist church mission initiative in the largest of the city’s favelas, Heliópolis:<sup>122</sup>

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Rowland, ‘Introduction,’ JSNT 33 (2010): 132: ‘*Wirkungsgeschichte* acknowledges literature, art, music and actualizations of the text as modes of exegesis just as important as the conventional explanatory writings of Judaism and Christian theology’.

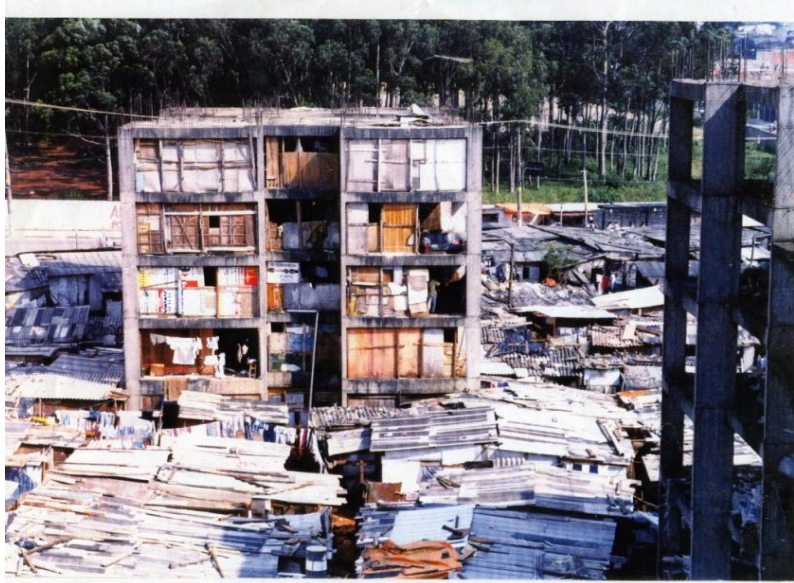
<sup>120</sup> See Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, 197, where she recognizes the ‘potentially immense’ range of sources that might inform the ethnographic pursuit, including sources as varied as governmental documents, mass media and personal writings, radio and TV broadcasts as well as family photograph albums and video recordings.

<sup>121</sup> For a history of the origin of the term ‘favela’ see the opening chapter of Glenny, *Nemesis*. For a review of the phenomenon in a global context see Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York: Verso Books, 2006) and UN-Habitat, *The Challenge of the Slums*, 2003.

<sup>122</sup> ‘Projeto Heliópolis–Pacto de Cooperação Missionário,’ Unpublished document, 1994. For an informative visual presentation of the favela as it had become, in 2010, see the video produced by the Prefeitura Municipal de São Paulo. *Urbanização de Favelas: Heliópolis*. São Paulo.



The favela of Heliópolis is the largest of the more than 700 favelas in the municipal area of São Paulo.<sup>123</sup> In the same way that the number of favelas continues to grow in the municipal area in general — 28% in the years '87–'92, so also the population of Heliópolis, already with more than 80,000 inhabitants, continues to expand with fresh 'invasions'.<sup>124</sup> Even though parts of the favela are now in an advanced state of urbanization, the community in general continues to be characterized by chronic and crushing poverty: a city of need in the midst of the most vibrant city of Latin America.



A corner of the Heliópolis favela, 1993–4.

### Favelas: Defining the Phenomenon

When comparing statistical data relating to favelas it is important to recognize the different definitions of the phenomenon that are typically made use of in the analysis

<sup>123</sup> The municipality or 'municipal area' refers specifically to the area administered directly by the city authorities. The metropolitan area, or 'Greater São Paulo', is perhaps the most appropriate measure of the city's socio-economic reality, comprising roughly twice that of the municipal area, a distinction that needs to be remembered when dealing with statistical references.

<sup>124</sup> 'Invasion' is a term commonly employed to describe the sometimes organized, mass occupancy of unutilized land areas to form new, or extend existing, favela communities.

of data sources.<sup>125</sup> These are helpfully reviewed in ‘Urban Slum Reports: The case of São Paulo’:

There is an official municipal definition in effect until now (2003), which dates from 1972 (HABI 1, 2000: 27): ‘Favelas are agglomerations of dwellings with reduced dimensions, built with inadequate materials (old wood, tin, cans and even cardboard) distributed irregularly in plots almost always lacking urban and social services and equipment, forming a complex social, economic, sanitary, educational and urban order.’ It was agreed upon that agglomerations with up to ten domiciles would be denominated ‘nuclei’. The municipal census of favelas in 1987 and the FIPE study of 1993 used the same definition. The IBGE, for its part, considers favela to be a ‘substandard agglomeration’, which is ‘a group made up of over fifty housing units located on plots belonging to others (public or private), with disorderly and dense occupation, in general lacking essential public services’.<sup>126</sup>

Other research institutes such as SEADE and DIEESE also have as a determining factor in the definition of favela, more than the type of construction, the characterisation of irregular and disorderly occupation of land, without land ownership or deeds at the time of installation. However, for the purposes of gaining a sense of the environmental conditions typical of most favela communities, the more general reference made by Taschner that in 1990, a quarter of favelas in São Paulo were located in areas that were dangerously eroded, and the remainder upon steep embankments and by the margins of watercourses subject to erosion and flooding, is helpful.<sup>128</sup> In as much as such areas of land were likely to be found more distant from the highly developed city centre, it is easy to comprehend her findings, in the later 2000 study, that urban

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<sup>125</sup> Acronyms for data collection entities typically cited in social studies: FIPE (Fundação Instituto de Pesquisas Econômicas), IBGE (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística), SEADE (Sistema Estadual de Análise de Dados), DIEESE (Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Socio-econômicos), SEMPLA (Secretaria de Planejamento, Orçamento e Gestão), HABI (Superintendência de Habitação Popular da SEHAB (division of the Urban and Housing Development Department of the City of São Paulo), IPEA (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada).

<sup>126</sup> Mariana Fix, Pedro Arantes and Giselle Tanaka, ‘The Case of São Paulo, Brazil’, in UN-Habitat, *The Challenge of the Slums*, 2003.

<sup>128</sup> Taschner, ‘Squatter Settlements and Slums’, 218. Due to the hilly topography of Rio, the spatial segregation between the favela and regular housing areas was enshrined in local parlance in the statement that all ‘cariocas’, Rio residents, live either ‘no morro’ or ‘no asfalto’ — on the hill or on the asphalt.

favelas spread and grew principally on the periphery of the municipality.<sup>130</sup> On the peripheries of the south-west and west of São Paulo, which include the communities that are the locus of most of the events to be recounted, the growth of favela population was particularly marked at this time, rising from 233,429 in 1987 to 482,304 by 1993, despite a slowing in the growth rate of the city.<sup>131</sup> For the metropolitan area as a whole, the favela population, comprised mainly of migrants from the economically depressed regions of the north-east and centre of the country, grew from around 1% in 1973 to almost 20% of the total by 1992.<sup>132</sup>

Writing in the principal daily paper of the city, the *Folha de São Paulo*, in February 2003, the Government Secretary for Housing, Paulo Teixeira, characterized the explosive growth of favelas during the 1990s follows: 'It is as if one new favela had been created in the Capital of São Paulo state, every eight days from 1991 to 2000', totalling a population of 1.16 million living in 2018 favelas. He concluded, 'The favela is the face of poverty in the 1990s'.<sup>133</sup>

### **The Dimensions of Deprivation: Measuring the Miseries of Marginalization**

In the governmental analysis of the results of the decadal National IBGE Census figures for the period 1990–2000, the multi-dimensional nature of socio-economic poverty was recognized in the adoption of a poverty indicator termed 'the Index of Social Exclusion' (IEx).<sup>134</sup> This indicator included elements reflecting economic well-being, educational attainment and exposure to violent behaviour. In its recognition of the social significance of exposure to criminality and communal violence, this index represented a refinement of the Human Development Index (HDI), then widely in use

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<sup>130</sup> Taschner and Bógus, *Caleidoscópio*, 34. For mapping of socio-economic indicators of the population of the metropolitan area during the period, see 'Atlas da Vulnerabilidade Social nas Regiões Metropolitanas Brasileiras', Instituto de Pesquisa de Economia Aplicada, 215ff. Accessed February 16, 2016.

[http://ivs.ipea.gov.br/ivs/data/rawData/publicacao\\_atlas\\_ivs\\_rm.pdf](http://ivs.ipea.gov.br/ivs/data/rawData/publicacao_atlas_ivs_rm.pdf).

<sup>131</sup> Census data from SEMPLA, 1995, cited by Caldeira, *Walls*, 232.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>133</sup> *Folha de São Paulo*, 12 de Fevereiro de 2003. See also Edney Cielici Dias, 'Desigualdade', *Cotidiano*, in *Folha de São Paulo*, February 23, 2003.

<sup>134</sup> André Campos et. al., *Atlas da Exclusão Social no Brasil*. Vol. 2 (São Paulo, Brazil: Cortez Editora, 2004). The detailed rationale for the composition of this indicator is given in 15–26.

to assess the relative development potential of national groups. Notwithstanding critique on the grounds that the IEx largely focused upon the definition of poverty/social deprivation in terms of the negative impacts of external factors upon individuals,<sup>136</sup> the same approach has been retained in the analyses produced in the 2015 edition of the *Atlas da Vulnerabilidade Social nas Regiões Metropolitanas Brasileiras*,<sup>137</sup> albeit modified through a more nuanced system of weighting of the component elements to produce what is termed an 'Index of Social Vulnerability' (IVS).

The construction of these indices of social deprivation is predicated upon the collectability, by national census, of data that are considered to significantly inform key social indicators of well-being, specifically financial insufficiency, housing inadequacy, criminality-insecurity and educational deficiency. Through a weighting of all of what are identified as measurable contributory factors in each area, the composite IVS index is calculated.

Whilst this approach recognizes the contributory nature of different elements of social disadvantage, it fails to quantify the compounding and disproportionate effect that multiple poverty factors can have upon the experience of deprivation, particularly in relation to social disempowerment and the engendering of a sense of hopelessness. The significance of this analytical weakness is highlighted by the present study which considers the impact of the multi-faceted poverty typical of the favela communities, where these are segregated into the peripheral rings of the city, as the only financially

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<sup>136</sup> An alternative approach was well articulated by Eduardo Nunes in an unpublished paper prepared for discussion within the Department of Development Support of World Vision, 2003 entitled, 'A Mensuração e Caracterização da Pobreza no Brasil' [The Measurement and Characterization of Poverty in Brazil]. In it he advocates an emphasis upon what are described as 'ativos', social elements that enable an individual to overcome the effects of external disadvantage, identified under three headings: Physical Capital, Human Capital and Social Capital.

<sup>137</sup> Fundação Sistema Estadual de Análise de Dados (SEADE), '*Atlas da Vulnerabilidade Social nas Regiões Metropolitanas Brasileiras*,' Instituto de Pesquisa de Economia Aplicada, 2015, accessed February 16 2016.  
[http://ivs.ipea.gov.br/ivs/data/rawData/publicacao\\_atlas\\_ivs\\_rm.pdf](http://ivs.ipea.gov.br/ivs/data/rawData/publicacao_atlas_ivs_rm.pdf). esp. 8–14.

viable habitational option for poorly educated and under-skilled migrants already liable to discrimination due to their predominantly Afro-indigenous descent.<sup>138</sup>

The limitations of all such census-based analyses, especially when used to identify the conditions and experiences of social deprivation within relatively small communities, must therefore be recognized. With few exceptions, and in distinction from the more extensive and geographically proscribed favela complexes of Rio de Janeiro, the favela communities that form the social worlds in which the recounted events took place were relatively small compared to the population areas from which the social data was compounded.<sup>139</sup>

In the cases of those favelas, such as Jardim Olinda, situated in peripheral areas of the city areas already identified in census data as relatively deprived, it can be readily understood that the favela community within such an area represented an even more deprived enclave.<sup>140</sup> In certain cases, however, such as the favelas of Vila Andrade and of Vila Clementino, which grew up upon pockets of 'waste land' within relatively well developed and prosperous neighbourhoods, the analyses of the census zones offers no indication of the desperate social conditions in their midst.<sup>141</sup> The failure of census data to adequately describe conditions in all communities throughout a census zone is further exacerbated in regard to the experience of different subgroups within a favela

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<sup>138</sup> Taschner and Bógus, *Caleidoscópio*, 35, details this trend, citing that in 1991, the percentage of non-white heads of households in the peripheral areas of the city was 41.38% compared to only 29.54% in the more prosperous and urbanized central and intermediate habitational 'rings', whilst in favelas themselves this figure rose to 53%.

<sup>139</sup> Of the favela communities discussed in more detail in this study, only Heliópolis and Paraisópolis, with 1990s populations measured in the tens of thousands, might be 'identifiable' within the administrative zonings employed in the IBGE Census data.

<sup>140</sup> E.g. in the 2000 Census, the immediate census zone within which Jardim Olinda is set is rated twenty-fifth of the ninety-five municipal areas of the city in terms of the Index of Exclusion (the lower placement indicating the more socially deprived), whilst adjacent areas are rated as third and sixteenth, pointing to the accentuated levels of social disadvantage of the area of São Paulo that forms the social context of the favela.

<sup>141</sup> The juxtaposition of wealth and poverty within the city is attested by Taschner and Bógus, *Caleidoscópio*, 32: 'regions with complete public infrastructure live alongside areas lacking basic services; the highest salaries are found over against an immense mass of those unemployed and under qualified; luxurious apartment buildings side by side with favelas...'

community, such as women or children, or those with physical or mental conditions that compound their social and educational disadvantage.<sup>142</sup>

Perhaps an even more significant and generalized limitation of the statistical analyses available is their inability to measure the impacts of relational poverty upon the experience of deprivation.<sup>143</sup> At all levels, from the exclusion from social networks that facilitate employment and upwards social mobility for young adults, to the impact of dysfunctional family relationships upon the psycho-social development of children,<sup>144</sup> the negative impact of relational deprivations is a significant dynamic. It is one that will be addressed in the dialogue between favela-focused experiences with children and the child-reception event presented in Luke's gospel.

### **Bringing Favelas to Life: 'And the statistics became flesh and dwelt among us'**

To begin to build a picture of the socio-cultural dynamic of these burgeoning favela communities that will give depth to the definitions and statistics of governmental sources, it may be helpful to quote at length from Paulo Lins, who paints an emotionally impactful word picture of the birthing and developing of a favela community in Rio de Janeiro in his book, made into an Oscar-contending film, 'City of God'.

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<sup>142</sup> Notice the recognition of the differing impacts of poverty in the observation by the Executive Director of Habitat in her preface to the UN-Habitat, *The Challenge of the Slums*, vi: 'Slum women, and the children they support, are the greatest victims of all'.

<sup>143</sup> See Marques, *Opportunities and Deprivations in the Urban South*, 13, where he outlines his understanding of poverty in relation to personal social networks and location of residence. 'I take poverty to be a multidimensional phenomenon produced by a range of social processes linked to the participation of individuals in social and economic processes through their life trajectories. In these trajectories, they access opportunity structures depending on attributes and qualifications, but also construct strategies, practices and events in the context of their everyday sociability. Access to these structures is mediated, among other things, by the location of individuals in urban space and by the social networks in which they are included, through the operation of specific but diverse and interconnected social mechanisms. Consequently, their social situation is influenced by their social networks and the degree of segregation of their place of residence'.

<sup>144</sup> See Pamela Couture's exceptional book, *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 14: 'Children's poverty is conditioned by two overlapping categories of poverty—material poverty and the poverty of tenuous connections'.

The new people brought rubbish, tin cans, mongrels, spirit guides and rituals, fight-days, paybacks for past offences, leftover anger in shoot outs, nights to sit by corpses, flood salvaged furniture, shop front bars, street markets on Wednesdays and Sundays, old worms in infants' bellies, revolvers, black magic charms hung round necks, street corners with voodoo chicken sacrifices, samba syncopated songs, gambling rings, hunger, betrayal, deaths, jesus christs on broken chains, hot dance music to be danced, oil lamps to light the saints, men on the run, poverty wanting to be made rich, eyes that never see, never tell, never eyes and heart to face life, cheat death, revive anger, bloody destiny, make war and get tattooed.<sup>146</sup>

Upon our arrival in the favela of Jardim Olinda, São Paulo, in January 1992, one of the first homes that I visited was that of the family of the young lad, André, who had first shown me around the favela. The following extract from an article that I produced for the BMS magazine in July of that year well illustrates the personal dramas that lie within the material fabric of favelas:

The shack measured about twenty feet by eight feet, has no windows, only a door at the front and rear and is situated at the top of a steep slope. Below, lie row upon row of other dwellings reaching right down to the valley bottom. André's father, José Pacheco, who worked as a guard in a luxury apartment block in the centre of the city, told me about his situation and how he came to live in the favela. 'Only about five people live in each of those apartments. They are about forty times larger than our home. Fourteen people normally live here, although there are only ten at present'. One evening in March there was a violent thunderstorm which turned the stream at the bottom of the valley into a raging torrent of mud and debris. An old woman who lived at the bottom of the favela and two men who lived at the top were swept away into the flood and drowned. 'Our house was hit with hail stones and I thought I was going to die' said the seventy-eight-year-old grandmother who lives in José's house.

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<sup>146</sup> Lins, *Cidade de Deus*, 16. The references to 'samba syncopated songs' and 'hot dance music to be danced' point to a motif that has been recognized by many commentators as a metaphor incorporating something of the dialectic between struggle and the celebration of life, between repression and resilience that characterize favela life, e.g. Michael Barke, Gregg O'Hare, and Tony Escasany, 'Samba: A Metaphor for Rio's Favelas,' *Cities* 18, no. 4 (2001): 259–70: 'Poverty, black identity and spatial separateness from the "mainstream" were essential contributors to the birth of the favelas and the samba'. Also, Graham Sparkes, 'Marc Chagall: Playing with Fire,' in *God and the Art of Seeing* (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2003), 73, who cites the example of Carnival, a cultural expression so central to Brazilian life, especially favela life: 'If we picture a carnival we will think immediately of music, laughter, dance and colour all brought together in playful celebration, but we are also aware of how threatening that act of play might appear, particularly to those in authority. It treads a fine line between being a procession and a march, a joyous gathering and a dangerous riot...there is always an unspoken statement of resistance and rebellion'.

José lived in Paraná state...they have been in São Paulo for eight years. 'I came to get a better job, to find an education for the children, to make a better life for the family but things haven't worked out...' <sup>147</sup>

The material and financial instability born of poverty that makes favela-living a family's only viable habitational option, also feeds an emotional instability that permeates community life as a whole. Vonnie McLoyd and Leon Wilson emphasise the compounded effects of personal poverty and their infectious influence upon the quality of community life:

Individuals who are poor, for example, are confronted with an unremitting succession of negative life events (eviction, physical illness, criminal assault) in the context of chronically stressful, ongoing life conditions such as inadequate housing and dangerous neighbourhoods, which together, markedly increase the exigencies of day-to-day existence. Because of limited financial resources, negative life events often precipitate additional crises so that stressors are highly contagious.<sup>148</sup>

However, whilst recognizing the personal suffering and communal tension that might be described as the 'warp' of favela life, Janice Perlman, at the conclusion to the preface to her reflections on forty years living with Rio favela communities, insists also on affirming a 'weft' comprised of brighter threads of experience born of resilience, and an insistence upon a commitment to life and living:

Favela is life, favela is love. Favela is freedom, friendship and feijoada.<sup>149</sup> Favela is people persevering. It is laughter and tears, life and death, only a hair's breadth apart. It is a place where the unexpected is expected and spontaneity is the norm. It is not all pain, poverty and passivity, it is people living their lives amid a civil war... <sup>150</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Christine, *Brazil: Evangelism and the Poor*, 3.

<sup>148</sup> Vonnie McLoyd and Leon Wilson. 'Maternal Behaviour, Social Support, and Economic Conditions as Predictors of Distress in Children.' In *Economic Stress: Effects on Family Life and Child Development*. New Directions for Child Development, edited by Vonnie McLoyd and Constance Flanagan, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1990), 62.

For a more recent discussion from the standpoint of a theological engagement with poverty, see Joerg Rieger, 'Liberative Theologies of Poverty and Class,' in *Introducing Liberative Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), esp. 149, 152–168.

<sup>149</sup> Feijoada is a traditional Brazilian stew of Portuguese origin, using beans with beef and pork.

<sup>150</sup> Perlman, *Four Decades*, 319. Similarly, in 1987, Ute Craemer, writing from the favela of Monte Azul, 'just down the road' from our base in Jardim Olinda, chronicled the impact upon



### Poverty becomes Marginalization: Societal Reaction to the Growth of Favelas

The former President of Brazil, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, wrote in his preface to Janice Perlman's book:

The common view, fed by the media portrayal of the favelas and their residents, is based on a long list of shortcomings: violence, poverty, unemployment, drug addiction, corruption, early pregnancy, disrupted families, and inadequate public services. This view seems compelling and yet it is deeply flawed. Needs and deficiencies are real but are not the whole reality. The people in the favelas have problems but they are not 'the problem'.<sup>151</sup>

I found this 'common view' precisely echoed in an experience in 1994 in the third of the favelas with which we became involved, Divinéia, in the suburb of Brooklin. A magazine insert in the principal national newspaper, *O Estado de São Paulo*, ran an article investigating local residents' reactions to their immediate neighbourhood, and one such specifically focused on Brooklin.<sup>152</sup> When asked what problems the local population could identify, a significant proportion answered, 'the favela', referring to the three small favelas located on the banks of a stream-turned-open-sewer forming one boundary of the neighbourhood, one of which was Divinéia. A second was perversely named 'Boca do Inferno', 'the Mouth of Hell': as a resident of the favela, you were perceived as a problem not a person.<sup>153</sup>

The perception of the favela populations as a threat, by more established and prosperous social groups, fuelled a sense of insecurity that was manifested in an

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small children of witnessing the desecration of the body of a murdered homosexual, reflected upon this 'emotional roller-coaster' characteristic of favela life, and observed, 'They are continuously going back and forth between horror and the sublime'. Craemer, *Favela Children*, loc.3594.

<sup>151</sup> Fernando Henrique Cardoso, preface to *Favela: Four Decades of Living on the Edge in Rio de Janeiro*, by Janice Perlman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 89.

<sup>152</sup> 'Seu Bairro Brooklin' [Your Neighbourhood, Brooklin], *Encarte Z3 do Jornal-Estado de São Paulo*, April 5, 1994.

<sup>153</sup> See also Perlman, *Four Decades*, 205–16: 'The favelas, as they grew, were seen as a blight on the urban landscape, a menace to public health, and a threat to urban civility. The incoming migrants, and even those born in favelas, were seen as dangerous intruders. The migrants, rather than being the "dregs of the barrel" — the most impoverished among the rural people, were more often the "cream of the crop" — the most farsighted, capable, and courageous members of their communities'.

explosion in the growth of the security industry offering everything from electronic and physical security systems to armed guards in every neighbourhood of the city.<sup>154</sup> Security checks and surveillance on condominiums, shopping centres, banks and public buildings, primarily directed towards the poor, conveyed an unremitting sense of social segregation against those housed in favelas.

The exclusion, suspicion and discrimination experienced by adult favela dwellers outside their communities impacts their family life, engendering a loss of self-worth and frustration that typically erodes aspirations and contributes towards a general lack of hopefulness in regard to the possibility of change.

### **A Sense of Spiritual Abandonment: 'jesus christs on broken chains'**

Paulo Lins' evocative characterization of favela life and culture, cited above, makes two telling references to the quality and content of spiritual experience. Whilst Jesus Christ has lost his capitalized unique status, he is still present within a community spirituality that includes 'black magic charms hung round necks, street corners with voodoo chicken sacrifices' — a spirituality nurtured in slavery and 'at home' in the new experience of societal marginalization and oppression of the favela. In the City of God,<sup>155</sup> the 'broken chain' no longer holds Jesus Christ close to the heart, the black magic charm offers a spirituality more immediate and immanent — more in synchrony and harmony with the harsh 'here-and-now' of favela living.

The Theology of Liberation movement is an articulate and well-documented testament to the struggle, born within the Roman Catholic tradition, to regain the spiritual space in the hearts of the poor of Latin America that had been lost to centuries of ecclesiastical identification with the politically powerful, a position largely emulated by

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<sup>154</sup> Eliana Simonetti, 'Favelões Urbanos' [Mega-Slums], *Veja*, July 28, 1999: 70-75. 'São Paulo is the third largest agglomeration on the planet with household incomes twice the national average. The metropolitan region is home to the most important industrial, commercial and financial complexes...It has a fleet of 310 helicopters and more than 6 million registered vehicles...yet people are afraid to go out into the streets because of the violence. The city has more than 900 companies specializing in electronic security, the houses have barred windows and more and more cars are armour plated...'

<sup>155</sup> Lins, *City of God*, 16.

the emerging Protestant and evangelical communities during the years of right-wing dictatorship.<sup>156</sup> Even by the time that we arrived in São Paulo in 1992, many senior Baptist ministers had little or no experience of favelas and had been trained by ministers who themselves had not had to face the challenge of urban poverty on such a scale. They were also children of a generation whose Protestant evangelical theology set them in opposition to a Roman Catholic response to the challenge of social deprivation that was either underpinned by an emphasis upon the soteriological efficacy of charitable works or expressed through the ‘revolutionary’, left-wing thinking of the largely Catholic-driven liberation theology movement. It is perhaps not surprising, though lamentable, that with such a background of theological suspicion and fearful uncertainty about involvement with the emerging favela communities whose lifestyle was so at variance with the inherited colonialist values of Southern Baptist ecclesiology, that many Brazilian Baptist leaders, mentored within this culture, preferred to either ignore the challenge of the urban poor in favour of other legitimate mission concerns,<sup>157</sup> or to express compassionate concern through arms’ length social assistance projects.

In a paper that I presented to the first Viva-Network ‘Children at Risk’ Conference in 2001, I made the following evaluation of the prevailing attitude amongst Baptist churches in São Paulo:

Typically, evangelical churches experience difficulty in projecting the Kingdom into deprived urban communities. Reasons for this include: Fear of the endemic violence in these communities, social prejudice, lack of experience by denominational leaders, theological concerns about the validity of social action by evangelicals, and uncertainty as to what to do, faced with such a great variety of social need.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> An authoritarian right-wing military dictatorship ruled Brazil from April 1, 1964 to March 15, 1985.

<sup>157</sup> See, for a similar view from experience in the slums of Bangkok, Ash Barker, *Slum Life Rising: How to Enflesh Hope within a New Urban World* (Victoria, Australia: UNOH Publishing, 2012), 121: ‘The rise of urban slums challenges Christian fidelity...it is possible to follow Jesus into transformative, faithful actions in slums, but it is also possible to reject or ignore this invitation. These kinds of themes around fidelity and infidelity...inform decisions to stay and face those violent powers or not’.

<sup>158</sup> Stuart Christine, *PEPE-a Case Study*, Viva Network Conference. Unpublished paper, 2001.

A further reason commonly given for not establishing a church presence in favela communities, often encountered in the 'historical' Protestant denominations, was based upon the technical illegality of favela dwellings. In contrast, the less 'establishment sensitive', and more missionally pragmatic, Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal groups either ignored the 'illegality' or were happy to recognize a nuanced difference between 'illegal' and 'not legalized'.

The irregular marital status of many favela residents, a direct consequence of marital pressures born of poverty, social transiency and lack of access to legal regularization, also presented baptismal and membership difficulties to Baptist congregations whose membership codes were largely modelled upon conservative rural Southern Baptist traditions.<sup>159</sup> No buildings and no members made traditional church planting difficult!

The impact of this 'marginalization of the church' and spiritual disenfranchisement of favela populations was quickly evidenced to us as we began to engage with the community in Jardim Olinda. As I mentioned in the description of our early encounter with favela life,<sup>160</sup> during an attempt to gain insight into what the community's expectations might be in regard to a church presence, I was surveying local residents and approached an older woman introducing myself as representative of a church group. Before even managing to pose a question to her, she vehemently interrupted with the phrase: 'Oh no! Not another church that talks a lot but does nothing.'

Churches were renowned for *words* pronounced from outside and from above the community, rather than *works* making a difference within. Typically, the church was

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See also Stuart Christine, '2001: The Favela Mission Worker's Training Programme,' unpublished document, August 31, 2001, in which, amongst eleven factors underpinning the programme proposal, I cite two directly relating to the lack of denominational leadership vision and experience: 'Factors that determined the nature of the Proposed Programme: The general lack of appreciation of the realities of mission amongst the poor by those in church and denominational leadership; The lack of church experience in integrating the social and evangelistic dimensions of Mission'.

<sup>159</sup> My background within the generally less restrictive constitutional framework of British Baptist churches offered space for a more flexible missional approach.

<sup>160</sup> See General Introduction.

perceived as *talking about*, rather than *living out*, its creed and had little credibility in a context where *concrete* mattered more than *concept*.

A second, and equally telling, indicator of popular perceptions of church was illustrated to me upon the occasion of the first public baptisms that we conducted in the open-air pool we built outside the lean-to church. As people gathered or stopped to stare in curiosity, I noticed a couple of young women observing the preparations over the low concrete wall that divided the 'inside' from the 'outside'. I encouraged them to go through the open gate and take a seat on one of the benches. They declined, and I moved away. As I did so I overheard one saying to her friend: 'It's a church thing, not for people like us'. Just then the heavens opened and there was a torrential downpour, and everyone rushed in to shelter under the lean-to, the young women included. Proceeding with the total immersion baptisms, with everyone pressing forward to get a better view, I saw their two faces eagerly pressing through the crowd. Notwithstanding the striking timeliness of the 'heavenly intervention', it was the women's earlier reticence and sense of exclusion that really struck me as so well expressing the pervading sense that if you were part of a favela community, you didn't really have a place in the church community, or at least in any role other than a spectator.

The explosive growth of independent neo-Pentecostal groups based in favelas, in the years that followed, can be understood as, to some extent, a response to this sense of spiritual abandonment and disenfranchisement. The offer of an individualistic, dualistic world view, in which suffering is demonic, and salvation is by divine intervention, in which status does not depend upon economics or education but upon spiritually discerned gifting, has proved an attractive message, but one that has all too easily lost touch with its ostensibly Christian origins and has left many of the most socially deprived once again possessing only 'jesus christs on broken chains'.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> There is such a large body of literature aimed at evaluating the causes and impacts of the neo-Pentecostal movement in favelas, that it would not be possible to make any detailed reference to the phenomenon in the context of the present study. One recent scholarly analysis with a comprehensive bibliography is Wilma Davies, *The Embattled but Empowered*

## Marginalization and its Impact on Children

Older adolescent siblings are particularly vulnerable to the effects of marginalization. Poor local schooling typical of deprived areas, exacerbated by low educational expectations in the community, together with a lack of the social skills and connections that facilitate employment, can effectively exclude young people brought up in favelas from the traditional pathways out of poverty through education and work opportunities.<sup>162</sup> Glenny has well expressed one significant effect of this vulnerability for boys:

...unemployment, testosterone, acquisitiveness, and absence of father figures, of school, of the state and of a future. In the era of globalization, they are surrounded by images of glamour and material goods. In a favela, there is only one way to access those things — drug money.<sup>163</sup>

The story of André from Jardim Olinda that I mentioned in the previous section, ‘The Researcher in the Favela: André and my “Moses’ moment”’, tragically illustrates how this scenario can destroy futures.

A response more typical of adolescent girls is to seek to gain access to a more exciting life beyond marginalization either by becoming involved with boys caught up in trafficking and crime, or to find fresh status within the community through motherhood. The widely-perceived potential for self-fulfilment in motherhood is recognized by Liza Steele as one of the social drivers in the acceptance — or even approval — that unmarried pregnant teens and adolescent mothers usually encounter in favela communities.<sup>164</sup> An acute sense of being trapped and corresponding desire to

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*Community* (Leidon: Brill, 2010). Another, by a Latin American scholar and from a wider historical-ecumenical perspective is Bullón, *Protestant*.

<sup>162</sup> ‘... poverty, the concentration of young people the lack of opportunities in the city make young people very vulnerable both as victims and as participants in criminal activity.’ Campos, *Atlas da Exclusão Social no Brasil* [Atlas of Social Exclusion], 97.

<sup>163</sup> Glenny, *Nemesis*, 127.

<sup>164</sup> ‘Attitudinal data show that Brazilians assign a particularly high premium to motherhood. Among the thirty-five nations included in the 2002 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), Brazil had the highest percentage of respondents who thought that watching children grow up was “life’s greatest joy,” with 91% strongly agreeing with that statement. Likewise, 63% of Brazilians strongly agreed that people who do not have children “lead empty lives,” ...a percentage that increased steadily by category as respondents’ level of education decreased,

escape from the social and psychological deprivation generated by marginalization is keenly felt by adolescents in favelas.<sup>165</sup> A vivid recollection involving a young girl in Jardim Olinda tragically illustrates this. Sueli, the thirteen-year-old daughter of a single mother who had come to live in the favela, had got involved with a local gang and became pregnant with twins. One night, as I was giving a group of the young people a lift back to their various shacks, she asked about a trip that I was due to go on. She looked up and out of the car window and said, 'I have always wanted to travel places'. Shortly afterwards, in an incident of intergang rivalry, she and a couple of the gang members were machine-gunned to death in her boyfriend's shack.

A sense of the social chasm between favela and 'regular' life as experienced by teenagers is powerfully expressed by Luíz Ruffato in a particular cameo from his collection of socially evocative narrative snapshots of São Paulo life. He presents a sixteen-year-old favela girl, making her way to buy some street food in her lunch break in the centre of the city. Recounting sights and sounds and smells that impact her as she walks, he records her reaction to a serious looking man whom she identifies as an evangelical churchgoer:

Ah!! a serious someone, believer, a home. little children. long way from where the hard-life lives, houses sad shacks, sideways glances at dead bodies in the street on Monday, rapes on Saturdays, robberies on Tuesdays on Wednesdays...<sup>166</sup>

The absence of positive male role models also tends to increase the influence of adolescents upon younger children.<sup>167</sup> When this sibling influence is 'negative', it can contribute to undermining the stability of whole families as reported by Feltran's

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suggesting that parenthood has particularly high value among the lower classes.' Steele, 'A Gift from God', 4–27.

<sup>165</sup> Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* Boston, MA: HarperCollins, 1990, 170, recounts a revealing incident with a twelve-year-old, Martin, who having produced a picture representing heaven and hell, explained it as follows: 'In heaven, you're way beyond everything; you're not you anymore, light like the wisp of a cloud, or even the wind going through a meadow. In hell, it is very intense. You're stuck, you're stuck with yourself, and with all that's weighing you down, from your life: very tough'.

<sup>166</sup> Ruffato, *Cavalos*, 49.

<sup>167</sup> See also *ibid.*, 40: 'Fathers were often ghostly figures who hovered dimly in the recent past but were frequently long gone by the time the child was able to form memories.'

study.<sup>168</sup> In particular, he records that the police would typically not distinguish between family members who were or were not involved in criminality; they were all ‘bandidos’ and treated accordingly. This perception readily feeds a depressing sense that however hard you might try, just to live in a favela community is to be labelled as an undesirable by wider society.

This generally adversarial attitude of the police towards favela communities has amounted to a criminalization of poverty.<sup>169</sup> Whilst police action might be prompted by the suspected criminal involvement of individuals within a favela, the prevailing negative culture often results in brutal action without regard for the rights or dignity of either individuals or the community as a whole. Also, and importantly, given the cramped living conditions within favelas, children are in no way protected from witnessing and being impacted by such indiscriminate abuse. In a journal entry from Christmas 1979, but which resonates with our experiences ten years later in Jardim Olinda, Ute Craemer describes an event in the nearby Monte Azul favela:

The good and the bad live here together, but the worst thing is that we are all so crammed together, and the children see and experience everything. At Christmas four murderers were arrested and the policeman cried: ‘Yes, just look, you women and children, last night these men killed fourteen people with razors and robbed them’. And they began to beat the defenceless men. The mother screamed, ‘Let them go, oh, my children!’ You hear it all in the whole favela.<sup>170</sup>

The high degree of social cohesion in many favelas, resulting from the compressed living space, the presence of extended family networks and shared immigrant cultural affinities, means that even when not directly involved in specific violent or criminal

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<sup>168</sup> ‘The five children younger than her, between ten and fifteen years old, also grew up close to the world of crime. In the nineties, the drug traffic became established in the periphery of São Paulo, as the centre for other highly profitable world markets such as arms’ trafficking and the crimes that arms made possible. As the years passed, the life of the kids was increasingly touched by the violence that characterized this universe of crime. “The violence was terrible” Ivete told me.’ Feltran, *Trabalhadores*, loc. 9139 (author’s translation).

<sup>169</sup> Davis, *Planet of Slums*, 202, comments on the likely consequences of this attitude for social cohesion: ‘as in Victorian times, the categorical criminalization of the urban poor is a self-fulfilling prophecy, guaranteed to shape a future of endless war in the streets’.

<sup>170</sup> Craemer, *Favela Children*, loc. 2059.



incidents, the community as a whole is impacted by them when they occur, generating a general climate of fearfulness, anxiety and emotional distress.<sup>171</sup> This also affects the children, both directly and through the stressed behaviour of family members towards them.<sup>172</sup> The emotional scarring produced through the witnessing and suffering of domestic violence is commonly evidenced in young children. A particularly moving expression of this common experience is captured in a child's drawing from one of the early PEPEs set up by my wife in the Tiquatira favela. That the card was intended to be used as a Christmas card makes it all the more poignant.




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Caption dictated by the child:  
 'My brother holds me so my  
 mum can hit me.'

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<sup>171</sup> Andrés Villarreal and Braulio Silva, abstract for 'Social Cohesion, Criminal Victimization and Perceived Risk of Crime in Brazilian Neighborhoods,' *Social Forces* 84, no. 3 (2006): 'We argue that the effect of social cohesion on risk perception is explained by the greater spread of information regarding crimes occurring in more cohesive neighborhoods where residents interact more frequently with each other'.

<sup>172</sup> For an extensive study of the negative impact of poverty and attendant experiences of social deprivation upon children, see McLoyd and Flanagan, *Maladaptation*, 50. 'Social maladaptation and psychological problems such as depression, low self-confidence, peer conflict and conduct disorders are more prevalent among poor children than economically advantaged children...Like their parents, children who are economically deprived are at high risk of suffering mental health problems'.

See also Terezinha Nunes who, in an important study conducted for the Netherlands-based Bernhard van Leer Foundation, reiterates two key conclusions of McLoyd's model, indicating the negative impact of poverty on the children: 1. 'That poverty and economic difficulties reduce the capacity for the support, interest and coherence of parental involvement in their children's childhood. 2. The children are indirectly affected by the negative behaviour of their parents'. "El Ambiente del Niño" [The Child's Environment]. Vol. 6. Occasional Paper (The Hague: Bernhard van Leer Foundation, 1994), 14-15.

For a British perspective, see Peter Beresford, David Green and Ruth Lister, *Poverty First Hand: Poor People Speak for Themselves* (London: Child Poverty Action Group, 1999), 94, which records the perception of socially deprived parents regarding the damaging effect of poverty on the relationships with their children in part 2 of the study, 'What poor people say'.

Neglect and exclusion from life's opportunities are characteristics of the life-experience of many children who suffer the consequences of adult deprivation. Children growing up within a favela community, dependent upon those older than themselves and without voice or capacity to express themselves independently, are unseen victims, mired in the deprivation and marginality experienced and mediated by adults and older peers, and no description of favela life is complete without a recognition of their presence and predicament.




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A child in the favela of Tiquatira, Penha, São Paulo, mid 1990s.

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### **Getting Close-up and Uncomfortable: Meeting the Children of Jardim Olinda**

It was in encountering small children, doubly invisible as 'below-the-radar' inhabitants of the poverty of favela communities often hidden within narrow alleyways, that I became aware of aspects of their and their families' life situations, which statistical analyses cannot readily convey.

Recalling a seminal encounter at the beginning of my involvement with children of the community of Jardim Olinda, and out of the conviction that 'the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these' (18:16), the photograph, 'Children in Jardim Olinda, 1992', became emblematic of a sense of call to become, in the name of Jesus, an agent of challenge and transformation to their experience of social marginalization and deprivation. With the aim of tapping into the impressions and the insights that arose from my subsequent involvement with the children, I will seek to 'exegete' this photograph with a view to further uncovering aspects of the social context within the

favela community that might helpfully inform the subsequent dialogical interaction between experience and text.



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Children in Jardim Olinda,  
1992.

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### **An 'Exegesis' of the Photograph: 'Children in Jardim Olinda, 1992'**

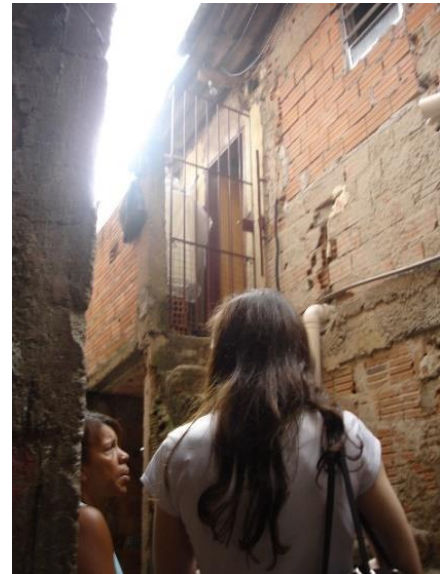
The children are seated on the dirt, in front of the shack that was home to Aparecida, a woman then in her twenties, who sadly suffered from learning difficulties, and lived with an elderly and chronically infirm man, Alberto. They shared the space, four 'rooms', with half a dozen children, an indeterminate number of relatives and the cardboard and other potentially re-saleable waste that Alberto collected in his barrow from the local neighbourhood. Uninvited undesirables also included biting and disease spreading vermin and insects of every sort.

The materials with which the shack was built were the leftovers from building work and publicity hoardings that were detritus of the 'other' world, just visible in the form of the apartment block showing in the top right-hand corner of the photograph. That whole communities could be based on this economy of waste is a testimony both to desperate necessity and community cooperation and creativeness. As the years passed, concrete building blocks and scraps of steel were gathered, replacing the wood and asbestos sheeting. Whilst this provided a more secure and weatherproof fabric for the home, it also offered the possibility of building upward, two, three, four or even five storeys, until the sky would be gradually blocked out, as the photograph taken from the same aspect ten years later illustrates.

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Georgie and Sônia Franco,  
church member and favela  
resident, at same location,  
circa 2002.

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This 'verticalization' of the favelas resulted in a gradual densification of poverty. Whilst internal living conditions were improved, community conditions arguably worsened with ever greater overcrowding and heightened potential for community discord within a darker and more suffocating world of squalor.<sup>173</sup>

The shallow gully cutting across the right foreground of the group takes water from bathrooms and kitchens, carrying the detritus of personal hygiene and of food. This would occasionally be flushed by rain waters as there was no communal drainage when we arrived in the favela.<sup>174</sup> Heavy rain, which was common, would flood the

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<sup>173</sup> This process, replicated in Rio de Janeiro, is referred to in Glenny, *Nemesis*, 37: 'The breathless expansion of the 1980's and 90's first ate up any remaining green spaces before building vertically, with apartment upon apartment upon apartment...the living area was long ago deprived of most windows and fresh air'.

<sup>174</sup> One of the first community projects we promoted was in the installation of an effective underground sewerage system.

bottom of the valley where the shack was situated producing conditions of persistent dampness, which were aggravated by the seasonal cold weather in the middle of the year, a feature of the São Paulo climate often overlooked by those accustomed to think of favelas in the hotter settings of Rio de Janeiro or Recife. It is perhaps not surprising that the local health clinic displayed a notice announcing that, after deaths due to domestic or other criminal violence, the most common cause of mortality was respiratory infections.<sup>175</sup>

The skin colour and bone structure of all but two of the children reveal their predominantly Afro-Brazilian ethnicity, already noted as an indicator of social disadvantage. The malformed legs and discoloured hair indicative of malnutrition, the feet barely protected by the ubiquitous flip-flops, the ill-fitting clothes and mixture of overdressing and underdressing all speak of poverty and dependency upon scavenging and random charity.<sup>176</sup>

Five family groups are represented amongst the nine children, all living, with several older and younger siblings, mothers and a changing number of adult males, within a few meters of Aparecida's shack. With house and room-divisions full of cracks and gaps, and the sharing of sleeping and living spaces, the general lack of privacy creates an environment where children were continually exposed to aggressive or sexual adult behaviour, which was regularly and negatively expressed in their own behaviour.

The absence of adults in the photograph, whilst perhaps incidental, is also suggestive of the deficiency in personal adult care typically experienced by favela children. In

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<sup>175</sup> Georgie wrote of an occasion in our first years in Jardim Olinda when we encountered this reality: 'We bend over to go into Sônia's home. It is made of bits of wood and leftover building materials. It's very damp and Sônia, a young woman who has recently begun coming to church, is lying on a simple bed, breathing with difficulty. Her two young daughters are playing around inside the house. Sônia says how she actually managed to get a job to clean a house today, but she is going to be unable to go because of her bronchitis. There will be no money for food once again'. Georgie Christine, *"Life in a Two Star Shack"*, Missionary Herald, BMS World Mission, February 1994. 12-13.

<sup>176</sup> Children enrolled in the PEPE pre-schools would regularly miss classes in bad weather since many only had a single decent T-shirt which had to be washed each day and could not be dried in time during the rainy season.

single-parent families, the mothers' need to work, commonly involving hours of tiring bus journeys to and from the place of employment, often resulted in children being left in the unstructured care of extended family or neighbours,<sup>177</sup> or of older children, again portrayed by the care being shown for the youngest of the group.

The metal grille held up in front of her face by the girl in the foreground is striking. Perhaps indicative of an understandable insecurity at the presence of a strange outsider, it is also unnervingly evocative of incarceration, such a concrete manifestation of the marginalization that is such a widely experienced reality in favela communities.<sup>178</sup> This sense of distance and separation from self, mixed with a childish curiosity and desire to engage, can also be perceived in the faces and body language of the children.

Perhaps particularly evocative of the condition of the children as their existence is portrayed in the photograph, is the manner in which they appear to be under threat from shadows advancing from all sides and from within the shack itself.<sup>179</sup>

### **Children in Jardim Olinda: A Life-Experience Common Throughout the Favelas of São Paulo**

Luíz Ruffato, again showing penetrating social awareness and empathy, draws back the curtain of social distance and disdain underlying the expression of marginalization, to reveal glimpses of the desperate life-experience of vulnerable favela children. He exposes the life of a twenty-seven-year-old single-mother family living first in the favela of Vila Andrade, the location of the first extension of the PEPE mission programme and just three kilometres from Jardim Olinda, and then in Jardim Irene

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<sup>177</sup> Where such 'support' groups were unavailable, it was not uncommon to find children being locked in the shack throughout the day or night whilst the parent was away, often with tragic consequences due to an almost total lack of home safety provision around cooking and the storage of harmful cleaning materials and medicines.

<sup>178</sup> The common Brazilian colloquialism for someone being in jail is to describe them as being behind the grill [*atrás das grades*].

<sup>179</sup> The perception of living under threat, expressed in the metaphor of advancing darkness, was re-echoed to me in a comment by a sister of Maria Lourdes, to the effect that whilst we had been absent from favela life during a three-month trip to the UK, it had seemed that darkness had begun to encroach again upon their lives.

also in the neighbourhood. In the year of my own arrival in Jardim Olinda, he writes that her partner began abusing her thirteen-year-old, eldest daughter. Enraged she poured alcohol over him and set him ablaze. Out of his mind with crack, he died, a charred body in the street. Eight years on, with the child now working as a prostitute<sup>180</sup> and with five other children by different fathers, including a baby girl, all looked after by the thirteen-year-old, Ruffato describes an early morning scene in their favela home. The sad squalor depicted would have been recognizable to Aparecida's children.

A rat...sharpens its teeth on the tender flesh...excited, the whole band comes close, in rushes...the little body, feeble, mummified in fetid rags...expels a weak cry...a short spasm. Ashamed, broken rays of morning light penetrate as if in confusion through the nail-holed roof of zinc, through the cracks in the walls of discarded advertising hoardings. But it is still night in the shack. A dirty dummy, its teat torn, being chewed by the baby, slipped away, rolling over her three-year-old sister at her side, who sucked a thumb in anxious recollection of when she sucked her mother's breast. Her chest wheezed all through her sleep, she coughed and cried, her six-year old brother had rolled himself up in the thin, smelly little sheet that they had got from the evangelicals...<sup>181</sup>

### **An Appraisal of the Contextual Framework Made at the Time**

In 1995, at an urban mission conference hosted by the Baptist Theological Faculty of São Paulo,<sup>182</sup> I had the opportunity to present a review of my missional reflections upon three years of intense exposure to social realities of favela life in São Paulo in the communities of Jardim Olinda, Vila Andrade, Divinéia, Heliópolis, Vila Clementino and Tiquatira. The review included the following profiling of favela life-experience, every aspect of which adversely impacted the lives of the children in these communities and

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<sup>180</sup> He locates her working the traffic lights on Avenida Francisco Morato, the principal thoroughfare from the region of Jardim Olinda to the city centre and a well-known red-light district, precisely the situation and location in which the eldest of Aparecida's children was to find herself some years later.

<sup>181</sup> Ruffato, *Cavalos*, 21.

<sup>182</sup> The conference represented a significant expression of interest in the need for reappraisal of traditional approaches to urban mission and featured as keynote speaker Robert C. Linthicum, author of *City of God, City of Satan: A Biblical Theology for the Urban Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1991).

formed the basis upon which my approach to missional engagement ‘in the name of Jesus’ was being developed.<sup>183</sup>

Profile of a Favela Resident: a 1995 Evaluation:<sup>184</sup>

- Materially deprived: The favela resident and their children live in need of the most basic necessities such as food, clothing, decent accommodation, security and medical and education provision.
- Spiritually oppressed: Their lives are subject to every kind of spiritual pressure and temptation, stimulated with ease by powers of ‘darkness’. For lack of the ‘light’ of the gospel and as a result of the subhuman conditions that prevail, evil has a freedom of activity as if ‘in its own back yard’.
- Socially de-structured: As a result of migrations and marital separations, having families comprised of children from various partnerships, the favela resident lives in an ambience of generalized familial instability, often characterized by precarious commitment between adult partners.
- Professionally unequipped: Parents and adolescent children alike find themselves excluded from occupational opportunities that could offer the possibility of escape from a daily struggle for survival.
- Threatened and insecure: For the reasons cited, personal and family life becomes characterized by successions of emotional, physical and financial crises: Insecurity lays siege to the life of the favela resident.
- Lacking privacy: Squeezed within their small shack, privacy and personal space is lacking. Like it or not, their individual, marital and family life becomes the public property of the favela.
- Marginalized: The favela resident feels like a third-class citizen, treated with contempt by police, authorities and residents of the surrounding neighbourhood.

As I proceed to explore experiences of God in specific personal encounters with the children of the poor, I recall words of Jon Sobrino alongside a photo I took in the early

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<sup>183</sup> Pamela Couture affirms what is indicated above, namely that, ‘Poor children encounter multiple factors that make their lives precarious’. *Seeing Children*, 14–16.

<sup>184</sup> Translation of section entitled: ‘Perfil do Favelado’ [Outline of a favela resident], from Christine, Stuart. ‘Entrando nas Favelas com Jesus,’ in *Ultrapassando Barreiras*. Vol. 2 (São Paulo, Brazil: Vida Nova, 1995), 155.



days of our ministry amongst the favela communities of São Paulo: 'The face of the poor become a positive meditation of the true, but hidden God, insofar as they are also a mediation of those false gods who choose death as the channel for their revelation'.<sup>185</sup>

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A child in the favela of  
Divinéia, 1993.

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<sup>185</sup> Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 146.

## SECTION 3: TEXT AND THE CONTEXT OF THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

### AN OVERVIEW OF THE INTERPRETATION HISTORY OF THE CHILD-RECEPTION TEXTS IN LUKE'S GOSPEL

Having established a personal and sociological context for the child-catalyzed missional experiences that were to inform the development of my missionary theory and practice in the favelas, I shall now consider the scriptural component of the proposed missiological dialogue.

Ricoeur writes:

The individual can be said to be 'tangled up in stories' which happen to him before any story is recounted. This entanglement then appears as the prehistory of the story told, the beginning of which is chosen by the narrator. The pre-history of the story is what connects it up to a vaster whole and gives it a background...stories that are told must then be made to emerge out of this background.<sup>186</sup>

Given the Ricoeurian epistemological framework of the present study, this investigation is of particular significance since the tradition of the interpretation, or the 'story' of the child-reception texts, formed the background to my Ricoeurian first *naïveté*, or uncritical faith, that well described my 1992 understanding of the gospels' presentation of Jesus' dealings with children. I shall therefore investigate the hermeneutical history of the child-reception events to gain a sense of how they have informed, and been informed by, the church's thinking and acting through the years and aim to identify insights that have arisen in response both to changes in the way

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<sup>186</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative, in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 29. Cf. the observation made by D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 70: 'Narrative threads coalesce out of a past and emerge in the three-dimensional space that we call our "inquiry field" ...They describe the focus of narrative inquiry as inward and outward, backward and forward. By inward we mean towards the internal conditions such as feeling, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions. By outward, we mean toward the existential conditions, that is, the environment. By backward and forward, we refer to temporality—past present and future'.

society has viewed children, and to the varying ways in which the church has called upon these stories to inform its theological self-understanding and Christian practice.<sup>187</sup>

This study is therefore understood to be a logical precursor to a critical reassessment of Luke's use of the child-reception texts.

### **Children: seen but not heard!**

Despite the universality of the condition of childhood and of the ubiquity of children in society, the old adage that children should be seen but not heard might be said to characterize the general lack of interest of theologians and biblical commentators regarding the narratives of Jesus' encounters with children, throughout most of the church's history.<sup>188</sup>

In the first section of this review of the interpretative history, the early patristic references to the child-reception texts will be cited.

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<sup>187</sup> Recent studies which aim to set the understanding of children and childhood more widely within the history and traditions of the church and society include: Marcia Bunge, (ed.), *The Child in Christian Thought*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001); Marcia Bunge, (ed.), *The Child in the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008). Douglas McConnell, Jennifer Orona, and Paul Stockley, (eds.) *Understanding God's Heart for Children-Toward a Biblical Framework*, (Colorado Springs/London: Authentic Media, 2007); Bill Prevette, Keith White, Rosalee Velloso-Ewell and David Konz, eds. *Theology, Mission and Child: Global Perspectives*, (Edinburgh: Regnum, 2014); Jerome W. Berryman, *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace*, (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2009); David H. Jenson, *Graced Vulnerability- A Theology of Childhood*. (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2005); Hugh Cunningham, *The Invention of Childhood*. (London: BBC Books, 2006); Odd Magne Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

<sup>188</sup> For a review of the neglect of a child's perspective in developmental studies in the history of religions prior to the beginning of this century, see Paula Cooley, 'Neither Seen, Nor Heard: The Absent Child in the Study of Religion,' *Journal of Childhood and Religion* 1, no. 1 (March 2010): 1–31, accessed October 2015.  
<http://childhoodandreligion.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/CooleyMarch2010.pdf>.

### The Treatment of the Child-Reception and Other Child-Related Passages in the Patristic Period <sup>189</sup>

Taken as an article of faith that Scripture spoke with a single voice, Tatian's undertaking to produce a harmonized conflation of the gospels was not unreasonable. However, in the text of his Diatessaron, the conflation of the three synoptic accounts of the child-reception events (Mt 18:1–5; 19:13–15, Mk 9:33–37; 10:13–16, and Lk 9:46–48; 18:15–17) essentially subsumes the distinctive content and emphases of the Markan and Lukan narratives. In Tatian's work, the Matthew reading is given preference along with the injunction that the disciples become as children and with the affirmation that it is 'being like children' that guarantees entry into, or possession of, the Kingdom:

And in that hour, came the disciples to Jesus and said to him, Who, thinkest thou, is the greater in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus knew the thought of their heart and called a child and set him in the midst and took him in his arms and said to them, Verily I say unto you If ye do not return and become as children ye shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Everyone that shall receive in my name a such as this child hath received me, and whosoever receiveth me, receiveth not me but him who sent me.<sup>190</sup>

Then they brought to him children that he should lay his hand upon them and pray: and his disciples were rebuking those that were bringing them. And Jesus saw, and it was distressing to him. And he said Suffer the children to come unto me and prevent them not; for those that are like these have the Kingdom of God. Verily I say to you, whoever receiveth not the Kingdom of God as this child shall not enter it. And he took them in his arms and laid his hand upon them and blessed them.<sup>191</sup>

This preference for the Matthean reading is an example of what appears to have been the generally wider circulation and influence of Matthew's gospel in the early church that is reflected in the numbers of extant papyrus fragments and citations by the

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<sup>189</sup> The citations were identified using the 'Biblical Usage' and 'General Categories' indices of the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers series, published by Eerdmans. For a recent discussion of patristic references to children in general, see Odd Magne Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), esp. 56–109.

<sup>190</sup> Tatian, 'Diatessaron', 25.8-12, AFN 10.82.

<sup>191</sup> Tatian, 'Diatessaron', 25.43-46, AFN 10.83.

patristic writers. To cite the results of Peter Head's extensive study on the early text of Mark's gospel:

The early manuscripts of the Gospels reflect a marked predominance for Matthew and John (among material on papyrus: 27 include John; 25 include Matthew; 10 include Luke; and only 3 include Mark). It is unlikely that this reflects random distribution for (at least) two reasons — first, this corresponds very closely to the popularity of the respective Gospels in the early church, in as much as this can be determined from the evidence of the citations of the Gospels in the church fathers. The citation preference throughout, in writers of the second and third centuries, involves a clear ranking of the Gospels in the early church in the order: Matthew, John, Luke, Mark which generally matches the ratio we have in the papyrus manuscripts. Secondly, the ratio of the fragmentary manuscripts changes dramatically in the later period: Matthew 30; Mark 22; Luke 19; John 22.<sup>192</sup>

This opening of the review of the interpretative history reveals an approach to the child-reception texts that is strongly influenced by the early tendency towards a harmonization of the gospel narratives with a preference for the Matthean reading with its particular injunction for the disciples to 'return (convert) and *become as children*', Mt 18:3

#### **References to the Child-Reception Texts in the Ante-Nicene Fathers**

**The Epistle of Barnabas** describes believers as 'having been renewed by the remission of our sins' and 'that we should possess the soul of children ... created anew by his Spirit';<sup>193</sup> a reflection of the equivalence of innocent childlikeness and qualification for Kingdom entry.

**The Gospel of Thomas** offers a variant on the event: 'Jesus saw some infants at the breast. He said to his disciples: These little ones at the breast are like those who enter

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<sup>192</sup> Peter Head, 'The Early Text of Mark,' in *The Early Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 113.

<sup>193</sup> *Epistle of Barnabas*, 6. ANF 1.140.

into the Kingdom. They said to him: If we then be children shall we enter the Kingdom?’<sup>194</sup>

**‘The Shepherd’ of Hermas**, in his apocalyptic vision of the saintly inhabitants of the white mountain, describes them by drawing upon the inferred innocence of children, ‘who defiled nothing in the commandments of God...but remained as children all the days of their lives’. By this comparison he uses the metaphor of childhood to illustrate a virtue that disciples should pursue: ‘Blessed are you who put away wickedness from yourselves and put on innocence’.<sup>195</sup>

**Clement of Alexandria**, in considering the children to whom Scripture points he states, ‘We are the children’ and goes on to cite the Matthew version of the infants being brought to Jesus [Mt 19:13]. He then interprets the event metaphorically, giving as justification Jesus’ statement about the need to ‘convert and become as children’, i.e. citing Mt 18:3, and affirms that Jesus is ‘setting before us, for our imitation, the simplicity that is in children...thus marvellously and mystically describing the simplicity of childhood...’ Interestingly, Clement rejects what was an alternative interpretation in contemporary use by Tertullian, when he writes, ‘He, [Jesus], does not use the appellation of children on account of their very limited amount of understanding from their age as some have thought, rather he pictures the children stretching upwards on tiptoes to attain “holy wisdom” instead of crawling with the whole body in senseless lusts’, and concludes: ‘Rightly then are those called children who know him who is God alone as their Father, who are simple and infants and guileless’.<sup>196</sup> Clement’s use of

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<sup>194</sup> *Gospel of Thomas*, 22, translated by Messrs. Brill of Leiden, in *New Testament Apocrypha*. Vol.1, edited by Wilhelm Schneemelcher and Robin McLachlan Wilson, (Philadelphia, PE: Lutterworth Press, 1963), 513.

<sup>195</sup> *The Pastor of Hermas*, 3.9.29, ANF 2.53.

<sup>196</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, I.5.1,8. ANF 2.212-3. (referencing Mt 19:14 and 18:3). Ireneaus will later make use of the inferred trusting and pure innocence of children, describing the quality of those who are saved by God as: ‘innocent children who have no sense of evil...Who are the saved...those who loved God believed in his promises and have become, “in malice as little children” [1Cor.14:20]’, in Ireneaus, *Against Heresies*, 4.28.3, ANF 1.502. An exceptional example of a less idealistic view of the moral culpability of children and their consequent standing before God is found in Commodianus, *The Instructions of Commodianus in favour of Christian Discipline*, 51, ANF 4.213, where he writes of infants being seized by persecuting authorities: ‘They, nor indeed do I excuse them, cannot be reproached, although

Matthew's version of the child-reception events serves to support the arguments of his three-volume work, 'The Instructor', in which the pathway to growth in the Christian life is presented using the metaphor of Christ as pedagogue of the childlike disciple.<sup>197</sup>

**Cyprian of Carthage** actually cites the 9:48 reference to 'the least being the greatest' as being the ultimate antidote against the temptation to envy or jealousy,<sup>198</sup> and on the same basis commends that 'humility and quietness are to be maintained in all things'.<sup>199</sup>

**Tertullian**, in his apologetic work *Contra Marcion*, ostensibly based upon Luke's Gospel in response to Marcion's rejection of the other gospels, refers to what he purports to be the Lukan text 9:47-48, but in fact cites the wording from Matthew 18:3, 'But behold Christ takes (*diligit* ['loves']) infants (*parvulos*) and teaches how all ought to be like them, if they ever wish to be greater'.<sup>200</sup> In order to support his argument for the equivalence of God's love for infants in the Old Testament (shown by the Egyptian midwives) with that shown by Christ in the New, he reverts to a reading that follows the Lukan description of the children as βρέφη, infants, (18:15–17). In doing so he distinguishes infants (*parvulos*) as of 'an age still innocent' and without the capacity for understanding that confers moral responsibility, from (*pueros*) where the 'children' are considered, 'already capable of discretion'. Tertullian's usage serves to illustrate both the tendency towards conflation or confusion in the attribution of texts to the different gospel writers and to offer an example of how commentators might draw upon different aspects of the metaphorical potential of children to support diverse pastoral or theological positions.<sup>201</sup> Surprisingly perhaps, there is little use of the child-

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they are seen to be taken captive. Perhaps they have deserved it on account of the faults of their parents; therefore, God has given them up'.

<sup>197</sup> '...Clement paints a picture of the child that emphasizes qualities fitting his program of transforming people to what he considers the proper understanding of Christian life...' Bakke, *When Children became People*, 63.

<sup>198</sup> Cyprian, *The Treatises of Cyprian*, 10.9, ANF 5.493.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, *Three Books of Testimonies against the Jews*: 12.3.5, ANF 5.534.

<sup>200</sup> Tertullian, *Contra Marcion*, 4.23, ANF 3.386.

<sup>201</sup> For a further example, used to support monogamous marriage, see Tertullian, *On Monogamy*, 8, ANF 4.65.

reception passages to inform the church's attitude in respect of the question of infant baptism.

**Origen**, in his commentary on Matthew, follows the approach of Clement and Tertullian in making use of the metaphorical potential of children to exemplify passion-free innocence and humility as commendable Christian qualities.<sup>202</sup> However, the following passage based upon Matthew 18:5, which is a true parallel to Luke 9:48, offers a development in exegetically based exhortation, as Origen commends the disciple who has renounced worldly status as worthy of emulation because he is one in whom Christ has promised to make himself present. His exegetical creativity then goes further still as he indulges his enthusiasm for allegory and offers an interpretation, 'different from the simpler', whereby he identifies the 'this child' with the Holy Spirit as a means of emphasising a theological tenet, namely that all who will enter the Kingdom must receive the Holy Spirit.<sup>203</sup> In particular, and exceptionally amongst patristic writers, Origen proceeds to recognize and treat separately the 'parallel' synoptic passages and invokes Luke to emphasise his point:

It is necessary according to Luke, to receive in the name of Jesus that very same little child which Jesus took and placed at his side. And I know not if there be anyone who can interpret figuratively the word...for it is necessary that each of us should receive in the name of Jesus that little child which Jesus took and set by his side; for he lives as immortal and we must receive him from Jesus Himself in the name of Jesus; and without being separated from him, Jesus is with him who receives the little child...<sup>204</sup>

By this allegorical treatment of the child-reception passage in Luke, Origen has succeeded in drawing together the roles of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and so offer exegetical support for his theological reflections about the Trinitarian relationship.

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<sup>202</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, 16, ANF 10.484: 'no passion is incident to the little children who have not yet attained to full possession of reason...so he is worthy of love, who, being converted as the little children, has reached such a point as to have, as it were, his passions in subjection like the little children'.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 18, ANF 10.485.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 19, ANF 10.486.



## References in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers

**Jerome** continues the tendency of earlier writers to prefer Matthew's account, when, with support from references in John's gospel, he makes use of the child-reception event to commend the practice of humility.<sup>205</sup> Only in a letter to Theodora in 399 CE does he, like Origen, invoke the Lukan passage to underpin a theological affirmation that it is, 'Christ who is honoured in his servants and who makes this promise to them, "He who receiveth you, receiveth me and he that receiveth me, receiveth him who sent me."'”<sup>206</sup>

**John Chrysostom** makes no references to the Lukan texts in his Homilies, whilst the Matthew passages are mentioned three times to exemplify the merits of childlike humility and freedom from passions.<sup>207</sup> His memorable description of children as having the potential to develop into 'wondrous statues (icons) for God' is set in the context of his discussion of the character of the Christian family and the responsibility that this places upon parents and church communities.<sup>208</sup>

**Augustine**, however, did focus his attention upon the condition of children and with an intensity unlike any of his predecessors. Strangely, despite the testimony of the man himself that it was a child's voice that set him upon the path to faith,<sup>209</sup> his views were to cast a shadow across church and societal attitudes to children for centuries to come. For Augustine, children and childhood are relevant only in so far as they offer what he

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<sup>205</sup> Jerome, *Letters*, 12, to the monk Antonius at Aemona, NPNF<sup>2</sup> 6.13: 'While disputing concerning precedence, our Lord, the teacher of humility, took a little child and said, "Except you be converted and become as a little children ye cannot enter the Kingdom of heaven. And lest he should seem to preach more than he practiced he fulfilled his own precept in his life: washed disciples' feet, received Judas with a kiss, conversed with Samaritan woman, spoke of the Kingdom of God with Mary at his feet and let himself be witnessed by poor women on resurrection"'.

His ranking of women with Judas and foot-washing normally reserved for gentile slaves, is notable!

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 75.4 to *Theodora*, NPNF<sup>2</sup> 6.156.

<sup>207</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies*, 61.2. NPNF<sup>1</sup>, 10.377; *ibid.*, 62.4, 385; *ibid.*, 65.1, 397.

<sup>208</sup> John Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, translated by Catherine Roth and David Anderson. Popular Patristic Series, 7 (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), 44.

<sup>209</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 8.122.29.

perceives to be evidence of the essential and innate sinfulness of the human condition.<sup>210</sup> The child-reception passages as such are only referenced on two occasions. Citing Luke 18:15–17, Augustine draws attention to their totally lost condition and the attendant responsibility of those in charge of children to bring them to the only one who can remedy their situation: ‘Let the little-ones come, let the sick come to the Physician, the lost to their Redeemer: let them come, let no man hinder them. In their branch they have not yet committed any evil, but they are ruined in their root’.<sup>211</sup> Citing Matthew 18:1–6, used in the same sense as in Luke 9:46–48, he interprets Jesus’ act of receiving the children as one whereby the disciples’ wrong-heartedness is challenged: ‘Jesus calleth unto him the age of humility to tame the swelling desire’.<sup>212</sup>

### **Summary of the Formative Exegetical Encounters of the Church with the Child-Reception Texts in the Patristic Tradition**

In general, the early church has left little evidence of any more than an occasional interest in interpreting the child-reception passages.<sup>213</sup> Children as a category do appear in metaphorical use to inform pastoral or theological arguments most commonly where these touched upon ecclesiastical practices involving children, such

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<sup>210</sup> E.g. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.19, 22 where he reflects that sinful tendencies evident in an infant’s play are ‘replicated and amplified’ in adulthood. R. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in Theology of St Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 24 concludes that Augustine’s position ‘epitomizes the wretchedness of the human condition’.

<sup>211</sup> Augustine, *Homilies in the Gospels*, 65.44. NPNF<sup>1</sup> 6.455.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.* 65.6, NPNF<sup>1</sup> 6.543.

<sup>213</sup> Bakke’s assertion that ‘Early Christian writers — the so-called patristic writers or fathers of the church — wrote extensively on children and children’s nature and qualities’, *When Children became People*, 56, must be qualified by the recognition that his focus of study is primarily on the extensive use made of the Matthean version of the child-reception text, Mt 18:3–4 in which children are presented as a paradigm for adult disciples, *idem.*, 57. He does not comment upon the variety of synoptic usage, that goes unrecognized behind the patristic preference for the Matthean version.

as in regard to baptism,<sup>214</sup> or admission to the sacraments.<sup>215</sup> Such manuscript and commentary evidence as can be found has also been coloured by the clear tendency to favour a ‘harmonized reading’ of the different synoptic narrations of the events, with a preference for the Matthean narrative. With rare exceptions, the uncritical presumption for the Matthean reading, with its injunction that disciples should ‘become as children’, can be seen to have largely determined the trajectory of the history of interpretation of the texts during this period. The Matthean narration invites a metaphorical approach to exegesis, in which specific interpretations are based upon different dimensions of the semantic field or metaphorical potential of the categories of children and childhood, chosen by interpreters to best suit their pastoral or, less commonly, theological concerns. The influence of this approach occasionally led to incorrect gospel attributions of texts, and inevitably obscured recognition of the distinctive character and purpose of the separate synoptic narrations.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> See Ferguson Everett, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 138 n.19. Writing of the use made of the Luke 18 passage, he states: ‘it is striking that in the patristic period only two texts employ the pericope (Lk 18:15–17), in connection with infant baptism’. He identifies these as Tertullian, *On Baptism* 18.5 and *Apostolic Constitutions* 6.15.7.

<sup>215</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 64.4 ad. 3; 112.2,3 ad.1 and 2; II 181.4 ad.2; supl. 72. obj. 4. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *The "Summa Theologica": 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edn.* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1924).

<sup>216</sup> In an editorial note to his translation of Tertullian’s *Contra Marcion*, ‘Dr. Holmes’ Note’, ANF 3.423, we read that “in at least in three instances” Tertullian apparently thinks “that to be in Luke which was only in Matthew”. This misleading conflation of the different synoptic narrations can still occasion misrepresentations of the Lukan text even today, as exemplified in the recent contribution to biblical literature relating to childhood, Richards, Anne. *Children in the Bible*. London: SPCK, 2013, where on page 125, even though specifically citing the Lukan passage, the comment is made, ‘Here the theological point is especially clear: every person who hopes for heaven must become like a child’, a comment that reflects the Matthean reading rather than the Lukan.

## **The Impact of Changing Societal Attitudes towards Children upon the Interpretation Tradition**

I would identify three broad social developments that have significantly influenced the location of children and childhood within the space of societal perception: the development of fresh attitudes towards education and the potentiality of children, the moral challenge occasioned by the deprivations experienced by children in the processes of population growth and urbanization, and the growing recognition and valuing of the autonomy and rights of children.

### **Attitudes towards the Educational Potential of Children**

The 16<sup>th</sup> century English Protestant reformer, Thomas Becon (1511–1567), articulated the Augustinian legacy in regard to children: ‘What is a child, or to be a child? A child in Scripture is a wicked man, as he is ignorant and not exercised in godliness.’<sup>217</sup>

However, concessions to the intellectual, emotional and spiritual characteristics of children were beginning to develop. These are exemplified by Luther’s 1529 ‘Shorter Catechism for young and simple people’, the publication of the first illustrated textbook for children in 1658 by the Bohemian Moravian educationalist John Comenius, and influentially, Rousseau’s 1762, ‘*Emile, ou, de l’Education*’, in which, over against the rationalism of John Locke’s 1693, ‘Some thoughts Concerning Education’, Rousseau argued that children should be considered as innocent, not requiring a ‘breaking of a godless spirit’, but be allowed to develop according to the dictates of nature. This enlightened view was not shared by all, however. John Wesley, who demonstrated a real and practical compassion and concern for the education of poor children, deprecated Rousseau: ‘A more consummate coxcomb never saw the sun’.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Thomas Becon, *The Catechism of Thomas Becon: With Other Pieces Written by Him the in the Reign of King Edward the Sixth*. Vol. 3, edited by John Ayre, 1844, accessed March 2016, RareBooksClub.com, 2012, 607.

<sup>218</sup> John Wesley, *Journals and Diaries V (1765–1775)*, February 3, 1770. Vol. 22, *The Works of John Wesley*, edited by Reginald Ward and Richard Heitzenrater. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1975).

### **Attitudes towards Social Deprivation experienced by Children**

Between 1520 and 1680, England's population doubled and nearly one third were under fifteen years of age. Hugh Cunningham writes that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries poverty especially affected children, as indicated by the number of parish records registering children needing parish support.

We see the beginning of two things that are with us to this day, a recognition that children are particularly likely to feature amongst the poor, constituting up to half of those who were poor, and second a sense of obligation on the part of the community to do something about it.<sup>219</sup>

Dickens becomes perhaps the greatest public advocate of this moral challenge as he sets children centre-stage in his hugely influential novels, exposing the social deprivations that accompanied the trebling of urban population in 19<sup>th</sup> century England — an urban explosion comparable to that experienced in São Paulo in the 1980s and 1990s. However, his righteous indignation was far from being the universal public sentiment, as manifest in a letter published in the *Bristol Mirror and General Advertiser* on Saturday June 23, 1849, in which a reader describes the sight of a diseased woman surrounded by children and a crippled child, on 'one of the principal thoroughfares in Bristol — Park Street!' and writes of 'the disgust excited in all'<sup>220</sup> — a sentiment, lamentably, also typical of São Paulo.

### **Attitudes towards the Valued Autonomy of Children**

The recognition of the unique and equal value and rights of the child, alongside those of each and every other societal member and grouping, has opened fresh space for the child to be understood and to inform in the context of theological reflection. Karl Rahner explores aspects of this 'theological egalitarianism':

What children and child-like adults have in common is...a state in which we are open to expect the unexpected, to commit ourselves to the incalculable, a state which endows us with the power still to be able to play, to recognize the

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<sup>219</sup> Cunningham, *The Invention of Childhood*, 94-5.

<sup>220</sup> Cited in Roger Steer, *George Muller: Delighted in God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980), 58.

powers presiding over existence are greater than our own designs, and to submit to their control as our deepest good.<sup>221</sup>

This contextualized approach to theological enquiry became integral to the analysis of Latin American poverty and oppression that fuelled the emergence of Liberation Theology.<sup>222</sup>

As societal attitudes towards children have developed, so has their metaphorical potential to inform Christian thinking, both in terms of theological understanding and in terms of models of discipleship. Whilst many of the interpretative trends established in the patristic period can be seen to persist, changes in social perceptions enable the child-reception texts to be understood in fresh light influencing their use in both popular preaching and theological reflection.

I will highlight below some examples of the exegetical employment of the texts during the periods indicated, that, whilst not exhaustive, serve to map out the hermeneutical landscape within which I developed my own response to the Lukan text as I engaged with it in the missional context of the favelas of São Paulo in the early 1990s.

### **Treatment of the Child-Reception Texts from the Reformation onwards**

The Reformation received the child from the hands of the Fathers still uncompromisingly tarred by the theological brush of Augustine's 'original sin', whilst paradoxically retaining the potential to model the supposedly childlike attributes of

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<sup>221</sup> Karl Rahner 'Ideas for a Theology of Childhood,' in *Further Theology of the Spiritual Life*, 2 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd/Herder and Herder, 1971), 8:71.

<sup>222</sup> This is well illustrated by the focus given to the effects of poverty on children in the proceedings of the influential Puebla conference:

'La falta de realización de la persona humana en sus derechos fundamentales se inicia aun antes del nacimiento del hombre por el incentivo de evitar la concepción e incluso de interrumpirla por medio del aborto; prosigue con la desnutrición infantil, el abandono prematuro, la carencia de asistencia médica, de educación y de vivienda, propiciando un desorden constante donde no es de extrañar la proliferación de la criminalidad, de la prostitución, del alcoholismo y de la drogadicción'. Puebla Conference Proceedings, section 1261, Mexico, 1979, Marquette University, Theology & Religious Studies: Latin American Theology Resources, accessed 17 May 2016.

<http://libguides.marquette.edu/c.php?g=36663&p=232900>.

simplicity and humility, understood as essential character traits of the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

In different homilies, both dedicated to the Right Honourable Sir Thomas Neville, Becon demonstrates this paradoxical attitude. In *The Christmas Banquet*, he writes, 'There is no man clean from filthiness, no not the young child', whilst in *The Potation for Lent*, he adopts the positive perspective found in Matthew,

The children which sing, betoken the faithful Christians in this world, which ought to be simple and humble in heart as a child is, as Christ saith, 'Verily I say unto you, except he be converted and become as a child, ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore humbleth himself as this child, he it is that is greatest in the Kingdom of heaven.'<sup>223</sup>

### **Child-Reception Texts in Works of Art from the Reformation onwards**

Though rare in medieval art,<sup>224</sup> portrayals of the child-reception events, especially of the women bringing children to Jesus to be blessed, became persistent and widespread from the Reformation onwards.<sup>225</sup> Particularly striking were artistic representations of Jesus blessing the children used as Lutheran propaganda broadsheets by the Wittenberg based artist Lucas Cranach the Elder,<sup>226</sup> a close friend and supporter of the great reformer.

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<sup>223</sup> Thomas Becon, 'The Christmas Banquet,' *The Early Works of Thomas Becon*, edited by John Ayre, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1843), 70, and 'The Potation for Lent', *ibid.*, 114. Reflecting upon this same paradoxical treatment of 'the child' in Wesley, Richard Heitzenrater observes: 'His views are not fully consistent or complete. He could as easily use children as empirical proof of the reality of sin, as use them as models for the type of faith that Christ requires of us all'. 'John Wesley and Children', chap. 10 in *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 279, 299.

<sup>224</sup> 'Prior to the sixteenth century the narrative was rarely depicted', Christine Joynes, 'A Place for Pushy Mothers? –Visualizations of Christ Blessing the Children,' in *Biblical Reception*. Vol. 2 (2013): 117–33.

<sup>225</sup> H. Hornick and M. Parsons describe artistic representations of Lukan narratives during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, as forming a legitimate and significant part of the *nach leben* of the original texts, in *Reading Luke: Interpretation, Reflection, Formation*, eds. Craig Bartholomew, Joel Green, and Anthony Thiselton (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 416–436.

<sup>226</sup> Joynes, *Pushy Mothers*, 118, argues that Cranach should be taken seriously as a biblical interpreter and not as a mere apologist responding to the historical context of the Reformist / Anabaptist controversy, and as such his portrayals offer 'significant insights into the biblical text'.




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Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Christ Blessing the Children*. One example of Cranach's renderings of the child-reception event, late 1520s. Currently at the Johanniterhalle, Germany.

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Steven Ozment, in a study of the relationship between these two great figures in the realms of art and religion, writes:

Disarmingly he [Cranach] enlisted infants and children into Protestant broadsheet propaganda against Rome and the sectarians. A popular example from the late 1520's was taken from the gospel story in which Jesus commands his disciples to clear the way for the little children, so they might come directly to him. Entitled 'Christ Blessing the Children', its message accused the papists and Anabaptists of not having humility and trust enough to enter the Kingdom of God by the faith of a child. Over the years, this novel, riveting scene appeared in twenty-plus versions...In the background of this popular painting, the enemies of salvation by faith alone and infant baptism are seen scoffing and grumbling as Jesus welcomes a throng of new mothers...<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Steven Ozment, *The Serpent and the Lamb – Cranach, Luther and the Making of the Reformation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 26. See also 171-2.



The significant role that artistic representations still played in forming popular opinion<sup>229</sup> is expressed in the not uncommon use of paintings of the child-reception events being employed to motivate social intervention on behalf of children in need. This is evidenced in the donation of a painting entitled *Suffer the little children to come to me*, to the newly established Foundling Hospital by the artist Reverend James Wills in 1746.




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James Wills, *Suffer the little children to come to me*, 1746. London, Coram Family, in the care of the Foundling Museum.

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The emotive quality of the scenes narrated in the synoptics, and the increased profile of children and childhood within society during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, saw a continuation of the popularity of such artistic representations.

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<sup>229</sup> Paul Cartledge, A. G. Leventis Professor of Greek Culture at the University of Cambridge from 2008 to 2014, commenting upon the importance of paintings in the transmission of the narratives of their subject matter, wrote: 'So far as the dissemination of ideas was concerned, the 18<sup>th</sup> century was still a world of the spoken word and of visual images rather than the written word', *Thermopylae* (London: Pan Books, 2007), 186.



An attractive example is found in the Anglican church of St Laurence, in Scalby, Scarborough. Commissioned in 1950, it interestingly presents the scene of Jesus with the children set directly beneath the representation of the crucifixion: an exegetical inference that follows Luke's setting.

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Stained Glass by Leonard Evitts, of Newcastle, in the Anglican church of St Laurence, Scalby, Scarborough. 2017.

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Within the Baptist tradition of child dedication, the texts are often employed in recommended orders of service and representations commonly included on certificates marking the occasion, as is evidenced in my own Certificate of Dedication from September 1950.

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Author's Certificate of Dedication, from Mansfield Road Baptist Church, Nottingham, 1950.

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## The Use of the Child-Reception Texts to inspire Christian Mission

An extension of this use of the texts to inspire Christian mission is found in the application of the texts to inform Christian response to all who suffer as a result of conditions of vulnerability, dependency and weakness that characterize children. Wesley's use of the phrase, 'from the least to the greatest'<sup>230</sup> is a recurrent one in his sermons and journals and reflects his profound belief and commitment to the character of the missional economy of God in Christ, as working for, from and through the weakest, embodied in the children, as both receptors and transmitters of the gospel.<sup>231</sup>

The call to change or 'conversion' also attracted the use of the Matthean narration of the child-reception event, to those whose principal goal was evangelistic. So, Wesley offered the following exegetical comment on Matthew 18:2:

The first step towards entering the Kingdom of grace is to become as little children — lowly in heart, knowing yourselves to be utterly ignorant and helpless and hanging wholly on your Father who is in Heaven for a supply of all your wants.<sup>232</sup>

With similar evangelistic zeal, Charles Spurgeon expounded the Lukan narrative (18:15–17) in a sermon entitled 'Receiving the Kingdom of God as a Little Child'.<sup>233</sup> He

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<sup>230</sup> John Wesley, 'The General Spread of the Gospel', in *Journals and Diaries II (1738–1743)*, edited by Reginald Ward and Richard Heitzenrater, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1975), 494: "They shall all know me", saith the Lord, not from the greatest to the least (this is that wisdom of the world which is foolishness with God), but "...from the least to the greatest", thus the praise may not be of men, but of God'. Cited in Joerg Rieger, 'Liberative Theologies of Poverty and Class,' in *Introducing Liberative Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 153.

<sup>231</sup> Referring to Mt 19:14 ('Let the children come to me and forbid them not'), Wesley appeals, 'Let us do something from the least to the greatest...', i.e. to mobilize children, those considered of no account, to be messengers of the gospel to the powerful. *Sermons 115–151*, edited by Reginald Ward and Richard Heitzenrater, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985), 317. And again, 'God begins His work in children. Thus, it has also been in Cornwall, Manchester and Epworth. Thus, the flame spreads to those of riper years until at length they all know Him and praise Him from the least to the greatest', in *Journals and Diaries VI (1776–1786)*, Reginald Ward and Richard Heitzenrater, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1975), 316.

<sup>232</sup> John Wesley, *Notes on the New Testament* (London: Charles Kelly, 1754), 87-88.

<sup>233</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, 'Receiving the Kingdom of God as a Little Child,' in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*. Vol. 24, 1349, 6 (1878), in "Spurgeon's Gems", last updated 06 September 2018. <https://www.spurgeongems.org/vols22-24/chs1439.pdf>.

extolled the inferred subjective childhood qualities of humility and simple faith as necessary conditions for receiving the gospel, rather than the objective conditions of ignorance and helpless dependence highlighted by Wesley: ‘How do children receive it? I answer, a child receives the gospel with humility, with simple faith and with unworldliness’.<sup>234</sup> He continues by giving voice to the new believer’s prayer for acceptance in the words of Wesley’s famous children’s hymn, *Gentle Jesus*: ‘Pity my simplicity/ Suffer me to come to thee’.<sup>235</sup>

It is noteworthy that even though Spurgeon is ostensibly expounding the Lukan co-text he finds no difficulty in evoking the Matthean passage to express his evangelistic appeal:

may we almost wish that we could begin again with a child’s freshness, simplicity and eagerness. As we pray for spiritual childhood...Scripture sets its seal upon the prayer...Except ye be converted and become as little children ye shall not enter the Kingdom of heaven.<sup>236</sup>

The use of the metaphor to characterize the goal of true Christian maturity exemplified by Hermas and Clement of Alexandria becomes more widely evidenced in post-

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<sup>234</sup> Spurgeon, ‘*Receiving the Kingdom*’, 87. A further example of Spurgeon’s employment of the child-event texts in his evangelistic preaching is found eight years later, this time from Mk. 10:13–16: ‘How I wish that all my congregation would receive Christ as a little child receives him! The little child has no prejudices, no preconceived theories, no opinions it cannot give up: it believes what Jesus says. You must come the same way to learn of Christ...a child when it comes to Christ comes very sincerely, and with all its heart. It knows nothing of sinister motives, or of formality. Its repentance and faith are genuine...Do you half wish you could be a child again? You can be. He can give you a child’s heart and you can be in his Kingdom newly-born’. ‘Jesus and the Children,’ *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*. Vol. 32 (1886), last updated 06 September 2018, <https://www.spurgeongems.org/vols31–33/chs1925.pdf>. (The text of this work is also reproduced in a collection of Spurgeon’s sermons on the themes of children and childhood: Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Come Ye Children*, (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1897)). Karl Barth, in his rejection of the relevance of the Matthew text in the debate with Oscar Cullman et al. concerning infant baptism, would later echo Spurgeon’s closing metaphorical portrayal of the converted adult as being ‘newly born’, arguing that ‘This has nothing whatever to do with a childlike mind or character, with childlike simplicity and innocence, as sentimentally suggested by many expositors. “ὡς τὰ παῖδια” means “in the absolute novitiate” which characterizes the existence of children’. *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), IV.4.180ff.

<sup>235</sup> For a full discussion of Wesley’s children’s hymns see J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrine of Charles Wesley’s Hymns* (London: Epworth Press, 1941).

<sup>236</sup> Spurgeon, ‘*Receiving the Kingdom*’, 86.

Reformation interpretations of the text. This is well exemplified in an early biographical reference to George Muller, the 18<sup>th</sup> century pioneer of the orphanage or children's homes movement:<sup>237</sup>

This man [Muller] was to be peculiarly an example to believers as an intercessor; and so God gave him from the outset a very simple, childlike disposition toward Himself...in faith and in the filial spirit, he always continued to be a little child. Mr J Hudson Taylor well reminds us that while in nature the normal order of growth is from childhood to manhood, in grace the true development is perpetually backward toward the cradle: we must become and continue as little children, not losing, but rather gaining, childlikeness of spirit. The disciple's maturest manhood is only the perfection of his childhood. George Muller was never so really, truly, fully a little child in all his relations to his Father, as when in the ninety-third year of his age.<sup>238</sup>

Increased societal sensitivity to deprivation experienced by children prompted treatments of the child-reception texts that dispense with the metaphorical, preferring instead to recognize in them the example of Jesus as a 'friend of children', an '*imitatio Christi*' application that incentivized social engagement on behalf of the 'this' child in her existential need. John Comenius, educationalist and latterly bishop of the Unitas Fratrum (Moravians), influential in Wesley's development, cites the Markan text as he passionately invokes God's help for the introduction of universal education for children, praying: 'Suffer the little children of the whole world to come unto thee' and 'forbid not the sons of the nations to be brought unto thee'.<sup>239</sup>

Robert Raikes, a founder of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Sunday School movement, who was a friend of Charles Wesley, reportedly encouraged his brother to incorporate the education of children as a core activity in the local Methodist societies.<sup>240</sup> In 1789,

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<sup>237</sup> Muller's initiative represented a revolutionary experiment, predating later initiatives in a movement that characterized growing public sensitivity to the plight of children: Dr Barnardo (Brethren) 1866; Spurgeon (Baptist) 1867; the National Children's Home 1869; Mr Fegan (Brethren) 1870; The Church England's Children's Society (Waifs and Strays) 1881.

<sup>238</sup> Arthur Pierson, *George Muller of Bristol* (London: James Nisbet, 1899), 43.

<sup>239</sup> 'Prayers to the Father of Lights for the Final Illumination of the Human Race', [chap. XXII] in *The Way of Light* (London: The University Press of Liverpool, 1668), 229-234. (Although he cites Mk 10:9 he in fact quotes from the text of Mk 10:14.)

<sup>240</sup> Josiah Harris, *Robert Raikes: The Man and His Work* (Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, n.d.), 29.

Raikes began correspondence with Rev. William Lewelyn of Leominster, in which he echoes Comenius' vision of the transformational potential of children's education:

I have two clergymen engaged with me in an effort to raise up, among the lowest of the people, a new race, taught at an early period the happiness of thinking on that which is good...we consider it an experiment how far it will be practicable to lead mankind, by slow and gentle steps, to the comforts and peace that good morals supply and thereby render those a blessing who have hitherto been a scandal to the community.<sup>241</sup>

There is a notable similarity between this sentiment and that of Rudolph Steiner, the founder of the German Theosophical Movement for whom Ute Craemer worked in the favela of Monte Azul, São Paulo in the 1980s.

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 80–81.

### Children perceived as Symbolic of the Poor and Deprived

That children in general, and especially those in deprived social conditions, share significant social correspondence with other vulnerable, disadvantaged and marginalized groups, is something increasingly recognized by current scholarship. In chapter 6 of his exploration of a theology of childhood,<sup>242</sup> entitled 'To Change and Become like Children' and citing Matthew 18:1–5 and Mark 10:13–16, David Jenson writes: 'Both pericopes of Jesus with children fall in line with his ministry to outcasts and nobodies that disrupts the present age'.<sup>243</sup>

Although this correspondence was to be found in the foundational declarations of Latin American liberation theology movement,<sup>244</sup> explicit references to children are not common in the subsequent literature. When the child-reception texts are referenced, they will typically be used in the sense of children being representative of the vulnerable and marginalized in general. In his seminal work, *Option for the Poor*, Gutierrez cites Matthew 19:4 and writes:

When the Lord cries, 'Let the children come to me. Do not hinder them. The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these,' we immediately think of docility and trust. We miss the radicality of Jesus' message. In the cultural world of Jesus' time children were regarded as defectives. Together with the poor, the sick, and women, they were relegated to the status of the inconsequential. This

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<sup>242</sup> 'My intention in these pages is to offer an inductive theology of childhood that provides that provides the basis of an ecclesial ethic of care for all children.' Jenson, *Graced Vulnerability*, xii.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>244</sup> See John Eagleson and Philip Scharper, 'Final Document,' in *Puebla and Beyond: Documents and Commentary*, eds. John Eagleson and Philip Scharper, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 32–39. 'The situation of extreme poverty acquires real life faces...the faces of the young children, struck down by poverty before they are born, their chance for self-development blocked by irreparable mental and physical deficiencies; and of the vagrant children of our cities who are so often exploited, products of poverty and the moral disorganization of the family... the faces of young people, who are disoriented because they cannot find a place in society, and who are frustrated, particularly in marginal rural and urban areas, by the lack of opportunity to obtain training and work.' (Translation from Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 136.)

shocks our modern sensitivity. To be 'such as these' therefore to be as children, means being insignificant, someone who has no value in the eyes of society.<sup>245</sup>

Similarly, the Mexican theologian Carlos Bravo, in his paper 'Jesus of Nazareth, Christ the Liberator', lists Mk 9:33–35 and 10:13–15 as examples of Jesus preparing his disciples to embrace the cause of the Kingdom: 'They must welcome the little-ones because they are the ones God prefers'.<sup>246</sup>

In so far as any particular characteristic of this exegetical use of the texts can be identified from the few examples available, it is that, in the radical call to mission engagement that is presented, the social contexts of existential deprivation and marginalization present in both text and receptor, are given a greater voice than in previous tradition. Notwithstanding this, the distinctive uses of the child-reception pericopes evident amongst the synoptic writers has rarely been taken into consideration in theological explorations of the child-reception pericopae.

More influential perhaps has been the growing appreciation of the nature of child development and the distinctive rights of children. These perspectives have offered a fresh and more positive background against which the metaphor of childhood has been explored.

The metaphorical potential of the call to 'become as children' has been taken up by Karl Rahner who writes:

...we do not really know what childhood means at the beginning of our lives until we know what that childhood means which comes at the end of them: that childhood namely, in which by God-given repentance and conversion, we receive the Kingdom of God, and so become children.<sup>247</sup>

And again,

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<sup>245</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, 'Option for the Poor,' in *Mysterium Liberationis – Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, edited by Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 242.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid. Carlos Bravo, 'Jesus of Nazareth, Christ the Liberator', 432.

<sup>247</sup> Rahner, *Ideas*, 43.



In the man, the child begins who must undergo the wonderful adventure of remaining a child forever, becoming a child to an ever-increasing extent, making his childhood of God.<sup>248</sup>

Perhaps most significant however, has been the recognition, stimulated by post-modern epistemological frameworks of investigation, of the hermeneutical potential of bringing text, receptor and receptor-transmitters into interdisciplinary dialogue with social and psychological sciences.

The Child Theology Movement,<sup>249</sup> represents one such development, as it draws upon the dynamics imparted by an interdisciplinary approach to undertake the hermeneutical and theological task in the light of Jesus' enacted response to his disciples' reflections upon Kingdom greatness, when he took a child and set her at his side.<sup>250</sup> Energized from the outset by Keith White and Haddon Willmer, the initiative has proved to be a significant catalyst in promoting the development of a wide ranging and contextually sensitive theological dialogue, stimulated by the scriptural treatment of children and childhood and of the synoptic narratives of these 'child-reception sign-acts' in particular. Whilst White has focused upon the Matthew 18 narrative,<sup>251</sup> it is the purpose of this thesis to gain insights from a detailed exploration of the Lukan

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<sup>248</sup> Rahner, *Ideas*, 50. Acknowledging the influence of Rahner, Jenson writes, 'Drawing upon a suggestive essay by Karl Rahner, I would suggest that becoming a child implies our partnership with God, in frank admission of the vulnerability and brokenness of human life'. *Graced Vulnerability*, 127.

<sup>249</sup> Haddon Wilmer, in his personal introduction at the First Penang Consultation on Child Theology, funded by Compassion International in 2002, uses the term 'Child Theology' as something he writes on. *First Penang Consultation on Child Theology* (London: Child Theology Movement, June 2002), 7. Two years later, in a similar consultation in Cape Town, he begins his introduction to Child Theology with the observation, 'Child Theology is the name we give to the work we are doing. As far as we know, no one has ever used the term before'. *Cape Town Consultation on Child Theology* (London: Child Theology Movement, February 2004), 7.

<sup>250</sup> 'This action and teaching of Jesus with a child in the midst has become a starting point for what has become known as "child theology." This recent approach to doing theology is not restricted to a concern for children or childhood but has set out in the hope of exploring the full range of biblical historical and systematic theology using the child placed by Jesus as a lens...Child theology is not an umbrella term for any and every sort of concern with children and theology. It names a precisely focused, but not fully worked out enterprise: to revise Christian theology as a whole, by attending to the child set in the midst by Jesus.' *Houston Consultation on Child Theology* (London: Child Theology Movement, May 2004), 12.

<sup>251</sup> Haddon Willmer and Keith White, *Entry Point – Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18* (London: WTL, 2013).

narrative when considered in dialogue with the missional situation of children in the favelas of São Paulo.

### **Conclusion**

Haddon Willmer, addressing a gathering of theologians and practitioners in Malaysia at the second Penang Child Theology consultation, made the affirmation, 'In order to speak of God, the Word of God used many human words and many components of human experience, amongst them, the child'.<sup>252</sup>

Given the relative paucity of historic engagement with synoptic accounts of the child-reception events, the present readiness to take the perspective of, and to hear the voices of, the minorities or marginalized, amongst them that of 'the child received', represents a welcome paradigm shift in hermeneutical openness.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Proceedings of the *Second Penang Consultation on Child Theology* (London: Child Theology Movement, July 2004), 10, footnote.

<sup>253</sup> Carlos Queiroz, a prominent Brazilian Protestant theologian-practitioner in a paper delivered two years later to a similar gathering in Itu, SP, Brazil, reiterates Willmer's affirmation: 'To say that the child is not merely a theme but rather an absolute of revelation, would be to commit the same error of the theology of liberation. The child cannot be sacralized as liberation theology has done with the poor. The child must be seen as an important mediation of revelation but not as an absolute of revelation. In fact, I consider that the child should be taken as a priority mediation of revelation'. *First Brazil Child Theology Consultation* (London: Child Theology Movement, September 2006), 21.

## CHILDREN IN LUKE'S GOSPEL: A MOTIF OF HERMENEUTICAL SIGNIFICANCE

### A Child-Motif in Luke?

The aim of this section is to investigate, or explain, Luke's treatment of child-referencing material and as a result to consider the appropriateness of speaking of a 'child-motif' within his gospel as a basis for exploring his narrative use of the child-reception events recorded at 9:46–48 and 18:15–17.

In the light of the evident intention to demonstrate to Theophilus that Jesus is God's promised agent for the realization of his eschatological purposes on behalf of all humanity, and in pursuance of this aim, Luke carefully presents his Jesus narrative as a natural progression and fulfilment of previous salvation history as set out in the scriptures.<sup>254</sup> It is appropriate, therefore, to identify and explore points at which Luke connects his reader back to treatments of children in these scriptures. The possibility will be investigated that such narrative links back into scriptural tradition are intended by Luke to inform his readers' understanding of the role of children and the category of childhood within God's revelation and purposes in the past, so as to provide hermeneutical tools to guide their interpretation of those engagements of Jesus with children that he weaves into his presentation.

With the growing scholarly appreciation of the coherence and value of compositional approaches to the gospels, the structure and content of the birth and infancy narratives of the opening two chapters of Luke are generally held to be integral to understanding the presentation not only of his gospel, but also the second volume from his pen, the book of Acts.<sup>255</sup> They will therefore be taken as the natural and appropriate starting point for this investigation. Luke's subsequent use of material involving children and the figure of childhood will then be considered in the light of

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<sup>254</sup> For a succinct and helpful discussion of the importance of Luke's 'careful account' being corroborated 'in accordance with the scriptures', see Mark Powell, *What Are They Saying About Luke?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 61.

<sup>255</sup> For a thorough discussion of the developments within biblical criticism leading up to the current renaissance in the theological appreciation of the birth and infancy narratives, see the extensive introduction in Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (London: Cassell, 1977).

those insights. The legitimacy of speaking of a child-motif in Luke will then be assessed so as to inform the detailed exegesis of 9:46–48 in relation to 18:15–17, the two instances in which Luke reports Jesus as specifically engaging with children as a basis for instructing his disciples about the dynamics of the Kingdom he has come to inaugurate.

### **The Birth and Infancy Narratives of John and Jesus: Luke 1 and 2**

Luke begins his ‘orderly account’ by introducing in parallel passages (1:5–27 and 1:28–45) the two key characters of his gospel narrative: John and Jesus. It is their significance and legitimacy he intends to establish so that through his subsequent presentation of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, Theophilus might ‘know the truth’ of the things he has been taught (1:4).

#### **The Compositional Structure and Function of the Birth and Infancy Narratives**

In his opening chapter, Luke carefully establishes the credentials of John and Jesus, recalling from Israel’s history occasions in which children figure as agents of national salvation and expressions of God’s intergenerational covenant faithfulness, especially at times of political or religious decadence.<sup>256</sup> The account of the birth of John to Zechariah and Elizabeth recalls the birth of Isaac to Sarah and Abraham (Gen. 21), and Samuel to Elkanah and the childless Hannah (1 Sam. 1), and suggests intentionality on Luke’s part given his evident concern to ground his presentation in the scriptural tradition. It is perhaps the role of Samuel as the divinely commissioned anointer of David to be the new ruler of God’s people and to establish a reformed Kingdom after the failure of Saul’s rule, which makes the most striking parallel to Luke’s introduction

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<sup>256</sup> See especially Keith White’s seminal paper in which he reviews the impressive, and perhaps surprising, participation of children as key players in the drama of Israel’s salvation history. ‘It is not just that these people happened to be children but that some of the most significant acts and revelations of God were through these children. Their faith and actions are critically important in the unfolding and outworking of God’s purposes.’ ‘A little child shall lead them: Rediscovering children at the heart of mission,’ in *First Penang Consultation on Child Theology*, (London and New York: Child Theology Movement, 2002), 36.

to his narrative of John the Baptist as the forerunner to Jesus,<sup>257</sup> especially given their juxtaposition in the report of Paul's justification of Jesus' credentials to the Jews of Psidian Antioch (Ac 13:20–33).

There is no existing account of David's birth, which is perhaps surprising when this is a characteristic of the lives of other national saviours. However, his revelation by Samuel (1 Sa 16) serves the same narrative function as the birth of Jesus in the opening of Luke's gospel. David's entrance onto the stage of salvation history is characterized by narrative features that are suggestive of Luke's narrative:

<b>Narrative feature</b>	<b>David</b>	<b>Jesus</b>
Called to establish a reformed Kingdom	1 Sa 16:1	Lk 1:32
Announced by divinely commissioned messenger	1 Sa 16:1	Lk 1:26
Born in the town of Bethlehem	1 Sa 16:1	Lk 2:4–6
Of inconsequential status	1 Sa 16:11	Lk 1:48
In shepherd context	1 Sa 16:11	Lk 2:8
Empowered by the Holy Spirit from the outset	1 Sa 16:13	Lk 1:35

The transition of David from dependent childhood to the exercise of his divinely enabled autonomy is dramatically related in 1 Samuel 17, in the account of his encounter and confrontation with his elder brothers, the compromised ruler Saul and the Philistine Goliath. Sent out as a child by his father (1 Sa 17:15–18), David emerges from the incident as one commanding the admiration of the people and the careful attention of those who previously exercised natural authority over him (1 Sa 17:55–18:7), awaiting only the right moment to enter into his life's vocation as king. Whilst recognizing the very different narrative context when compared to Luke's brief account of Jesus' visit to the Temple in Jerusalem (2:41–52), the two accounts contain comparable elements and perform a similar narrative function. As in the case of David,

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<sup>257</sup>Claire McGinnis discusses parallels between the birth of Jesus and that of Moses in 'Exodus as a Text of Terror for Children,' *The Child in the Bible*, edited by Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 27–28.

Jesus has matured, no longer described as παιδίον (2:27), but now παῖς (2:43), and has moved out of the context of the family home into a context central to the nation's life. He is presented as being moved by an awareness of his identity before God (2:49) to exercise autonomy of decision-making in a way that provoked his family (2:48), but excited popular admiration (2:47) as he demonstrated extraordinary understanding, συνέσις, that the reader will naturally appreciate as being due to the growth in wisdom, σοφία, reported in 2:40.<sup>258</sup> In terms of the narrative development of both these great stories of national salvation, the main protagonists have now been convincingly legitimized for the roles they are to play and the stage set for the principal drama to begin.

The compositional presentation of the birth and infancy narratives of John and Jesus can be seen to evoke recollections of God's past action with and through children at significant moments within Israel's story as the people of God. Given the counter-cultural nature of such a strong affirmation of childhood in the context of contemporary Greco-Roman culture,<sup>259</sup> it is the contention of this study that Luke's gospel introduction illustrates a notable commitment to the category of children and childhood as providing a legitimate lens through which the dynamics of the eschatological Kingdom can be understood.

### **The Use of Scripture to inform the Presentation of Jesus**

John and Jesus, the great protagonists in Luke's account of the outworking of God's saving purposes for humanity, enter the narrative as new born infants, infants whose eschatological credentials Luke is quick to establish. This he does by means of three

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<sup>258</sup> συνέσις and σοφία are to be attributes endowed by the Spirit of God upon the eschatological king in Isaiah 11:2 and are the two key qualities that David himself will seek from God for his son Solomon (2Ch 22:12).

<sup>259</sup> See John Carroll, 'What Then Will This Child Become? Perspectives on Children in the Gospel of Luke,' in *The Child in the Bible* edited by Marcia Bunge, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 178. He argues that whilst the opening narratives would perhaps be 'reminiscent for Jewish readers of the early chapters of the Exodus narrative, Ex 2.1–10,' they would be 'disorienting' for its earliest readers, who he identifies as most likely of Greco-Roman cultural background. For further discussion see thesis chapter on Greatness and Children in the contemporary Greco-Roman-Jewish culture.

compelling attestations: the angelic status of the herald of their births, the divine enabling of their conceptions and the declaration of their life purposes as grounded in the unfolding history of Gods' salvation as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The infants' births are announced by an angelic figure,<sup>260</sup> whose identity is carefully established for the reader, with all the authority of direct speech, as Gabriel, 'who stands in the presence of God' (1:19), and who has been specifically sent by God, first to Zechariah (1:11, 19) and then to Mary (1:26). By means of this emphatic identification the reader is invited to recall that this divine messenger is previously known in the scriptures as the one sent to the prophet Daniel (Da 8:15–26, 9:21–27), to clarify the eschatological significance of his vision.<sup>261</sup>

It is therefore one who is known to Israel as God's chosen eschatological herald, who brings the news of the forthcoming births, births that will be made possible only by divine intervention (1:13, 35) and with prophetically foretold divine purpose (1:16–17, 32–33). The child to be named John will grow to fulfil, in the spirit of Elijah, the preparatory eschatological role foretold by the prophet Malachi (Mal 4:5–6), whilst in the birth and life of Mary's son Jesus, Isaiah's messianic hope of an eschatological successor to the rule of David will be realized (Is 9:6–7).<sup>262</sup> So the 'Son of the Most High' will receive 'the throne of his father David' and reign over the house of Jacob for ever, in a Kingdom that will never end (1:32). It is important to note that Theophilus is directed back to Scripture upon the authority of the angelic messenger Gabriel, a

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<sup>260</sup> Hull notes that Luke, more than any other NT writer, even Matthew, makes references to angels. See esp. 91, where he lists the 'remarkably wide' range of activities performed by them. John Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition*. Vol. 28, Studies in Biblical Theology, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series (London: SCM Press, 1974).

<sup>261</sup> In particular, his somewhat enigmatic reference to the coming of the 'Anointed One' (τοῦ Χριστοῦ, LXX Da 9:25,26), would most likely be understood by Luke as referring to Jesus, who he will present in 2:11 as receiving angelic affirmation of the title *χριστὸς κύριος*, followed in 3:16 by baptismal 'anointing' at the hand of the eschatological forerunner John, attested by the Spirit baptism from heaven in 3:22, and ultimately claimed by Jesus himself in 4:18.

<sup>262</sup> It is to be recalled that Luke is aware of unaccredited messianic figures and movements, to whose falsity he will draw the attention of the reader in the second of his two volume narrative, Ac 5:36–37, and which stand in clear contrast to the broadly based mainstream messianic credentials that he presents as characterizing Jesus' advent. He will go on to warn against such false eschatological teachers in Lk 17:23 and 21:38.

character within the narrative itself. This selection of the scriptures, their content and imagery, will form the basis for anticipating and then interpreting the ministries of John and Jesus that Luke is beginning to present.<sup>263</sup>

It is of particular note that the very first reference back to the scriptures by Luke (1:16–17), a partial citation from Malachi 4:6, points to an interpretation of the text that will inform the reader as to Luke’s understanding of the metaphorical value and potential of the category of children.

### **John’s Ministry: ‘Turning back the hearts of fathers to children’ (1:17)**

Despite the fact that the wording of 1:17 does not represent a formal quotation of the LXX Malachi text, or of similar phrasing found in Ben Sirach 48:10, there is scholarly consensus that Malachi is the most natural provenance for the reference. The citing of only the first clause of the couplet as found in the MT is variously explained as due to the influence of the LXX and Ben Sirach, which only record the first clause, or to an editorial decision on Luke’s part, either to economize space,<sup>264</sup> or because the second couplet was deemed unnecessary for his rhetorical purpose. The omission of the second part of the MT of Malachi 4:6 lessens support for an interpretation of John’s reforming role in terms of improving parental-child relationships. Had the complete couplet been included, or had the omission been that of the first half of the couplet, then the remaining admonition for children to turn to their fathers might most naturally have been interpreted in such a way. But as Luke cites the first half only, the family-focused understanding becomes unnatural.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> It is noteworthy that Luke’s approach to the use of the Old Testament scriptures is in clear distinction to that adopted by Matthew, e.g. Mt 1:22, 2:15, 17, 23, who introduces the references as editorial comments from outside the narrative.

<sup>264</sup> John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1993), 31.

<sup>265</sup> One of the few advocates of this interpretation is Luke Timothy Johnson in *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), where he adopts a reading where the two clauses are taken as separate and sequential and refer to two aspects of ‘turning’, one moral and one social. For other less commonly supported interpretations, see Federic L. Godet, *Commentary on Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1981).



In the light of his treatment of scriptural citation further on in the gospel, Luke's omission of the complementary couplet, 'and children to their fathers', is perhaps best understood as revealing a selective approach to the use of scriptural material. This approach can be clearly seen at 4:18-19 in the paradigmatic reference by Jesus to Isaiah 61:1-2 when Luke's account omits the phrase 'and the year of vengeance of our God', a dimension of ministry not supported in the life and ministry of Jesus that he will be presenting.<sup>266</sup>

In 1:16 the purpose of John's ministry is set out, namely that he will bring back, ἐπιστρέψει, many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and is legitimized as being the proper task of the eschatological forerunner, by reference in 1:17 to the first couplet of Malachi 4:6, 'He will turn [ἐπιστρέψει] the hearts of fathers to their children'. In 3:3-18, Luke presents his practical exegesis of this text when he reports John fulfilling this role by challenging his hearers to repent<sup>267</sup> and return to lifestyles worthy of God's people, particularly echoing Malachi's calls for reformed priestly office and social justice, and his use of the imagery of refining and of the metaphor of fire (Mal 3). The wayward sons of Israel who need to turn back to God are then to be identified as 'the fathers' in the partial citation from Malachi 4:6 and 'the children', to whom their hearts are turning, are by inference, a metaphor for those who live as true sons and daughters of God.<sup>268</sup> This interpretation considers the following clause, 'the disobedient to the wisdom of the just', to be a complementary, explanatory elucidation of the Malachi citation, introduced by an exegetical 'and' (καί). Read in this way 'the disobedient' describes Israel as the 'fathers', who need to be brought back to behave as 'children', who are described as those living 'in accordance with', (ἐν), the understanding of 'righteous ones', The proposed reading requires the silent

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<sup>266</sup> For a helpful treatment of this, see Michael Prior, *Jesus The Liberator – Nazareth Liberation Theology (Lk. 4:16-30)*, The Biblical Seminar Vol. 26 (Sheffield: The Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

<sup>267</sup> The emphasis upon repentance is characteristic of Luke-Acts. See Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 2, n.24.

<sup>268</sup> Cf. the Qumran metaphorical use of nursing infants as 'sons of grace' who represent the faithful receiving the teaching of the Teacher of Righteousness: 'Thou hast made me a father to the sons of grace...they have opened their mouths like little babes...like a child playing in the lap of its nurse', 1QH 7:20-22; cf. 1QH 9:35-36. Cited in Peter Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 82.

‘understanding’ of ἐπιστρέφω to supply the absence of any verb in the clause.<sup>269</sup> This is suggested by the verb’s presence in the two previous clauses which are taken to be synonymous. The otherwise difficult use of ἐν, rather than εἰς, would thus be overcome as the sense of ‘movement’ inherent in the idea that the disobedient ‘fathers’ are moving to become like the just, could be derived from the ‘understood’ verb. The ἐν, as used by Luke, is then understood as a typical use of the word, describing the manner in which righteous ones live, rather being required to carry the idea of movement that is normally expressed through the use of εἰς.<sup>270</sup>

A number of commentators find support for understanding the phrase as complementary to the previous clause, by recognizing in the sentence construction the stylistic feature of didactic parallelism, in which the second element of a didactic couplet is employed to elucidate further the affirmation of the first element.<sup>272</sup>

This positive characterization of ‘children’ evidenced by the suggested understanding of Luke’s use of the Malachi text is notable,<sup>273</sup> coming as it does in Luke’s very first reference to the authenticating scriptures and within the context of the authoritative word of the eschatological messenger. At the outset of his narrative Luke alerts the reader to the fact that he can make metaphorical reference to children as representing

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<sup>269</sup> The case for this reading is strengthened by noting that Luke’s final quotation from the scriptures, in Ac 28:26–27 (Is 6:9, LXX) is explicitly directed πρὸς τοὺς πατέρας ὑμῶν, (v.25) that they might ἐπιστρέψωσιν (v.27), by accepting the gospel of Jesus in order to be healed. This final reference to the authenticating voice of Scripture at the very close of Luke’s presentation, echoes his very first scriptural quote.

<sup>270</sup> It is a measure of the difficulty presented by the phrase that Charles Francis Digby Moule describes the use of ἐν, in 1:17 as ‘the most remarkable instance’ and ‘quite astonishing’, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge University Press, 1959), 76. However, commenting on Luke’s unexpected use of ἐν, instead of εἰς, in 9:46 where a sense of movement is also inherent in the context, Moule observes that such use, while not the norm, is not exceptional. It is arguable that the missing ‘dynamic’ in 9:46 is in some measure provided by the opening verb Εἰσῆλθεν, in a manner similar to that being suggested for the reading of 1:17.

<sup>272</sup> See John Carroll, ‘What Then Will This Child Become? Perspectives on Children in the Gospel of Luke,’ chap. [X] in *The Child in the Bible*, edited by Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 181.

<sup>273</sup> Joel Green describes the positive use of the children metaphor in 1:17, observing, ‘Interestingly, this positive emphasis on children will continue in the Gospel (e.g. 9:46-48; 18:15-17)’, Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 76.

the attitudes and lifestyles appropriate to true sons and daughters of God – those who are prepared for the Lord (1:17c).

### **Jesus' Ministry: The Fulfilment of the Davidic Covenant (1:32–33)**

In preparing the reader to hear the crucial and legitimizing pronouncement of Gabriel in regard to the personhood and destiny of the child to be born to Mary in 1:32–33, Luke first establishes the fundamental credential of lineage running back through both his parents. Mary, described in 1:36 as ἡ συγγενίς of Elizabeth, shares in the most prestigious priestly descent from Aaron as Luke has ascribed to her in 1:6. Joseph's lineage is traced back to David, the founder of the royal covenant upon which the hope of eschatological restoration rested (1:27). This crucial link is emphatically repeated at 2:4. Fundamental to the understanding of the God-humanity relationship in the Hebrew religious tradition is the covenant commitment of God to each succeeding generation.<sup>274</sup> The birth narratives, recognizing the role of children as both heirs and agents of the transmission of God's eschatological commitment to his people,<sup>275</sup> carefully seek to establish that Jesus' birth as a child fulfils this traditional expectation.<sup>276</sup> It is, appropriately, to shepherds, residents of the birth place of David and co-heirs of this most honourable bloodline of the shepherd king, that notice is given of an authenticating sign that a saviour, who is the anointed one, the messianic successor to the Davidic kingdom, has been born to those who look to David as their patriarch, and who is to be found by them 'wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a

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<sup>274</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, 'Child and Childhood as Metaphors of Hope,' *Theology Today* 56, no. 4 (2000): 597. 'Children were no longer merely included in the powers of origin through the veneration of the ancestors, but the generations were now aligned towards children as the carriers of hope and as signs of the steadfastness of the God of promise. With the Abrahamic religions, we see the future taking the place of origin, freedom taking the place of security, unknown possibility taking the place of known reality...The God of promise is a God of children.'

<sup>275</sup> Note the prominence of child kings in maintaining the Davidic line: Josiah was only eight when he led reforms (2Ki 22:1,2), and Joash, the only survivor of killings by Queen Athaliah (daughter of Ahab) became king at seven (2Ki 11:1–12:21) and had a long and acclaimed reign of religious reform. Observed by Esther Menn, 'Child Characters in Biblical Narratives: The Young David (1 Sam. 16–17) and the Little Israelite Servant Girl (2 Kngs. 5:1–19),' in *The Child in the Bible*, edited by Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 324–352.

<sup>276</sup> The reiteration in Luke 3 of Jesus' genealogical credentials underlines the importance of this dimension of the category of children and childhood within his gospel.

manger' (2:12). It is to Luke's characterization of the sign quality of the child, both to the shepherds in Bethlehem and also to Simeon and Anna in the Temple in Jerusalem, the city of David (2:34), that we will now turn our attention.

### Signs in Luke–Acts

Luke employs the word 'σημεῖον', sign, more often than any other New Testament writer: nine times in volume one and thirteen in the second volume of his work.

In the infancy narrative, Luke first presents the reader with divine attestations as to the significance of the child event: in the glorious proclamation of the angel to the shepherds (2:9–10) and thrice emphasised in the inspiration of Simeon by the Holy Spirit (2:25–27). He then twice affirms, first through the angel (2:11) and then through Simeon (2:26), that the child-sign points to the fulfilment of the Davidic messianic hope.<sup>277</sup>

This implied impact of the signs upon the reader who is outside the narrative world of the gospel is an important feature of the birth and infancy narrative. Luke is able to use the concept of sign, unconstrained by any setting within traditional material he is including. The angelically announced sign to the shepherds and the example of Mary (2:16–19), Μαρία πάντα συνετήρει τὰ ῥήματα ταῦτα συμβάλλουσα ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτῆς, are presented and tacitly commended to the reader. The reader is also 'included' in Simeon's Spirit-inspired prediction to her (2:34–35), that the child-sign will cause ὅπως ἂν ἀποκαλυφθῶσιν ἐκ πολλῶν καρδιῶν διαλογισμοί, in an open-

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<sup>277</sup> Later in his narrative, in chap. 11, where 'σημεῖον' is embedded within traditional material common to Mark and Matthew, it points to the popular expectation of supernatural events that would attest to the advent of the 'last days' of prophetic scripture. Luke is particularly harsh in his dismissal of such demands, uniquely setting the search for such signs in the context of accusations that Jesus is in league with Beelzebub (11:16). As in Mk 8:11 and Mt 12:38; 16:1, Luke attributes this popular demand to a 'wicked generation' (11:26), whose unbelieving hearts are known to him, and to whom he will only offer the 'sign of Jonah', a sign that will remain enigmatic until after his death and resurrection when it will become evident to believing hearts. When John's murderer, Herod, made such a request (23:8), he was met by silence! The use of 'σημεῖον' in 21:7, 11, and 25 also reflects traditional use, paralleled in Mk 13 and Mt 24, to speak to those events, 'signs from heaven' that are yet to occur but will presage the final denouement of the eschatological drama.

ended future. Similarly, Anna's enthusiastic testimony about the child Jesus is presented to an audience that is not constrained by the limits of the narrative but includes *πᾶσιν τοῖς προσδεχομένοις λύτρωσιν Ἱερουσαλήμ*.<sup>278</sup>

In a comparable way, at the opening of his second volume, Luke points the reader to the importance of authenticating signs (Ac 2:19), where he introduces *σημεῖα* into the LXX citation of the prophecy from Joel 2:28–32 (LXX 3:1–5), the text which gives scriptural legitimacy to Peter's Pentecost proclamation. By giving the word a scriptural context, he attracts to its usage a divine authority but also, and importantly, 'creates space' prior to the final Day of the Lord, for the sign-attested ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. This 'opening up' of the prophetic eschatological calendar is elaborated in Ac 2:22. Here Luke sets out his understanding of *σημεῖα* as being divinely empowered events indicating Jesus of Nazareth as the Davidic Messiah, a messiah who is now resurrected and ascended to sovereign status in accordance with the scriptures (Ps 110:1; Ac 2:34, 35). As his on-going narrative will show, the occurrence of further signs performed 'in his name',<sup>279</sup> will confirm that *Τὸν μὲν πρῶτον λόγον* of Ac 1:1 was indeed only the beginning, and that Jesus' followers are called to recognize and cooperate with the continued exercise of his kingly authority despite the misunderstandings and opposition on the part of the rulers of the current world order.

### **The Prophetic Tradition of Children as Signs**

As a result of their innate weakness, vulnerability and dependence in relation to adult society, children have an unparalleled metaphorical potential to serve as signifiers of groups who due to particular cultural, social or economic conditions find themselves in need of support. In Isaiah, Luke's primary source of scriptural attestation of Jesus'

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<sup>278</sup> *πρὸς δεχομένοις* – translation in the present tense strengthens the sense of an immediacy that includes the reader, over against the imperfect rendering found in the NIV.

<sup>279</sup> The sign performed by Peter and John at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple, Ac 3:1-10, is paradigmatic for the development of the church's mission, within which authenticating signs of Jesus' on-going Kingdom rule will be evidenced. In the account of what results from the sign, the reader is enabled to 'overhear' the Sanhedrin (Ac 4:16), including the words of the high-priest Annas (Ac 4:5–6), conceding the nature of healing as a sign (unhelpfully translated 'miracle' in NIV), performed 'in his name' (Ac 4:17), a verdict confirmed by Luke's own, chronicler's reference to *σημεῖον τοῦτο* at 4:22.

ministry, this potential is recognized and set at the heart of the prophet's appeal to the nation's leaders for religious and social reform.<sup>280</sup> The prophet hauls the nation's religious and political leaders before the court of the Torah (Isa 1:17, 23; 10:2), where God's intended rule of justice for the Davidic Kingdom is to be based on his own parent-child commitment to Israel (Isa 1:2),<sup>281</sup> and finds them guilty of neglect of this divinely decreed responsibility for the weak and dependent. His pronouncement of judgement followed by a promise of gracious restoration (Isa 1:24–26) is dramatically set before Ahaz, the current Davidic incumbent, in acts of prophetic symbolism. Isaiah is instructed by God to give names to his three children to make them living embodiments in the community, of his message of hope and presence and judgement: Shearjashub, 'A remnant shall return' (Isa 7:3), Immanuel, 'God is with us' (Isa 7:14), and Maher-shalal-hash-baz, 'Pillage hastens: looting speeds' (Isa 8:3). These divine responses to the nation's rebellious lifestyle are declared by the prophet in Isaiah 8:18: 'Here I am, and the children the Lord has given me. We are signs and symbols in Israel from the Lord Almighty'. Whilst it is left to Matthew (1:23) to explicitly link Jesus' birth to the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 of Immanuel and the virgin's child, the account by Luke of the angelic announcement to the virgin Mary (1:34) and the shepherds, can hardly be uninfluenced by it and the following declaration in Isaiah 9:6–7. This is especially so given the child-sign language of Luke 2:12 and the context of the national repentance and restoration of the Davidic kingdom that colours the whole Lukan birth narrative. For the shepherds, the angelic word pointed to a sign confirming his message, that they would discover if they obeyed his direction. To the reader, the even more significant invitation is to discover the dramatic fulfilment of Isaiah's pronouncement of future hope through the birth of the promised Davidic Messiah. Isaiah exegetes the social and religious condition of God's people using the hermeneutical motif of the

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<sup>280</sup> In her excellent essay exploring the treatment of children in Isaiah, Jaqueline Lapsely accurately comments that Isaiah 'begins and ends with the images of children' and 'seems to be veritably teeming with the images of children'. "'Look! The Children and I Are as Signs and Portents in Israel": Children in Isaiah,' in *The Child in the Bible*, edited by Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 101.

<sup>281</sup> This opening expression of the parent-child metaphor to speak of God's relationship to his people is richly developed in the closing chapter of Isaiah where the message of Israel's judgement and restoration is set in an explicitly eschatological framework and described again using the same motif, but unusually adopting the female parenting metaphor (Isa 66:7–11).

child, to set before Ahaz and the people of Judah the values of national life that are appropriate in God's Kingdom. Luke's message is that the birth of the virgin's child, Jesus, signals the inauguration of that Kingdom, with those values, for all nations.<sup>282</sup>

The dawn of the eschatological Kingdom is not merely proclaimed verbally but signalled, both to the shepherds (2:15) and to Simeon (2:30) by what they see as the encounter with the child Jesus.<sup>283</sup> The 'objectivity' of the sign heightens the impact of the message it conveys, as it witnesses to a more forceful, insistent intervention in the life-experience of both the narrative characters and, through the narration, the reader, by the author of the salvation narrative. In contemporary parlance, signs are by their nature 'in your face', and therefore have extraordinary potential to confront and challenge. James Mays highlights this potential of prophetic symbolism when commenting on the likely impact occasioned by Isaiah's contemporary, Hosea, when he gave 'message' names to his three children in Hosea 1:3, 7, 9:

A daughter called 'Uncared-for' would be a scandal; every time her name is called it speaks of a child whose father would not play his rightful role. Because she is a prophet's child the scandal would be known to be a word to the people.<sup>284</sup>

When Luke reports (2:7) and then repeats from the lips of the angel from heaven (2:12), that God's very own sign-child will be seen birthed in a manger because there was no more adequate accommodation for him, the potential for scandalizing the reader could hardly have been more powerful, nor the yearning for restorative justice

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<sup>282</sup> 'The clear intent of the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke is to record the advent of the long-awaited Messianic Child.' Robin Mass, 'Christ the Logos of Childhood: Reflections on the Meaning and Mission of the Child,' *Theology Today* 56, no. 4 (2000): 460.

<sup>283</sup> 'The Lukan motif of closed and open eyes refers not to physical vision, but to an eschatological understanding of the work of Jesus. The motif stretches back beyond the Lukan writings to the very beginning of salvation history in Genesis 3.' Arthur Just, *The Ongoing Feast — Table Fellowship and Eschatology at Emmaus* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, Pueblo, 1993), 66.

<sup>284</sup> See James Mays, *Hosea: A Commentary*, SCM OT Library (London: SCM Press, 1969), 28. Both prophets adopt the same sign-child symbolism to forcefully convey their message of judgement and hope. Whilst Isaiah does this in the variety of names he gives his three children, Hosea expresses this potential for restoration in the face of judgement by changing the names of his children (Hos 2:21–23).

that had been expressed in Mary's song (1:52–54) more dramatically echoed.<sup>285</sup> Likewise Simeon, having himself seen the sign of God's salvation embodied in the child named Saviour (2:30), calls upon Mary and the reader together to ἰδοῦ, 'behold' (2:31), this signal event that was destined to provoke a radical confrontation and transformation of personal and national life.<sup>287</sup>

The vocational naming of Mary's son as Jesus, at the command of the angel (1:31), repeated as an important preface to the encounter with Simeon (2:21), has already identified him as being more than merely the son of Mary and Joseph.<sup>288</sup> The reader is prepared by the given name to understand the nature of transformation that is at the heart of God's purpose, namely salvation involving comfort (παράκλησις; 2:25) in the face of worldly oppression, and redemption (λύτρωσις; 2:38), a concept already introduced in Zechariah's song (1:68–69) with strong allusions to the message of hope in Isaiah 11:12. In what acts as a narrative co-text to the Simeon passage, the prophetically accredited Anna adds her testimony, περὶ αὐτοῦ, to 'all who were looking forward to the λύτρωσις of Israel' (2:36–38).

In Luke's narrative account of Jesus' birth and infancy, as in the prophetic precedents of Isaiah and Hosea, the powerless child, with his paradoxically significant name, offers a perfect prefiguring of God's plan of salvation to be brought about through the judgement and gracious hope that Luke will narrate.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> 'His nativity evokes solidarity with the thousands of children born amid violence and poverty.' Jenson, *Graced Vulnerability*, 22.

<sup>287</sup> 'Ἰδοῦ!' [See!] Simeon is enabled by the Holy Spirit to perceive the significance of the moment. The exceptional threefold attestation of the Spirit, enabling his role as herald of the Lord's Christ (2:25–27) cannot but impress the reader from amongst the community of the Spirit. Simeon's self-designation as τὸν δοῦλόν σου (2:29) is a further commendation, echoing Mary's response to her special calling as ἡ δούλη κυρίου, at 1:38, 48. Through the agency of these two Spirit-enabled servants *par excellence*, the child Jesus is introduced as the long-awaited Saviour, not only into Luke's narrative world but into the narrative of God's salvation history that includes the reader.

<sup>288</sup> This pointer to understanding the full identity of the principal protagonist in Luke's narrative is restated in the account of Jesus' adolescent visit to the Temple (2:49–50) and crucially again at the opening of his ministry in Nazareth (4:22).

<sup>289</sup> See also Lapsley, *Children in Isaiah*, 83, 'it matters that the divine message of both judgement and hope in Isaiah come in the form of children'.



The closing episode of Luke's account of Jesus' birth and infancy (2:41–52) recounts his visit as a twelve-year-old to the Jerusalem Temple.<sup>290</sup> Whilst not being described as σημεῖον, the event is presented by Luke as having the same impact upon Mary as the signal encounters with the shepherds and with Simeon; namely that of provoking amazed reflection upon the significance of the events (2:19, 33, 51). This implicit call to reflection is important for the reader in order to understand correctly the events of Jesus' adult life. Jesus' response to his mother's rebuke are the first words we hear from his own lips and are predicated upon the divine necessity, δεῖ, of his pursuing the obedience that he owes as son to the one for whose worship the Temple was built (2:49). His reply does not speak of his mission as much as of his personhood and represents the climax of Luke's introductory presentation. Until now the reader has heard the testimony of third parties as to the child's identity and mission, but now Jesus speaks for himself: only a twelve-year-old yet knowing himself to have God as his Father and needing to make autonomous decisions to engage in learning his affairs in his house rather than following the childhood demands associated with his human family. In this way, Luke prepares his parents within the narrative, and the reader outside the narrative, for the inevitable divergence of loyalty to family on earth and Father in heaven. This, however, still lies in the future. Luke reassures the reader that growing self-awareness does not lead to rebellious or precocious adolescence (2:51), and he recounts Jesus' return with his parents and obedience to them. For the first time (2:46), the subject of the narrative is referred to only by his name, Jesus, without the qualifiers of child (2:27), or boy (2:43).

Luke has introduced the Saviour in the birth and life of the child. The reader is prepared to appreciate the life and ministry of the man.

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<sup>290</sup> Luke's is a simple, coherent description of Jesus' behaviour showing both respect and insightfulness in his interaction with the teachers (2:46), which contrasts with highly embellished accounts given in non-canonical infancy narratives such as the Infancy Gospel of Thomas 19:2-5, in *New Testament Apocrypha*, 398-9, and the Arabic Infancy Gospel, *ibid.* 400.

### **Miraculous Encounters involving Children recorded in Luke's Narrative**

In chapter three, and as a prelude to opening his account of Jesus' active ministry, Luke presents the reader with a comprehensive reaffirmation of Jesus' identity as the prophetically announced eschatological Messiah (3:1–14), His Spirit anointed and divinely attested Son (3:21–22), and his Davidic, and ultimately divinely grounded, lineage (3:21–38).

In 4:1–13, as Jesus' self-understanding of his messianic role is set before the reader, confrontation is experienced with spiritual and social forces that challenge his role, as had been foretold by Simeon in his encounter with the child Jesus. Characteristic of Luke's literary style, it is from within the narrative itself, now from the lips of Jesus, that the reader is taken to the scriptures to find reassurance (4:4, 8, 12, 18, 19, 25–27). It is noteworthy that in the appeal Jesus makes to the precedence for opposition found in the prophetic ministries of Elijah and Elisha (4:22–27), children are at the heart of each event, children without whose presence, either as beneficiary or initiator, the miraculous interventions would not have taken place. This, albeit tacit, acknowledgement of the significance of children in God's dealings with Israel resonates with the theme already identified in Luke's introductory narrative. The remainder of the chapter records ministry activity by Jesus that corroborates his claim to be fulfilling the role of the messianic agent of Isaiah.

In 5:1–6:16, Luke presents the gathering together of his group of disciples, which implicitly the reader-disciple is being invited to join. In 6:17–9:50, Luke organizes his material into three narrative cycles which display the clear intention of helping the reader-disciple to grow in confidence and commitment to Jesus as the eschatological agent of God. Each 'cycle' can be understood to display a structure consisting of: Jesus' teaching, the call to the reader-disciple to embrace Jesus' teaching, his exemplifying action and the intended consequence when the reader-disciple follows that example.

<b>Jesus' teaching</b>	<b>Call to practice</b>	<b>Jesus' example</b>	<b>The intended result of following Jesus' example</b>
6:17–45	6:46–49	7:1–17	7:18–35. The questions of John the Baptist, the accredited messianic forerunner, are answered in the disciples' presence.
7:36–8:18	8:19–21	8:22–9:17	9:18–27. Peter acknowledges Jesus' messianic identity and role as the 'Christ of God'.
9:28–34	9:34–36	9:37–43a	9:43b–50. The disciple group is challenged to understand and accept Jesus' model of messianic ministry for themselves.

Integral to each of the sections that present the exemplary practice of Jesus, Luke sets the three recorded ministry engagements of Jesus with children:

7:11–17	The raising of the only son of the widow of Nain
8:40–56	The raising of Jairus' only daughter
9:37–43a	The restoration of the demon-possessed only son of the desperate father

If read in isolation, each incident might not attract the reader's special attention. However, their setting by Luke as central elements within each progressive cycle of his carefully crafted evidential presentation of Jesus' ministry is striking. Luke signals that a proper understanding, or hermeneutic, of Jesus' Isaianic messiahship will be informed by an appreciation of Jesus' ministry towards children. Indeed, the reader's readiness to join the disciples in their accompaniment of Jesus on his crucial journey to Jerusalem (9:51ff.) will be assessed as they are challenged to compare their own attitudes and aspirations as disciples of this Messiah, to those narrated in the discussion over greatness and to which Jesus responds by once again, and dramatically, setting a child in their midst (9:46–48).

As a prelude to assessing points of commonality between the three accounts of Jesus' personal engagement with children, each account will be briefly examined to highlight particular textual or internal narrative features.

### **7:11–17. The Raising of the Son of the Widow of Nain**

The son of the unnamed widow from the town of Nain is addressed by Jesus as *Νεανίσκε* (7:14), the same word used of Eutychus, the young man who fell from a window after falling asleep during Paul's late-night discourse at Troas in Ac 20:9–10. Older than *παῖς*, *τέκνον* or *βρέφος*, *νεανίσκος* is typically translated 'young man', which in the present instance, given the absence of reference to a grieving wife, implies that he probably lived in a state of premarital interdependence with his mother. The echoes of the Elijah event (1Ki 17:7–24), already referenced by Luke, are suggestive: the encounter takes place at the gate of the city, the man of God has compassion on the widow especially because the child is identified as the only son, the child is raised to life and 'given back' to his mother and the miracle is taken as a sign of divine visitation and authentication of the 'prophet' as a genuine agent of God.

### **8:40–56. The Raising of Jairus' Daughter**

Luke preserves the interweaving of the account of the healing of Jairus' daughter and that of the woman with a haemorrhage, as found in the other synoptics, whilst modestly recasting the narrative to reflect his stylistic and thematic preferences.<sup>291</sup> Mark's description of Jairus pleading for Jesus' intervention typically employs present tenses with an adverbial *πολλὰ*, muchly, to describe the intensity of his plea. The Lukan use of a present participle followed by the imperfect continuous provides the sense of active desperation, but in a more grammatically correct form. The diminutive *θυγάτριον*, little daughter (Mk 5:23), and *κοράσιον* (Mk 5:41), are rendered in Luke *θυγάτηρ* (8:42) and *παῖς* (8:51, 54), words more appropriate to her reported age of twelve years. Luke maintains the sense of pathos and personality by introducing the

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<sup>291</sup> For a stimulating study of the narrative from a child/feminist perspective, see Amy Allen, 'Reading for Inclusion: The Girl from Galilee (Luke 8:40–56),' *Journal of Childhood and Religion* 7, no. 1 (2017): 1–17.

information, not present in Mark, that the girl is her parents' only daughter. In a further suggestive addition to the Markan tradition, Luke introduces a closing comment that, in response to Jesus' command, the girl's 'spirit returned'. Notwithstanding the variation in vocabulary from the LXX, Luke's reference is best explained as a further allusion to Elijah's ministry in 1 Kings 17:21–22.

### **9:37–43a. The Restoration of the Demon-Possessed Son**

In distinction from the presentation of this event by both Mark and Matthew, Luke, by use of an introductory time reference, ties his account of the child's restoration directly to the mountain-top epiphany. In doing so he highlights the essential link between the grounding of the person and mission of Jesus in the glorious and overarching salvation history of Israel's God and the microcosm of anguish and deprivation embodied by the voiceless child of a nameless man in a crowd. The father pleads that Jesus might 'look upon' his only son and set him free from his affliction. Luke employs the verb ἐπιβλέπω, 9:38, to replace the intensity of appeal expressed in the more extensive dialogue between the man and Jesus found in Mark. Luke's only other use of this unusual preposition-verb construct<sup>292</sup> is significantly found in Mary's song (1:48), where she marvels at the gracious attention that the Lord has paid to her by making her the mother of the Messiah despite her lowly status. The experience of messianic Kingdom power that the father seeks for his son is nothing less than an expression of μεγάλα (1:49), the 'great things' that the 'One who sent Jesus' graciously did in the birth of Mary's son. The crowd will witness this and testify to the μεγαλειότητι τοῦ θεοῦ, greatness of God (9:43). The juxtaposition of Kingdom glory and greatness and human weakness and insignificance that Luke highlights in his gospel introduction is thus set before the reader once more. Prior to the challenge focused upon the question of what constitutes true greatness (9:46–48), Jesus once again makes the disciples' response to a child the test of their preparedness to share in

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<sup>292</sup> Found elsewhere in the NT only at Jas 2:3.

his ultimate confrontation with all the powers that oppose the Kingdom purposes of the One who sent him.

### **A Cyclical Pattern in Luke's Presentation of Jesus' Encounters with Children**

The encounters are dramatic. In each, the very life of the child is under threat. Yet even when the threat appears consummated, as in the cases of son of the widow of Nain and the daughter of Jairus and his wife, Jesus is presented as treating and addressing each child personally. He speaks directly to ὁ νεκρὸς, the dead youth (7:14–15); he takes the young girl by *her* hand, τῆς χειρὸς αὐτῆς, and addresses her as ἡ παῖς (8:54), happily translated in the NIV as 'my child'; and in 9:42, his exorcism of the demon is described as ἰάσατο τὸν παῖδα, healing the child, who he then personally returns to the child's own father. In exercising his Kingdom authority on behalf of each of these individuals he not only saves them from past circumstances that have contrived to threaten to end their short lives, but also restores to each the potentiality for future life beyond childhood: for a son to exercise support for a widowed mother and continue the family line with all its implications of covenant blessing, for a daughter growing into marriageable adolescence the possibility of motherhood, and for a young boy to live free from destructive dominance by Kingdom-denying evil spirits that are robbing him of his God-given autonomy to enjoy childhood and sonship. In each instance, the concluding act by Jesus of 'returning' the children to their family dramatically emphasises that Kingdom restoration understands that the child's individuality is properly to be comprehended and complete within the context of family life.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> The Lukan phrase, ἐπέστρεψεν τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτῆς (8:55) echoes the LXX of 1Ki 17:21 ἐπιστραψήτω δὴ ἡ ψυχὴ του παιδαρίου τούτου εἰς αὐτὸν, though Nolan, *The Gospel of Luke*, 426, considers only that the Lukan phrase 'may be influenced' by the Elijah tradition. Similarly, the use of ἔδωκεν (7:15) and ἀπέδωκεν (9:42) to describe returning the child to the parent is reminiscent of 1Ki 17:23 (LXX), ἔδωκεν αὐτὸν τῇ μητρὶ αὐτοῦ. Nolan's description of this detail as 'a compassionate gesture' towards the father (*ibid.*, 392), reflects a tendency amongst commentators to lose sight of the child as the principal focus of Jesus' intervention.

The statements in the narrative of each encounter, that the children are the parents' only child, is also striking and unique to Luke.<sup>294</sup> The import of this information within his narratives appears to be twofold: to illustrate the depth of parental affection and so intentionally highlight Jesus' compassionate responsiveness to such situations, whatever the social or religious status of the family, and also to further recall the example of Elijah's ministry to the only son of the widow of Zarephath (1K 17:12). In Jesus, God continues to be at work on behalf of the vulnerable, in this instance showing care for those threatened by the implications of childlessness.<sup>295</sup>

Not only is the drama of each child-encounter presented with due recognition of the importance of the family context, but also with explicit reference to the awareness and involvement of the community (7:12, 16; 8:52–53; 9:37–38, 43).<sup>296</sup> Jesus' action at Nain was certainly a community event in which he intervened as he placed his hand upon the 'bier' (7:14) being borne by community representatives, and his appeal to the widow to cease her weeping (7:13) was, as in the instance of Jairus' daughter (8:52), directed to the community representatives weeping in anticipation of her funeral. The father of the demonized boy is described as ἀνὴρ ἀπὸ τοῦ ὄχλου (9:38), and the whole encounter took place in the presence of the community of which the man and his son were a part. It is a characteristic of Luke's accounts that he recognizes the involvement of the communities of which the children were a part and records the empathy and

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<sup>294</sup> Jairus' reference to his daughter as reported in Mk 5:23 and Mt 9:18 might be held to imply that she is his only daughter. Luke, however, makes this explicit (8:47), in a reference that strongly echoes the affirmation in his unique record of the raising of the son of the widow of Nain (7:12). In the case of the demon-possessed boy Luke again presents this narrative detail (9:38), not reported by either Mark or Matthew.

<sup>295</sup> Childlessness was popularly perceived as a consequence of sin as indicated in the narrative of 1Ki 17:18. Notwithstanding Luke's commentary in 1:6–7 combatting this perception, the social implications of childlessness could threaten social marginalization and penury, particularly for widows, as well as an inevitable sense of socio-religious alienation at the prospect of losing active participation in the ongoing covenant life of the people of God.

<sup>296</sup> Green's comment, *The Gospel of Luke*, 387, that 'the crowds' are an 'almost permanent feature of the Lukan landscape', fails to recognize that in each Lukan child-encounter narrative, apart from 'crowds' that are accompanying Jesus, the community of the child's family is also represented and becomes an active participant in the encounter.

highly charged emotional atmosphere attendant upon the desperate condition of the children and their families.<sup>297</sup>

Luke presents the reader with a cycle of three narratives in each of which a child in need is 'seen' by Jesus and is kept in view throughout the narrative as a personal beneficiary of Kingdom restoration. The cumulative impact of these encounters in which Jesus responds to children as individuals within their family and community contexts, prepares the reader to understand the significance of the 'sign action' shortly to be presented by Luke indicating the importance of receiving 'this child' in his name (9:48). This narrative section of Jesus' Galilean ministry thus has John the Baptist, the Twelve and finally 'the disciples', the reader included, being successively presented with a scheme of the ministry activity of Jesus that places a child at its centre. They are challenged to embrace for themselves the model of messiahship that Jesus embodies. Only so will they be prepared to follow in his footsteps on the journey to Jerusalem and ultimately to the ends of the earth, as authentic agents of his Kingdom, and continue, 'in his name', the agenda of the One who sent him.

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<sup>297</sup> In the case of the raising of the son of the widow of Nain, the community impact is described with the suggestive use of the verb Ἐπεσκέψατο (7:16), of God's coming to help/showing his concern for his people. The verb is twice used by Luke in his introduction, in Zechariah's prophecy (1:68, 78) to speak of God's eschatological intervention in the births of John and Jesus. It is also employed, significantly for Luke, in Ac 15:14 to describe God taking a people for himself from amongst the Gentiles. The Ac 15 usage is notable because Peter, whose ministry to the Roman centurion is in view, is uniquely referred to, not by the common form of his name, Σίμων (which occurs 16 times in Luke–Acts), but as Συμεών, Simeon, the form of the name used of the prophetic figure of the infancy narrative (2:25ff). Whilst the context makes it clear that it is Simon Peter who is in view, the lack of textual variations (unlike at 2 Pe 1:1, the only other use of Συμεών), indicates the originality of the more 'difficult reading', and an intentional allusion to Simeon's temple court prophecy (2:32), that the child Jesus would become 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles' – the thrust of Simon Peter's intervention.



## Children in the Teaching of Jesus

### 7:29–35. Jesus' Commentary upon Reactions to his and the Baptist's Ministries

The section dealing with Jesus' response to John the Baptist, 7:18–35, is shared with Matthew 11:2–19, with the exception of what might be read as interpretative insertions by each evangelist (Mt 11:12–15 and Lk 7:29–30), which in the case of Luke can be read either as a continuation of Jesus' discourse or as an explanatory editorial parenthesis.<sup>298</sup> Either way, from a narrative standpoint, the impact of the words is the same as they help the reader to understand that the opposition experienced by both the Baptist and Jesus is the result of a rejection, by people of the religious establishment, of God's saving purposes for Israel; a rejection presaged by their failure to acknowledge John's ministry through baptism.<sup>299</sup> That this rejection indicates a deep-seated condition of heart-felt opposition is then illustrated by Jesus' parabolic reference to children at play in the marketplace (Mt 11:16–19 and Lk 7:31–35). The παιδία, who can be heard denouncing the obdurate character of playmates in the context of their games, well illustrate the thoroughgoing negativity of the response of Israel's religious leadership to John's call for them to turn back to the Lord.<sup>300</sup> As in the statement of Israel's need for repentance at 1:16–17, and the description of John's future ministry given by the angel, so again the metaphor of children is employed by

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<sup>298</sup> Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 297, asserts general commentary support for reading 11:29–30 as words of Jesus, though more recent scholarship prefers to understand the text as editorial comment, so: Nolan, *The Gospel of Luke*, 342; Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 298; and Francois Bovon, *Luke, Volume 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, Hermeneia (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2002), 285; Darrell Bock, *Luke-Volume 1, 1:1-9:50*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1994), 676–7 has an extended discussion of the different positions.

<sup>299</sup> References to children playing in the streets of the eschatological Jerusalem in Zc 8:5 or to Wisdom playing before God in creation (Pr 8:30–31), reflect the idea of play as an expression of happiness or fulfilment, and do not inform or have contextual resonance with the context of the parable that comes embedded in tradition linking it to the rejection of the ministries of John and Jesus.

<sup>300</sup> Quasi-allegorical interpretations of the children at play confuse the function of the saying and leave the commentator open to unfounded interpretations of the 'children'. See Bock's review of the allegorical alternatives, *Luke-Volume 1*, 680–681, and his interpretation of the imagery of children as representing an inferior or immature response to what God was doing in John and Jesus. 'Jesus picks a simple everyday illustration of children at play, thus rebuking the people for being no better than children in their response to God's work, Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 300. This generation is immature and childish.' *Ibid.*, 681.

Luke to illustrate the need for a positive response to the eschatological messengers.<sup>301</sup> This response, spelled out in 7:29, is linked to the concluding comment in 7:35 by Luke's use of ἐδικαιώθη, in the sense of 'is declared to be righteous'. In this summary comment upon the whole section, the word is repeated in a quasi-proverbial affirmation, that σοφία will be seen vindicated in the lives of all her children, πάντων τῶν τέκνων αὐτῆς, who construct their lives in accordance with his word and will. These 'children of wisdom' of 7:35 are none other than 'the children' to whom 'the fathers' should turn their hearts (1:17), namely those who live out 'the wisdom of the righteous' (1:17), and so become a people prepared for the Lord.

#### **10:18–24. Jesus' Joyful Commentary upon the Positive Experience of the Seventy-Two Missionaries**

The opening phrase of the section 10:21, 'In that same hour', serves in Luke, not only to establish a continuation of the theme of rejoicing, but also to make a clear narrative link to the preceding account of the mission of the seventy-two. Whatever reference the ταῦτα of 10:21, revealed by the Father to the νηπίους, little children, might have had in an alternative hypothetical setting, their reference in Luke's narrative is most naturally to the experiences of the disciples undertaking their appointed mission, ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί σου (10:17). 'In his name' the disciples had entered into the eschatological agenda of Isaiah 61 and Luke 4, and experienced for themselves both the power of the Kingdom of God and the rejection of human society. Jerome Kodell suggests that the disciples' enthusiasm concerning the power they experienced against demons displays a continued hankering after worldly greatness (9:46), and that Jesus' comment in 10:20 implies a 'subtle rebuke'.<sup>302</sup> However, Luke's linking of the comment to his report of Jesus' divinely inspired elation (10:21), most naturally implies an overriding affirmation of the disciples, who are beginning to discover their potential, as 'little

<sup>301</sup> Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 301, gives a helpful review of possible backgrounds to the illustration, but his suggestion that 'The reproach in v. 32 must be one directed by the Jews against God's messengers, rather than the verdict of Jesus on the Jews', fails to relate the passage either to Luke's introduction to John's ministry in 1:16–17 or to take into account the consistently positive representation of children elsewhere in Luke.

<sup>302</sup> Jerome Kodell, 'Luke and the Children: The Beginning and the End of the Great Interpolation (Luke 9:46–56; 18:9–23),' *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 49 (1987): 425.

children’, to live out their ultimate calling to become ‘his witnesses’ (1:8).<sup>303</sup> Although Luke, unlike Matthew at 11:25, highlights the Spirit’s activity in Jesus’ joy, the act of revelation itself is specifically attributed to the Father. The uncharacteristic lack of reference to any instrumentality of the Spirit in the process of eschatological revelation<sup>304</sup> can be understood when the passage is read in the light of the ‘child-reception’ teaching of Jesus at 9:46–48. There, the promise is given that the presence of Jesus, the one sent by the Father, and the Father’s own presence, will be experienced by those who receive the ‘child’ in his name. Luke now has Jesus declaring that it is his Father who revealed to the disciples that what they have experienced is a participation in the role and mission of his ‘the sent one’. In doing so the missionary Father’s self-giving to those who have ‘received Jesus’ by undertaking his ministry, in his way and in his name is confirmed. This privilege of the disciples and, by inference, of the reader, to be able to participate in the long-awaited messianic mission, is emphasized in the closing saying of the section, 10:23–24. Here indeed is legitimate greatness within the Father’s scheme of salvation history.

### **11:1–13. Jesus teaches about Prayer and characterizes the Disciples as Children of the Heavenly Father**

The teaching of Jesus about prayer in the passage 11:1–13, is grounded in the father-child relationship graciously offered by God to those who seek his Kingdom and Spirit. This development of the potential of the child metaphor, already noted in Luke’s earlier presentation of Jesus’ teaching, becomes explicit in the first and final elements

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<sup>303</sup> Darrell Bock comments that ἡγαλλιάσατο, rejoiced, as used in Luke, carries the sense of eschatological rejoicing tied to fulfilment: 1:14–55, 44, 47; Ac 2:26, 46; 16:34. *Luke Volume 2: 9:51–24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 1009.

<sup>304</sup> Youngmo Cho, *Spirit and Kingdom in the Writings of Luke and Paul*, Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005). Cho argues strongly for a revelatory rather than ‘operational-soteriological’ characterization of the Spirit’s work in Luke–Acts. He argues that ‘Luke’s general perspective of his pneumatology is of the prophetic dimension, following the traditional understanding of Intertestamental Judaism’ (138) and, ‘generally understands the Spirit in a prophetic character’. He concludes that ‘although soteriological pneumatology is present at Qumran, particularly in 1QH (and Wisdom), it should not be regarded as a major or dominant strand within Judaism’ (196). Pace Green, who speaks of the ‘empowerment of the Spirit’ rather than the invoked authority of Jesus, ‘in his name’, as the combative power of the disciples against the demons. *The Gospel of Luke*, 421.

of the four pericopes brought together here. The answer to Jesus' 'child-disciples' prayer to God their Father (11:3) is figured in the generous provision by the parabolic father-with-children, of ὅσων χηρήζει, whatever his insistent petitioner needs (11:8). This metaphor is taken up again in the final parabolic saying, where the application to the post-Pentecost reader becomes even more apparent as Jesus assures them of the gift of the Holy Spirit in response to their filial appeals to God.

### **A 'Child-Motif' in Luke's Narrative? Four Criteria**

Children are encountered as a real or metaphorical presence in ten out of the twenty-four chapters of Luke's gospel narrative. Whether this represents a 'preference for the child' as a narrative figure with particular power to contribute to his compositional intentions, meriting the denomination of 'motif', is what must now be assessed. The outcome of this assessment will be significant for the detailed exegesis of the two key passages, 9:46–48 and 18:15–17, which are set by Luke at the beginning and close of the journey to Jerusalem, and in which Jesus specifically presents children to his disciples as figures of reference for a correct understanding of Kingdom practice.<sup>305</sup>

I suggest four criteria for making this assessment:

#### **Do 'Children', as a Category, carry 'Motif' Quality for Luke?**

The fundamental importance of Israel's scriptures in defining Luke's world-view has already been noted. The frequency with which he draws upon or alludes to the role of children as recorded in the historical and prophetic tradition, and the way that he consistently and carefully grounds the events of the births of John and Jesus in these traditions, is evidence that he considers the category of children and childhood as

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<sup>305</sup> Compare to Gundry's assessment of the material in Mark's gospel. 'Mark includes a substantial amount of material on children in his Gospel....Taken together, they show small or young children as occupying a significant space in Jesus' public ministry and as forming a motif in Mark's Gospel. Thus, in the following comments I shall treat these texts as mutually interpretative.' Judith Gundry, 'Children in the Gospel of Mark, with Special Attention to Jesus' Blessing of the Children (Mark 10.13–16) and the Purpose of Mark,' in *The Child in the Bible*, edited by Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 148.

legitimized by scriptural precedent and as offering a coherent and compelling hermeneutic to correctly understanding the origins of the Messiah.

**Are there Inherent Qualities of the Category that serve to inform Key Concerns in his Composition?**

The counter-cultural and counter-intuitive quality of the status-inversion dimension of eschatological salvation presented by Luke in the divinely attested declarations of the birth narratives could hardly find a more appropriate motif for its presentation than that of the child with its innate vulnerability and powerlessness. In the face of an obdurate and power-driven religious class, Luke presents Jesus as bringer of a revolutionary, 'upside-down' Kingdom, in which divine affirmation and transformation consistently flow through children and those who share their qualities of weakness and dependency.

**Do the References to Children and Childhood function in a Consistent and Coherent Manner within Luke's Narrative?**<sup>306</sup>

Children are presented as a symbol of those who, in their utter vulnerability and dependence, are gracefully enabled to perceive and embrace the signs of the Kingdom. These 'sons of wisdom' are the figure of those prepared to embrace the coming of the Messiah and his Kingdom, a characterization consistently presented in 1:17, 1:39–45, 2:47, 7:31, 7:35, 10:21 and 18:16–18. The symbolic quality of the category is affirmed by Jesus in the nature of his encounters with real children where they are the recipients of the transformative power of Kingdom blessings. In the setting of Luke's narrative, Jesus' response to children serves as a 'Kingdom standard' against which the 'Kingdom status' of other characters is revealed.

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<sup>306</sup> The distinction between frequency and consistency of usage in assigning motif quality is reflected in Luke Johnson's assessment of Luke's narrative use of 'Possessions'. He makes the observation that although 'Luke consistently speaks about possessions, he does not speak about possessions consistently'. Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sharing Possessions: Mandate and Symbol of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 13.

### **Does the Category embody the Potential to influence the Reader-Disciple?**

In Luke, the metaphorical content of the child is defined primarily by the relationship of children to all worldly forms of power. It is the innate weakness, vulnerability and dependence of each God-created child-person which so powerfully serve Luke's purpose of presenting the messianic mission in Luke 4. For Theophilus, an adult whose understanding of human value will have grown out of his personal experience of development from childhood within a Greco-Roman culture in which children were the epitome of inconsequentiality, the metaphor would carry the potential for embodying the radical challenge of the Kingdom Jesus was proposing.<sup>308</sup> As a once-child himself, and perhaps a parent and a citizen conditioned by the cultural norms of his day, the consistently and insistently present children of Luke's narrative would have an undeniable power to challenge Theophilus' understanding of human value. As Brent Strawn observes in relation to the power of the parent-child metaphor employed in the Old Testament to describe the relationship between God and his people, ultimately the metaphor, 'works because it has been lived'.<sup>309</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Within the literary narrative that is Luke's gospel, children play a significant role. At times, they take centre stage, becoming the focus of Kingdom activity; at others they serve to reveal the place of other characters in relation to the Kingdom, but consistently Luke can be seen to value and intentionally employ the tradition that he has received in which children and childhood figure. The perspective of a narrative reading of the gospel makes it appropriate, therefore, to speak of a 'child-motif' in Luke's presentation of the mission of Jesus and its implications for the reader.

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<sup>308</sup> For a full discussion of the socio-political marginalization of children in the Greco-Roman world see the following section, 'Greatness and the Child-Reception Act'.

<sup>309</sup> See Brent Strawn, 'Israel My Child: The Ethics of a Biblical Metaphor,' in *The Child in the Bible*, edited by Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 131.

## THE SETTING OF THE CHILD-RECEPTION EVENTS IN LUKE'S GOSPEL

### Introduction

The context given by Luke to the dramatic child-reception events of 9:46–48 and 18:15–17 will be considered first in relation to their place within the structure of the gospel as a whole, and then in their relationship to the immediate literary context.

### The Child-Reception Events within the Structure of the Gospel as a Whole

9:46–48 is set by Luke at the close of the Galilean ministry with its climax in the revelation of the messianic personhood of Jesus (9:18–36), and the entry point to his narrative of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem (9:51). It is generally accepted that the section most naturally concludes at the point that Luke rejoins the material that he shares with Mark at 18:14.<sup>310</sup> As such, it falls between Jesus' second and third passion predictions, at 9:43–45 and 18:31–33.

The complementary, or co-textual, character of the two child-focused events is displayed in the repetition of the central thematic elements of disciple error and correction mediated through dramatic child-reception, and the setting of the two pericopes in close relation to the passion predictions.

It is striking that Luke's compositional activity not only introduces this journey framework with teaching based upon an intentional engagement of Jesus with a child, but that he prefaces the point of re-entry to the Markan material and continuance into the final part of his account of Jesus' life and ministry, by recording a second, similar, incident (18:15–17). This device, a Lukan stylistic characteristic according to Kodell,<sup>311</sup> serves to emphasize the significance of the texts in relation to the 'bracketed' section. Surprisingly few commentators remark upon this 'bracketing' of the journey narrative with the child-reception events.<sup>312</sup> Kodell, however, has explored this feature of Luke's

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<sup>310</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of alternative positions, see Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 400–402.

<sup>311</sup> Kodell, 'Luke and the Children', 417.

<sup>312</sup> John Noland, who does make this observation, fails to reflect upon its possible significance in terms of Luke's editorial intentions. *Luke 9:21–18:34* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1993).

narrative, particularly as it differs from the placement, and therefore narrative impact, of the pericopes made by Mark and Matthew.<sup>313</sup> He observes that at the end of the so-called 'Great Interpolation', Luke does not include the Markan pericope concerning divorce (Mk 10:2–12), nor the Markan detail recording a change in location (Mk 10:16–17). He notes that these omissions permit a stronger interpretative link in Luke, between the child-reception pericope (18:14–17), and the Pharisee/tax-collector incident, that he sets immediately before (18:9–14). It is perhaps surprising that he fails to note the interpretative significance of the passages that Luke places in relation to 9:46–48 at the beginning of his journey narrative.

It is generally recognized that the material gathered by Luke into the journey narrative, and framed by the two child-reception events, serves to heighten the reader's awareness of the eschatological nature of the increasingly explicit conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities, articulated in the repeated passion predictions.<sup>314</sup> The journey narrative within Luke's compositional scheme offers the reader a dramatic exposition of the eschatological promises first presented in the infancy narratives. Simeon's receiving the sign-child into his arms, ἐδέξατο αὐτὸ εἰς τὰς ἀγκάλας (2:28) and seeing in him the Lord's Christ (2:26), who will be instrumental in bringing about an eschatological transformation in the social framework of God's people (2:34), finds echoes in the two child-reception texts: in Jesus' challenge to his disciples to abjure their commitment to the status-based framework of the dominant Greco-Roman and Jewish hierarchies and to receive 'this' child, δέξεται τοῦτο τὸ παιδίον (9:48), and for them to receive the Kingdom as they would a child, δέξεται τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ ὡς παιδίον (18:15–17). The contra-Kingdom behaviour of the disciples at the close of the journey narrative in not 'receiving' the children that are brought to Jesus for blessing,

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<sup>313</sup> Kodell, *'Luke and the Children'*, 429.

<sup>314</sup> Mark Powell has a helpful review of the scholarly discussions around the 'journey motif' in Luke, *What Are They Saying About Luke?*, 25–7. In particular he summarises the study of Helmuth Egelkraut *Jesus' Mission to Jerusalem: A redaction Critical Study of the Travel narrative in the Gospel of Luke, Lk. 9:51–19:48*, Europäische Hochschulschriften (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1976), concluding that: 'Jesus' journey is emblematic of God's visitation, a visitation that is resisted and finally rejected. The journey, or rather, the visitation, is intensely eschatological because, for Israel, the Kingdom is present and the crisis imminent', *What Are They Saying About Luke?*, 26.



is a clear demonstration that they, like the Jewish leaders, have failed to understand the eschatological focus of Jesus' messianic mission on the poor (4:18). The presentation of this failure both prepares the reader for the disciples' equivocal behaviour in the forthcoming events in Jerusalem, and also represents a challenge to the reader's own community to judge their preparedness to engage in the ongoing mission of Jesus by considering their own responsiveness to the 'children' and all they represent.<sup>315</sup>

### **The Child-Reception Events in relation to their Immediate Context**

As observed by Kodell, Luke sets the 9:46–48 pericope in unqualified relation to the surrounding narrative elements. The reader-disciple is confronted by it after having received the revelation of the messianic personhood of Jesus (9:23–36), observed the exorcism of the demon from a child (9:37–42), and heard the second passion prediction (9:43–45). The child-reception event is then followed by a query regarding an exorcist not of the disciple's inner-circle (9:48–50), and Jesus' crucial decision to journey with his disciples to Jerusalem (9:51) — a journey whose serious implications are presaged not only by the ominous mention of his departure from the earthly stage and description of this decision as αὐτὸς τὸ πρόσωπον ἐστήρισεν,<sup>316</sup> but also by a story of rejection in a Samaritan village (9:52–56) and explicit warnings about the cost of discipleship (9:57–62). A further and final child-motif reference, 10:21–23, is made to declare the divine pleasure at the disciples' successful participation as effective agents in the mission of the One who sent Jesus.

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<sup>315</sup> Joseph Fitzmyer reviews the significance that Luke gives to the journey narrative for all the actors in the drama of salvation history, from Jesus himself, to all those who would figure as witnesses in his second volume and beyond: 'If Jesus moves to the city of destiny according to what has been determined, he nevertheless equips his followers for the mission of proclaiming him and his message of salvation after his death and resurrection to "the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8) The travel account becomes then a collection of teaching for the young missionary church, in which the instruction for the disciples alternates with debates with opponents'. *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, The Anchor Yale Bible 28 (London: Doubleday / Yale University Press, 1970), 826.

<sup>316</sup> For a discussion of this usage, see Robert Derrenbacher, 'A Response to Thomas Brodie: Luke's Use of the Elijah-Elisha Narrative,' in *The Elijah-Elisha Narrative in the Composition of Luke* (London: Bloomsbury / T&T Clark, 2014), 32.

The lack of scene-change in regard to the immediate narrative context of 9:46–48, sets it in a hermeneutically closer relationship with the surrounding text than do the settings found in Mark or Matthew. Luke does not include the geographical references to Capernaum, nor the dramatic location of ‘the house’, which preface the accounts of Mk 9:33 and Mt 17:24–26. As Tannehill has noted, the fact that there is no change of scene between the disciples’ inability to comprehend Jesus’ pronouncement of his suffering and death and the presentation of their discussion about greatness could indicate that Luke wants the reader to understand that the two things are linked, and that the reason for this incomprehension is in fact to be found in the worldliness displayed by the disciples in 9:46.<sup>317</sup>

In relation to the preceding narrative recounting the disciples’ failure to exorcise a demon from the young boy who was brought to them, Luke, unlike Mark and Matthew, records nothing of the disciples’ questioning of Jesus about the cause of their failure, or of Jesus’ reply (Mk 9:28–29). This serves to leave the significance and understanding of the exorcism event open for elucidation in the passage recording the greatness debate and Jesus’ child-focused response — an exegetical link that becomes important when considering the narrative value of the passage immediately following 9:46–48 in which a story of *successful* exorcism is presented.

The coherence of the passages that form the immediate hermeneutical context of 9:46–48 is enhanced further in Luke by the absence, in his account, of the Markan pericope (Mk 9:35), which contains a pronouncement by Jesus about the first in the Kingdom needing to be servant of all. As Alfred Leaney and others have noted, the Markan placement of this pronouncement, which in effect answers the question raised by the disciples’ debate, separates the greatness question from the child-reception event.<sup>318</sup> In Luke, however, it is unambiguously the symbolic act and teaching that provide this answer.

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<sup>317</sup> Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke–Acts*, 227.

<sup>318</sup> Alfred R. C. Leaney, “Jesus and the Symbol of the Child (Luke ix.46–48)” *Expository Times*, 56 (May 1954): 91–92.

Unlike Mark, then, whose introductory framing of the greatness debate and symbolic child-focused response tends to loosen the pericope from the narrative sweep of the literary context and sees the event as primarily informing his presentation of the qualities of authentic discipleship, or of Matthew, whose presentation of the event is specifically crafted to develop understanding of the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven (Mt 18:1–4), Luke presents the pericope firmly embedded within his narrative presentation of Jesus’ eschatological mission and its challenge to the disciples’ heart-mind set.

The success of the unknown exorcist in ministering in the name of Jesus, and Jesus’ affirmation of his ministry (9:49–51), contrasts with the earlier failure of the disciples, who Jesus characterizes as belonging to a γενεὰ ἄπιστος καὶ διεστραμμένη (9:41), a generation which is failing to perceive and share in the eschatological event that his ministry is inaugurating. Although the disciples had ‘received’ the child brought to them by the anxious father, (9:40), they failed to exercise the eschatological power present in Jesus himself and exercised by the ‘outsider’ exorcist who acted ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί σου. John’s description of the unnamed exorcist as οὐκ ἀκολουθεῖ μεθ’ ἡμῶν (9:49) represents an implied lack of perceived status, as not being part of the inner circle of the Twelve. However, the affirmation of his ministry by Jesus showed that he in fact enjoyed a status that allowed him to act as an effective agent of the Kingdom when the disciples, with their ‘this-generation’ attitudes, had failed to do so.

As has been noted already, the prevailing theme of the journey to Jerusalem narrative is one of conflict and growing opposition, and this is strongly presented in its opening passages (9:53; 10:3, 10–16). However, Luke does so within a careful and consistent affirmation that, despite this lamentable if inevitable opposition, the mission of Jesus will be graciously and successfully carried forward. The disciples’ new experience as heralds and agents of the Kingdom of God in the face of demonic opposition was to prove as positive as their previous experience, prior to the child-reception event, had been negative. Luke records their celebration that now, acting ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί σου (10:17), they had found the success that had previously eluded them, the same success as the unnamed exorcist. What is striking is that Luke then records Jesus’ response to

their positive mission experience by citing yet another child-illustrated saying (10:21), in which Jesus, ἡγαλλιάσατο τῷ πνεύματι τῷ ἁγίῳ, addresses his Father, πάτερ κύριε τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ τῆς γῆς...ἀπεκάλυψας αὐτὰ νηπίοις. This pericope from the Q material, which Matthew places in the different context of the failure of the authorities to understand and accept Jesus' ministry, Luke has employed as a commentary upon the disciples' experience and success in the mission activities that he had commissioned them to.<sup>319</sup>

### **Conclusions regarding the Narrative Settings of the Child-Reception Events**

From the perspective of the gospel's composition as a whole, the child-reception pericopae, hermeneutically enriched as they are by the treatment of children within Luke's presentation of Jesus' messianic mission, can be understood to act as significant markers in the development of his mission-focused narrative composition. Their setting, particularly in relation to the immediate narrative context of the second passion prediction and the beginning of the journey to Jerusalem, is best understood as intentional and indicative of their hermeneutical significance.

I shall now consider how Luke's presentation of the events emphasises their qualities as prophetically powerful sign-acts, pointing forward through the gospel narrative into the life experience of the reader-disciple and constituting a call for radical transformation of attitude and action for those who seek to properly understand and participate in the mission of the One who sent Jesus.

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<sup>319</sup> The mention of the active presence of the Holy Spirit, the acknowledged agent of eschatological activity, in Jesus' pronouncement, absent in Mt 11:25, and Jesus' final comment (10:23–24), in which prophets and kings, βασιλεῖς, rather than the prophets and righteous men, δίκαιοι, of Mt 13:17, are cited as those who had wanted to witness the events in which the disciples had participated, enhances further the eschatological character of the missionary enterprise.

## THE CHILD-RECEPTION EVENT AT 9:46–48, AS A ‘SIGN-ACT’

### Introduction

Luke presents a lean, action-driven account of Jesus’ response to the revelation of the disciples’ worldly, counter-Kingdom heartset (9:46). The disciples are in need of radical Kingdom transformation and the ‘child-reception’ action is Jesus’ chosen vehicle to dramatically convey this message.<sup>320</sup>

### The Sign Quality of the Child-Reception Event in 9:46–48

As a response to the disciples’ worldly concern over relative status, Jesus’ action of placing the child, *παρ’ ἑαυτῶ*, in the place of social privilege, is firstly an enacted declaration of what he considers to constitute greatness in Kingdom terms; despite her worldly insignificance, the child is declared to be honoured, as she is set at the side of the King.<sup>321</sup> Confrontation, however, is added to revelation as the disciples are called to embrace this challenge to their current adherence to the status-value system of the prevailing world order, and to imitate Jesus’ act of receiving *τοῦτο τὸ παιδίον*. Receiving this child, *ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματί μου*, interpreted in accordance with Luke–Acts’ primary use of the phrase, points to an action imbued with, and potentialized by, the

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<sup>320</sup> Sally McFague argues in her chapter ‘Metaphor, Parable and Scripture,’ in *Metaphorical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1982), 52, ‘that Jesus’ life as an embodiment of the Kingdom is one protagonist in the drama; the other protagonist is the economic, political, national and social mores of his time’. This understanding is perfectly exemplified in the Lukan presentation of the child-reception event, where the disciples’ discussion paints the backdrop of societal mores against which the shocking drama of his receiving a child is presented. McFague’s characterization of parables as a means of comparing and challenging the ways of the world with the Kingdom way of God, underpins her description of the child-reception event as an ‘acted parable’.

<sup>321</sup> It is possible that the Luke–Acts use of Ps 110:1 suggests the social significance of this act. The Lord’s invitation to ‘my Lord’ to sit at ‘his right hand’ reflects the convention that to set someone at one’s side is to attribute honour. Jesus himself is recorded as citing the text in the context of a denunciation of the corrupt value system of teachers of the law (20:41-47) and invokes the convention in his final response to the Jewish leadership’s insistence that he clarify his claim to messiahship (22:69). Luke has Peter twice citing Ps 110:1 in his Pentecost apologetic for Jesus (Ac 2:33, 35).

Kingdom-authority of Jesus, an authority that they will receive as they receive him and the One who sent him.<sup>322</sup>

The intention of Jesus' action and accompanying pronouncement is, therefore, three-fold: to expose wrong attitudes, to call upon and to enable the disciples to become active participants with him in the mission he received from his Father — a mission that is to bring transformation of life-experience to those who, like the child, are powerless and without social value in the prevailing world order. Luke presents a shocking, confrontational action and commentary that signals the need for active, imitative response, a response that will catalyse, for the disciples, their direct experience of and participation in this mission.<sup>323</sup>

Whilst the immediate prophetic force of the sign-act narrative is sharpened by the description of the child as 'this child', emphasising the immediate and concrete reality of action being enjoined upon the disciples, the child inevitably takes on a metaphorical value for those outside the narrative world.<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> The phrase, which does not appear in John or Paul, is common in Lk 9:49; 21:8; 24:47, and Ac 4:17–18; 5:28, 40; 15:14.

<sup>323</sup> Jesus invades the disciples' 'life-world' discussion of status and greatness, with an expression of 'Kingdom life-world' which challenges the very 'systemic social framework' within which their life-world exists, and which has kept them enthralled in an illusion of normality. It is as if Jesus has broken in from a parallel dimension, and with the child at his side has leapt through and shattered the mirror in which the disciples had been viewing their status condition, destroying the illusion and the system of worldly, 'godless' values that framed it.

<sup>324</sup> The metaphorical potential of 'child' within the broad sphere of adult social discourse is boundless; 'Children scatter metaphors without limit as real children'. Keith White, 'He Placed a Little Child in the Midst — Jesus, the Kingdom and Children,' in *The Child in the Bible* edited by Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 365. The metaphor must be provided with context to allow for a coherent sharpening of focus and application. When introduced into a particular narrative context then the metaphor can take on a parabolic role in relation to the participants in the narrative and meta-narrative worlds, alerting those who are touched by it to fresher or wider existential possibilities than those that had previously informed their world view. With 'parabolic force' it can act as a window from what is currently known, allowing the entry of world-changing perceptions from 'beyond'. Cf. Eduard Schweitzer's comment that 'Jesus does not make a straightforward point and then use a story to illustrate it. Rather a story appears to be required in order to communicate something about the nature of the Kingdom that cannot be conveyed without the language of parables or the performance of a parabolic action'. *The Good News According to Luke*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1984), 24.

A metaphor may be considered to take on the quality of a sign when it is embodied in an existential reality within the narrative world and intentionally directed in a confrontational manner towards the participants in the life drama being narrated. In the case of 9:36–38, the deliberate introduction of a child figure by the principal protagonist, Jesus, may be understood in this light. The child is brought from ‘off-stage’, to inform a particular adult context within a narrative that has consistently developed what I have argued to be a child-motif. The crucial moment at which the child-event is staged, at the climax of a journey of discovery about the true identity of Jesus and the beginning of the journey of understanding about the implications of that discovery, is indicative of an event of hermeneutical importance in Luke’s development of his narrative.<sup>325</sup>

The sign is by nature both revelatory and confrontational.<sup>326</sup> It not only points towards a different understanding of ‘the world’, but also demands a response which will affect the actor’s life within the narrative world. The world is forever changed by the appearance of a sign. The sign is purposeful and implies the possibility, or even necessity, of concrete change. The actors will forever be defined within the narrative drama by their reaction to the sign. In that sense, especially where the sign is given in the context of religious drama, the sign may be said to possess a prophetic quality. The event presented in 9:46–48 has been dramatically presaged at the outset of Luke’s narrative by the account of Simeon’s declaration that the child Jesus, set before him by Mary and Joseph, 2:27, was destined to be a sign of convulsive social transformation.

It is proposed, therefore, that the dramatic and dynamic nature of the event is well characterised by the descriptive, ‘*sign-act*’.

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<sup>325</sup> ‘Like so much of the two-volume work of Luke, the account of the Nazareth synagogue scene is presented with an abundance of dramatic and literary skill. The dramatic character of the context should not be glossed over.’ Prior, *Jesus The Liberator*, 122.

<sup>326</sup> ‘What is it that we are meaning by the term ‘prophet sign’: not a visual aid intended to assist in teaching — rather, the dramatic equivalent of the spoken oracle; not an efficacious act, which causes something to happen, the dramatic embodiment of the divine purpose, which otherwise may well be at present hidden.’ Morna Hooker, *The Signs of a Prophet: The Prophetic Actions of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1997), 38–39.

### **A Comparison with the Pericope's use in Mark 9:33–37 and Matthew 18:1–5**

In distinction from Luke's treatment, Mark emphasises the affectionate way in which Jesus deals with the child. The use of ἐναγκαλισάμενος draws attention to the *manner* of the response appropriate to a vulnerable and dependent infant. This focus has the effect of qualifying the act of 'receiving'. Kingdom greatness is to be shown by emulating this manner, by welcoming the vulnerable and dependent with the gentle accepting care with which Jesus took the child into his arms. The event is well understood as an acted parable effectively presenting a picture of appropriate behaviour to be emulated by the disciple, but lacking the more imperative, prophetic, sign-act quality present in Luke's narrative.

In Matthew, the episode has a similarly gentle but even less confrontational tone. The issue of greatness is presented as a legitimate enquiry made by the disciples rather than a reprehensible attitude exposed by Jesus. In contrast to the direct action of Jesus in taking the child, in Mark, λαβών, and Luke, ἐπιλαβόμενος, Jesus' action in Matthew is less emphatic, implicitly depending upon the readiness of the child to answer his call, προσκαλεσάμενος. The teaching introduced into the narrative at Mt 18:3–4 redirects the significance of Jesus' action away from the *child* to focus instead upon the disciples' need to cultivate child-like qualities, γένησθε ὡς τὰ παιδιά, and particularly the attitude of humility, ταπεινώσει ἑαυτὸν ὡς τὸ παιδίον τοῦτο. The call to 'receive the child' which is central to interpreting Jesus' response to the greatness debate in Mark and Luke, whilst still present at Mt 18:5 has become effectively dissociated from the question about greatness by his metaphorical treatment of childhood and now serves as a call to Kingdom-care for the 'child' over against reprehensible action that might lead ἐνα τῶν μικρῶν τούτων into sin (Mt 18:6). The narrative intention of the child-event in regard to the question of what constitutes greatness is therefore pursued primarily by utilizing the metaphorical potential of the child to suggest



Kingdom-appropriate adult attitudes rather than focusing upon the action of Jesus in respect of the child.<sup>327</sup>

Whilst each of the Evangelists can be seen to exploit the metaphorical potential of the child in a distinctive manner, Luke does so with a particular imperative quality which alerts the reader-disciple to the significance which he attributes to the event within the development of his narrative.

### **Other Uses of the Sign-Act Genre in Luke**

To clarify further the nature and narrative role of the child sign-act in 9:46–48 it is helpful to ask whether Luke presents other examples of Jesus' ministry actions in a similar way.

#### **22:7–27. The Last Supper Narrative**

The didactic, and occasionally prophetic, dimensions of particular actions are commonly observed by preachers and scholarly commentators on the biblical text, but it is perhaps in the account of the Last Supper (22:7–27) that the parabolic/prophetic potential of an action by Jesus, mirrors so closely that identified in the child-reception event of 9:46–48.

Like the sign-act of 9:46–48, the account of the Supper stands at a crucial moment of transition in the development of the narrative. The reader-disciple is challenged to progress from following Jesus within the framework of a journey of challenge and response, to live with him in the crisis of final confrontation which precedes ultimate vindication.<sup>328</sup> As in the case of the child sign-act, the intention of the crucial Supper

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<sup>327</sup> 'The child is a converting sign; the child here does not symbolise what God is like or model the perfect adult Christian but serves to make the disciples see themselves and all things differently so that they find their own adult way into life.' Haddon Wilmer, *'The Triangle'* (unpublished paper on the relationship between Child, Theology and Mission, 2013), manuscript.

<sup>328</sup> Many scholars recognize parallels between Lk 22 and the Jn 13 account of Jesus' symbolic washing of the disciples' feet, with which John, like Luke, dramatically introduces the next section of his narrative, e.g. Andrew Lincoln, *The Gospel according to St John* (London: Continuum, 2005), 375: 'his [John's] expansion may well have been on the basis of Luke...Jesus

event is to dramatically interpret the true and radical nature of, and pathway to, the Kingdom whose establishment is Jesus' mission. The theme of 'greatness' also informs Luke's setting of the Supper. Its reiteration at 22:24 is striking and unique to Luke, and, as at 9:46, it is preceded by a demonstration of Jesus' divinely enabled cognizance of their contra-Kingdom mindset.<sup>329</sup>

The act of receiving the bread and 'this cup', τοῦτο τὸ ποτήριον, are suggestive of the receiving of 'this child', τοῦτο τὸ παιδίον. However, whilst the call of 9:46–48 is to the imitation of what is symbolized by Jesus' taking of the child, in the Supper the call is rather to a ritual repetition of the action itself, which will result in the recollection of what is symbolized by the bread and wine. Furthermore, the locus, the repetition of the Supper and indeed its sacramental potential, is set within the life of the church whilst the child sign-act points beyond, to ministry-action by the church in the world still subjugated to contra Kingdom values, the very mission activity which Jesus has been exemplifying and which Luke in his second volume will declare to be his continued intention in the life of the missionary church.<sup>330</sup>

Whilst sharing the dramatic nature and a similarly radical and transformational potential, the Supper lacks the signal-directive quality of the child-event sign-act.

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out of love washes his disciples' feet, points forward to his death, exemplifies the reversal of traditional values about honour and status, and both shows and teaches that this reversal is necessary for those who are to maintain solidarity with him in his mission'. John's use of ὑποδειγμα to describe the foot-washing (Jn 13:15) appears to carry much of the force of the sign-act in Lk 9:46–48, and the presentation of the event embodies much of the quality of 'sign' that is characteristic of the fourth gospel's narrative development. See also George Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 36 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 231: 'If the act of foot-washing is a parable of the stooping of the Son of God to the self-sacrifice on the cross, the call to the disciples is to walk in the same steps, much as Mk 8:34'. Interestingly only Morna Hooker, *The Signs of a Prophet*, 74, notes the 'remarkable similarity' between the teaching that accompanies John's account of the foot-washing with the synoptic child-reception event.

<sup>329</sup> Intentionality in Luke's narrative arrangement of his material may also be inferred from the fact that neither Mark nor Matthew include the greatness debate at this point, let alone repeat it from the earlier setting as Luke does.

<sup>330</sup> The Wesleyan understanding of socially focused action as 'a means of grace' captures this missional thrust of the child sign-act in 9:46–48. For a stimulating exploration of this theme, see Couture, *Seeing Children*, 15–22.

### **Acts 10:1–16. Peter’s vision**

Perhaps the most compelling parallel to the nature and narrative use of the 9:46–48 sign-act in Luke’s gospel is that presented in his second volume, at Ac 10:10–16: Peter’s vision of the sheet descending from heaven containing animals he is commanded to kill and eat. This dramatic scenario, in which Peter and the reader-disciple are made to be protagonists, radically challenges understandings and mores that contradict the Kingdom purposes of the Messiah announced by Simeon (2:30–32). Just as the child-reception sign-act challenges the exclusion and oppression of the humble poor in his gospel, so equally clearly and with similar iconoclastic imperative, the command to set aside the excluding principle of the ‘unclean’ (Ac 10:15), on the grounds that God does not follow the status-sensitive preferment typical of the prevailing world order (Ac 10:34), οὐκ ἔστιν προσωπολήπτης ὁ θεός becomes the hinge point for Luke’s development of the overarching theme of his second volume: the inclusion of the Gentiles.<sup>331</sup>

### **Conclusions about the Sign-Act Quality of the Child-Reception Event (9:46–48)**

Luke confronts the reader-disciple with a sign-act, exemplary of the radical mindset and praxis necessary for disciples of the One who sent Jesus to establish the eschatological Kingdom in the context of a world order where greatness is defined in terms of comparative power-status. With prophetic clarity, it declares the values of the Kingdom and prepares the reader-disciple to understand the negative response of worldly powers that they will encounter during their ‘journey to Jerusalem’ and on into the wider world of Acts and beyond. It is a sign-act that not only challenges attitude but calls forth imitative action-response. It is the nature of this Kingdom action that will now be explored.

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<sup>331</sup> The potential of this parallel to offer a creative hermeneutic of Acts in dialogue with contemporary missional experience is presented in the conclusion as pointing to a further application of the methodology developed in the present study.

## GREATNESS AND THE CHILD-RECEPTION 'SIGN-ACT'

### 'Greatness' and the Child-Reception Event in First-Century Mediterranean Society

It is a discussion about greatness and honour-status that forms the immediate narrative context of Jesus' child-centred action and pronouncement. The disciples of a master, who had just announced that he would suffer persecution and death at the hands of those in power, are concerned about 'which of them would be the greatest' according to the social system defined by those very people: 'Roman society was obsessed with status and rank'.<sup>332</sup>

The narrative of Luke–Acts reflects this all-pervasive preoccupation of Greco-Roman society with relative social status and its legitimizing or coercive influence.<sup>333</sup> Surprise and negativity was shown by the local Jewish community at what was deemed to be Jesus' presumptuous, 'out-of-class', behaviour (4:22) Status seating and status seeking at invitation-only meals (14:1–14), and self-aggrandizement in the exercise of public prayer and other religious practice (18:9–14; 20:45–47; 21:1), are examples of social behaviour narrated by Luke that the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. reader, Jewish or Roman, would readily recognize and probably adhere to.

Awareness of and sensitivity to this cultural characteristic is apparent from the opening of Luke's narrative in his concern to ascribe divine honour-status to the infant Jesus. So also, in the crucial conclusion to his story, in the passion narrative of events that might normally be interpreted as implying total loss of honour for the condemned

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<sup>332</sup> Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire* (Bristol: Redwood Books, 1987), 148–159, 199. For this widely attested position, see also: Richard Rohrbaugh, 'Honor: A Core Value in the Biblical World,' in *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament*, eds. Deitmar Neufeld and Richard DeMaris (Oxford: Routledge, 2009); Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey, 'Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World' chap.2 in *The Social World of Luke–Acts* edited by Jerome Neyrey (Massachusetts: Hendriksen, 1991), 47.

<sup>333</sup> Paul Ricoeur has stressed that the interpretation of a text is concerned with the world that unfolds in 'front' of the text, but this does not mean that he refuses an appropriate emphasis on an historical referent behind the text. See his discussion in Paul Ricoeur, *From text to action: Essays in hermeneutics, II*. Kathleen Blamey & John B. Thompson (trans.) (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 75–88. See also Gregory Laughery, 'Ricoeur on History, Fiction and Biblical Hermeneutics,' chap. X in *'Behind' the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation*, Scripture and Hermeneutics (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 4:344 n.31.

and crucified Jesus, Luke provocatively attributes to him a multiplicity of high status titles: Son of God (22:42, 70; 23:46), Saviour (22:51; 23:43) Prophet (22:46) Christ (22:67; 23:35, 39) Chosen One (23:35), King (23:2, 37).

This radical challenge to the prevailing status system is a defining characteristic of the Kingdom that Luke's Jesus is to establish. In the outworking of his Isaianic messianic vision (4:18–19), Jesus is consistently presented as responding positively to encounters with socially disqualified people,<sup>334</sup> whose behaviour would customarily have been eschewed as representing inappropriate challenges to his honour-status.<sup>335</sup> This is well illustrated in Jesus' first recorded mission intervention (4:31–35), where a demon witnesses to Jesus' Kingdom status as the Holy One of God. Instead of expelling the possessed man from the social context of the synagogue, thus affirming his precedence and right to be in control in that religious space, Jesus expels the demon from the man. This act of acceptance and restoration, done εἰς τὸ μέσον (4:35), represents a 'spotlighting' of the person to whom Jesus is responding, and serves to emphasize the confrontational nature of the inversion of the prevailing social code in a way that will be characteristic of Luke's subsequent narrative.<sup>336</sup> Jesus does not exercise the perceived right of the more honourable person to ignore, dismiss, censure or exploit the low-status intruder who comes unbidden before him, making claims upon him. On the contrary, Luke presents Jesus as personally addressing each individual, ascribing them dignity and honour-status. The spirit-possessed man is in no way harmed in the confrontation (4:35), and Jesus is shown to be concerned not to

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<sup>334</sup> The encounter in the house of Simon the Pharisee (7:36–50) exemplifies the social assumption made by the host and person of honour, that Jesus would have repudiated the woman's actions had he known the status attributed to her according to the prevailing socio-religious norms (7:39). The negative response of the disciples when Jesus welcomes children whose carers, presumably women, insist on invading Jesus' space for a blessing (18:15–17), and to the cries of a blind beggar (18:35–43), both demonstrate the lamentable complicity of the disciples with this prevailing attitude.

<sup>335</sup> See also 5:19 where the paralytic is lowered down, in which Luke uses the same adverbial phrase, εἰς τὸ μέσον, and again at 6:9 when the man with the withered hand is called forward (following Mark in this instance). Similarly, in the account of the woman with a haemorrhage who presumes to touch his robe (8:42–48), Luke expands on the Markan account by stating that 'she fell at his feet ἐνώπιον παντός τοῦ λαοῦ' (8:47), whilst at 13:12 it is amongst those assembled for teaching in the synagogue that a crippled woman appears and is spotlighted by Jesus as he calls her out for blessing.

<sup>336</sup> So also in the encounters presented in 5:13, 24; 6:9; 7:14–15; 8:48, 54; 13:12 and 19:41.

gain honour at the expense of the vanquished demon, but rather confer dignity and honour-status upon the previously oppressed and marginalized man.<sup>337</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that despite Jesus' silencing of the demon's verbal attribution to him of honour-status (4:34–35), the common people immediately acknowledge that Jesus has exercised the essential attributes of honour-status: the right and the capacity to actually exercise power, ἐν ἐξουσίᾳ καὶ δυνάμει (4:36). Popular surprise turns to admiration and acclaim as those without social status see in his action hope for themselves, despite their social and spiritual marginalization (4:40).

As the narrative progresses, Jesus is presented as deliberately and consistently associating with those whose physical or perceived spiritual condition was deemed, according to the Mosaic code (Lev 21:17–26), to exclude them from the people of God.<sup>338</sup> Higher-status members of the ruling class are typically presented displaying the contrary reaction (5:21; 6:11; 13:14). As Jesus ignores or redraws boundaries defining status, honour and precedence in society, they show fury at what is seen to be a challenge to the very foundation of the theological and social framework that defines their understanding of the world and underpins their position of significant status as interpreters, guardians and beneficiaries of that structure. The common people, however, who are most threatened by the social exclusion enshrined in the legal proscription that the 'unclean' should not 'come near', are presented by Luke as articulating the eschatological hope that in Jesus 'God has visited his people' (7:16). It is precisely because the Christ of God has 'come near' that those, who in their own right would be excluded because of the Law, are now able to participate in the life of the promised Kingdom, a regime that Jesus shows to be a Kingdom of grace.

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<sup>337</sup> 4:35, μηδὲν βλάψαν αὐτόν. This is an example of a cognate accusative use, qualifying the nature of the main verb ἐξῆλθεν, indicating that the demon left causing no harm. The end of sentence positioning gives narrative emphasis to the well-being of the man rather than, as in Mark's conclusion to the event, to the fate of the demon.

<sup>338</sup> Lepers (5:12–16; 17:11–19), menstruants (8:42–48), cripples (5:17–26; Ac 3:1–10; 9:32–34), the blind (7:21), the sick (4:38–40, Ac 5:15–16), the possessed (4:31–37; 8:26–39, Ac 16:16–18). Neyrey, 'The Symbolic Universe of Luke Acts,' chap 10 in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 279.

Luke's presentation of the disciples' debate about personal greatness and his subsequent account of their rejection of the unnamed exorcist reflect the exclusionist social mapping that characterized the mindset of the Jewish community of Jesus' day. It is this social topography, in which 'elevation' was defined according to adherence to interpretations of the Mosaic law defined by the elite themselves, that was radically challenged by the gracious initiative of the bringer of the promised Kingdom. This shift from 'defensive exclusion' practiced by the 'establishment', to one of 'offensive inclusion' practised by Jesus, can be seen to be a characteristic of Luke's narrative of Jesus' mission. From his first volume, which presents the ministry of 'Jesus *with the disciples*', through to its continuation in the book of Acts, which presents the ministry of 'the disciples *with Jesus*', the eschatological intervention of God in Jesus is, as was predicted by the Spirit-inspired utterances of Mary and Simeon (1:46–55; 2:34), to be understood in the light of this redrawing of the 'socio-religious' ordering of the symbolic universe of people in relation to God.

The pericope 9:46–48 presents the response of Jesus to the disciples' discussion about which of them was the greatest. It is set at the moment of transition when the narrative that has been recounting the disciples' and reader's journey into experience and acknowledgment of Jesus' person and ministry in Galilee, becomes the narrative of the journey into confrontation with the powers that be in Jerusalem.

The reader has been conveyed to the point of witnessing Peter's recognition of Jesus' true status and the divine affirmation of Jesus by God on the mount of transfiguration. Luke now challenges his readers to expose their hearts, as the disciples had to, to the critique of the child-reception sign-act, with all its implications for their own confrontation with the existing social order. The child-reception event serves, both for those inside and those outside of the narrative world of Luke's gospel, as a narrative gateway into the journey of Kingdom confrontation with the current 'guardians of greatness' in 'Jerusalem'. For all who would follow Jesus its message is as radical as it is reassuring.

To appreciate the signifying potential of the child as the central element in Jesus' action in 9:46–48 it will be important to gain an understanding of the perceptions of children, current in Jewish and Greco-Roman societies of the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E.<sup>339</sup>

In drawing comparisons between the perceptions of children in Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures, it will be important to distinguish between social condition and social status. It is perhaps unlikely that in a world of typically short life expectancy, high infant mortality<sup>340</sup> and generalized deprivation and instability, the social condition of the different economic classes of Jewish children would not have differed greatly from their counterparts in the many other ethnic groups across the Mediterranean world. The cultural backgrounds of the different worlds, however, informed as they were by different religious and socio-political histories, had the potential to generate differences in the perception and worth attributed to children.

Since the worth attributed to any object is dependent upon the context in which the evaluation is being made, the worth and status afforded to children by adults may be expected to differ according to the particular social contexts in which the child-adult relationship is in view. I shall therefore evaluate the evidence relating to three social contexts in which children are referred to in Luke: the family, religious practice, and that of societal influence and status.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> See: *The Child in the Bible*, edited by Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); Judith Gundry-Volf, 'The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament,' in *The Child in Christian Thought*, edited by Marcia Bunge, 29-60. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); Albrecht Oepke, 'Παῖς', in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 5: 636-653; Beryl Rawson, ed., *Marriage, Divorce and Children in Ancient Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); William Strange, *Children in the Early Church* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 1996); Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Jesus and the Children—Biblical Resources for Study and Preaching* (Geneva: WCC, 1979); Thomas Weidemann, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 1989); Garnsey and Saller, *The Roman Empire*, 126–147; Margaret MacDonald, *The Power of Children: The Construction of Christian Families in the Greco-Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

<sup>340</sup> For an extended discussion of the evidence regarding life expectancy, see Weidemann, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire*, 11–17.

<sup>341</sup> The importance of context in determining the relationship between social status and acceptable behaviour is well illustrated in a discussion in *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, 'Tractate Nizikin of the Exodus' (21.2.27, 57, 63). Here, foot-washing, considered of such servility as to be inappropriate even for Hebrew men sold into slavery, is reserved for Gentile slaves.



## The Child in the Context of the Family

Jewish wisdom tradition represents a significant source of influence in the formation of community attitudes towards children.<sup>342</sup> Children are perceived as being contributors to the family's standing within the community. A child's wisdom will be displayed in its prudent behaviour, and the quality of behaviour is judged within the value-framework of the extended family. Children can either add value or detract from the family's well-being, having the capacity, through their behaviour, to bring joy or grief (Pr 10:1), prosperity or disgrace (Pr 10:5), or to become a source of 'glory' to their grandparents (Pr 17:6). This scriptural tradition was eloquently rearticulated within the context of Hellenistic Judaism by Ben Sira.<sup>343</sup>

Luke's own narrative presentation of the life and ministry of Jesus, with its many references to children, offers both direct and incidental insights into the place of children within the family. His consistent recording of the 'only child' status and consequently impassioned parental appeals for Jesus' help in the child miracles recorded in 7:12, 8:41 and 9:48 speak eloquently of typically strong affective bonds between parents and their children.<sup>344</sup> What might be understood as this natural care of parents for their children is also fundamental to the parabolic teaching of 11:11, 13. Matthew's reference to Rachel weeping for her children (3:16–18), speaks of the presumption of maternal love afforded to infants, also found in Luke's presentation of Jesus' warnings about the particularly intense sufferings to be anticipated by pregnant women and mothers with nursing infants when judgement comes upon Jerusalem

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However, the exceptions to this status-based regulation are that a man's son or a teacher's pupil might do so, indicating that within the family or the master-pupil relationship, what is deemed generally unacceptable is permitted. Jacob Lauterbach, *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004).

<sup>342</sup> For a comprehensive discussion on children in Proverbs, see William Brown, 'To Discipline without Destruction – The Multi-Faceted Profile of the Child in Proverbs,' in *The Child in the Bible*, edited by Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>343</sup> See especially Sr 3:2–16; 30:1–13. That Sirach was known and influential in rabbinic writing on family concerns is evidenced, for example, in *m.Sotah*.6.1. and *b.Qidd*.78b. It is arguable that this can be seen to continue to colour attitudes to children, in family context, in the New Testament emphasis on the value of discipline and filial obedience, even when applied metaphorically within the Christian family of the church, e.g. 1Ti 3:4, Hb 12:7–11.

<sup>344</sup> As an example of the testimony of traditional Jewish literature, see 4 Mc 15:4: 'How can I possibly express the deep love of parents for their children?'

(21:23). Like Mark and Matthew, Luke records Jesus' citation of the fundamental rule of domestic life in Israel that children should honour their father and mother (18:20), and Jewish society's expectation of filial obedience is implicit in the tradition that Luke draws upon in 8:19–21, 14:26 and 18:29, where Jesus shockingly demands an allegiance greater than that of family ties. Unlike the other synoptics, however, Luke makes no reference to the Jewish tradition of Corban (Mk 7:11–13, Mt 15:1–20), which expresses a specifically financial responsibility of children towards older parents. In the family context, the prevalent Jewish cultural norm was a reciprocal relationship expressing filial obedience and respect, and parental love.<sup>345</sup>

One distinction between Jewish and Greco-Roman attitudes to children in the family, is found in the well-documented Roman practice of leaving outside to die by exposure, unwanted female or otherwise weak or malformed children.<sup>346</sup> The casual tone of the Roman merchant Hilarion's counsel to his pregnant wife Apis in Alexandria on June 17, 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E., to keep the child only if it is a boy,<sup>347</sup> points to the prevalence and acceptance of this practice. That the Roman historian Tacitus is aware of Jewish apologetic condemning the practice<sup>348</sup> and deems it comment-worthy, suggests that it

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<sup>345</sup> This is echoed as a Christian precept in the exhortations of Eph 6:1–4 and Col 3:20–21.

<sup>346</sup> Seneca (c.50 C.E.), in *On Anger*, 1.15.2–3, argues that the killing or disposal of 'monstrous or weak or unnaturally formed' children is to be considered a reasonable act (as opposed to an act of uncontrolled violence). So too, Plutarch (c. 100 C.E.) in *Lycurgus*, 16.1ff., attests to the practice in Spartan culture, of leaving unwanted infants to die by exposure as a way of disposing of babies considered unfit for the martial training. The practice became so prevalent in early Greek culture that the Greek historian Polybius identified it as a serious contributor towards depopulation in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. in his *Histories*, 36.17.5–10, where he speaks of the practice as a self-evident evil to be combatted by the state, even to the point of introducing legislation requiring parents to rear the children born to them. According to Garnsey and Saller, 'Because of the decline due to high infant mortality rate, Roman women who lived to adulthood had to bear five or six children on average if the population was not to go into decline'. *The Roman Empire*, 138.

<sup>347</sup> *Papyrus Oxyrhynchus*, 744, 'if it is a boy keep it, if a girl, discard it'. Exposure was perhaps the most common exercise of provision of 'pater potestas', which gave the 'pater familias' the power of life and death over all members of his 'domus' (household), including his children. The Empire finally outlawed exposing children in 374 C.E.

<sup>348</sup> Tacitus (56–117 C.E.), *Histories* 5.5, 'They [the Jews] regard it as a crime to kill any late-born child'. Written during the period 100–110 C.E. this comment predates most extant Christian apologetic writing on the issue. Ronald Mellor, in *Tacitus' Annals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 23, makes the argument that Tacitus was able to distinguish between Jews and Christians.

is both a current and, for Greco-Romans, a counter-cultural propaganda. Christian writings of the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century show the persistence of this practice as they inveigh against the practices of both abortion and infant exposure, appealing essentially to the same theological and ethical premises as those cited by their Jewish antecedents.<sup>349</sup>

Comments by the renowned 2<sup>nd</sup> century medical researcher Claudius Galenus cast further light upon what today's western culture might consider a harsher perspective on infants, affirming that by the time of weaning, around 18 to 24 months, 'a child would be old enough to understand blows and threats'.<sup>350</sup>

There is little documentary evidence of the positive affective dimension of childhood in Greco-Roman society, and what there is inevitably reflects the experience of the wealthier classes. The death of a child does, however, provoke written expressions of affection. Of the death of his younger child, at the age of five, Quintilian wrote, 'this sweet child preferred me to his nurses, to the grandmother who looked after the upbringing, and all the others...'<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>349</sup> *The Didache* 2.2, 'Thou shalt not murder a child by abortion' and 5.1–2, 'The Way of Death is filled with people who are...murderers of children and abortionists of God's creatures'; Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 27, 28, condemned the exposure of children both on grounds of murder when they died, and more commonly that most were taken and raised for prostitution, boys and girls; *The Epistle of Barnabas* 19 repeats both prohibitions, whilst Athenagoras, *A Plea for Christians*, 35, in the second part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E., addressing the emperor Marcus Aurelius, condemned abortion on the grounds that the foetus should be considered 'a created being and therefore an object of God's care'.

<sup>350</sup> Galen (130–210 C.E.), cited in Aline Rouselle, *Porneia – On Desire and the Body in Antiquity* translated by Felicia Pheasant (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 58. As in much Jewish wisdom tradition, there existed a general and deeply engrained acceptance that corporal punishment was beneficial as an incentive to moral and educational development. Also, Aristophanes (446–386 B.C.E.), a Greek comic writer, in *Wasps* 1297–8, 1307, 'invented an etymology from παῖς, 'child', to παιέν, 'to beat', and that was not the only one of his jokes to point to hard reality'. James Francis, 'Children and Childhood in the New Testament,' in *The Family in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 70.

<sup>351</sup> *Institutio Oratoriae* 8. Marcus Aurelius appears to agonize, attempting to reconcile his Stoic philosophy with his emotions at the death of his two children, in *Meditations* 7.41 and 11.6.

The many thousands of extant funerary inscriptions offer a more democratic picture of natural family affection. One affectionate epitaph by Martial, in remembrance of a slave-child, Erotian, reads:

Let not the sod too stiffly stretch its girth,  
Above those limbs, erstwhile so free;  
Press lightly on her form, dear mother Earth,  
Her little footsteps lightly fell on thee.<sup>352</sup>

For this echelon of society, child-rearing was considered a costly business, whose benefit of providing heirs to the family property, reputation and name could more easily be circumvented by adoption of a suitable heir later in life.<sup>353</sup> Gundry-Volf draws attention to an ‘apology for child rearing’ which she attributes to the emperor Augustus (63 B.C.E.–14 C.E.), who was concerned to encourage child-rearing to ensure the future of the aristocratic families and maintain the status quo of elite adult domination of the Roman social and political structure.<sup>354</sup> A warmly worded commendation of the value of child-rearing by Cassius Dio, in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E., is grounded more in the valuing of the children for what they will bring to the adults, than expressing an appreciation of children in their own right.<sup>355</sup> Pliny, who also praises this civic duty demonstrated by those who rear children, perhaps more

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<sup>352</sup> *Epigrams* 5.34, cited by Strange, *Children in the Early Church*, 8.

<sup>353</sup> Pliny (61–112 C.E.), *Letters* 4.15.3, *To Fundanus*, he writes: ‘in an age when the advantages of being childless are such that many people consider even one son to be a burden...’

<sup>354</sup> Gundry-Volf, ‘Children in the New Testament’, 32 n.6.

<sup>355</sup> Cassius Dio (155–235 C.E.), *Roman History* 56.3, ‘Is it not a joy to acknowledge a child who possesses the qualities of both parents, to tend and educate a person who is both the physical and the mental mirror of yourself, so that as he grows up, another self is created? Is it not a blessing when we leave this life, to leave behind as our successor an heir both to our family and to our property, one that is our own, born of our own essence, so that only the mortal part of us passes away, while we live on in the child who succeeds us?’ – a similar sentiment is expressed in the Jewish intertestamental text, Sir 30:4–5, ‘When the father dies he will not seem to be dead, for he has left behind him one like himself, whom in his life he looked upon with joy and at his death without grief’.

significantly from the point of demonstrating familial affection, also reveals his sympathy towards friends whose children die before achieving adulthood.<sup>356</sup>

This somewhat ambivalent attitude of Greco-Roman society towards children is also illustrated in the writings of Cicero. Whilst articulating a typically dismissive attitude towards children in general,<sup>357</sup> he, like Pliny, exhibits a more affectionate attitude towards the children of family or friends.<sup>358</sup> A later instance of this somewhat ambiguous mindset is seen in the text of a Roman child's Greek-Latin school copy book attributable to the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E., that speaks of the child kissing his parents before proceeding to his daily lessons,<sup>359</sup> even though, as Quintilian reported, violent abuse by teachers was a not uncommon feature of a child's educational experience,<sup>360</sup> as Augustine also recalled with anguish in his *Confessions* two centuries later.<sup>361</sup>

### **The Child in the Context of Religious Practice**

The fundamental element of Jewish national identity, consistently presented in the scriptural tradition, is that of being considered the people of God's choosing. Underpinning this tenet of faith is God's affirmation that he has committed himself in covenant to Israel from generation to generation for all time. In this theological construct, children take on a value beyond that limited to their place in the family, strong as that affective relationship might be. They are understood and valued as conveyors of the covenant for the nation and this is reflected in the renowned Jewish

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<sup>356</sup> Pliny, *Letters* 5.16, to Marcellinus, writing upon the death of Fundanus' fourteen-year-old, just before she was due to be married, '...and this has made us miss her all the more severely and made our sorrow all the heavier to bear. What a sad, heart-rending funeral it was!'

<sup>357</sup> Cicero, *De Republica* 137.3: 'The thing itself cannot be praised, only its potential'.

<sup>358</sup> Cicero, *Ad Atticus* 16.11.8 (5 November): 'I want you to give Attica a kiss in my name, since she is such a cheerful little girl: the best thing in children'. See other citations given by Weidemann, in *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire*, 84–89.

<sup>359</sup> *Colloquia Monacensia*, 'I left my bedroom with my paedagogus and with my nurse to say good morning to my mother and father. I embraced and kissed them both. And thus, I left the house.' Cited by Strange, *Children in the Early Church*, 28.

<sup>360</sup> Quintilian (35–100 AD), *Institutio Oratoriae* 1.3.17, cited by Strange, *Children in the Early Church*, 34.

<sup>361</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 1.9, writes at a later date of the practice of hurtful discipline during his school days between 365–9 C.E. which he describes as a 'period of suffering and humiliation' from which he prayed to God for deliverance, and about which his parents, 'who certainly wished me no harm, would laugh at the beating I got'.

cultural commitment to education, especially in regard to the transmission of the tenets of their faith.<sup>362</sup>

In Scripture itself the argument for attributing inherent status to children as individuals, based upon their createdness by God, is rarely made, although the idea can be found applied to the poor, powerless and vulnerable in references in the Wisdom Literature.<sup>363</sup> The affirmation of the inherent worth of children as beings created by God is, however, found as a recurrent theme in Jewish Hellenistic philosophical apologists from Aristobulus in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E.,<sup>364</sup> and Pseudo Phoclydes,<sup>365</sup> through to Philo and Josephus in the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. where the most common context is the Jewish argument against the infanticide practised across the Greco-Roman world. Philo is found making his case based upon the practice being contrary to ‘natural law’,<sup>366</sup> whilst Josephus takes his stand upon its prohibition in the Jewish Law.<sup>367</sup>

Sons and daughters are perceived as God’s provision to the community to allow it to continue to exist and enjoy the honour of being His covenant people. Children are therefore celebrated as a covenant blessing, or as Psalm 127:3–5 expresses it, a ‘heritage’ from the Lord, a guarantee that the parents will not be put to shame. In this light, the sense of shame felt by Elizabeth in her childlessness and subsequent exhilaration upon becoming pregnant (1:24–25), is readily understood.

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<sup>362</sup> See an incidental reference in Juvenal (late 1<sup>st</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E.), *Satires* 14.96–106. See also Josephus, *Contra Apion* 1.60; 2.173, 178, 204, and Philo, *Hypothetica* 7.14.

<sup>363</sup> E.g. Pr 14:31; 17:5; 22:2.

<sup>364</sup> Fragments of Aristobulus’ writings, ostensibly directed to the Egyptian King Ptolemy, remain recorded in Eusebius. Fragment 4.6, preserved in Eusebius 13.13.3–8, translated in James Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. Vol. 2 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), 841, states: ‘We are all his [God’s] children’. Although used metaphorically, the usage implies children’s innate value derived from all humanity’s status as created by God.

<sup>365</sup> ‘Do not let a woman destroy the unborn baby in her belly, nor after its birth throw it before dogs and the vultures as a prey.’ *Sentences of Pseudo Phoclydes* 184,185 (50 B.C.E.–100 C.E.), a Jewish moralistic teacher assuming the name of the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. Greek poet-philosopher.

<sup>366</sup> Philo (20 B.C.E.–50 C.E.), *Legibus Specialibus* 3.110–119.

<sup>367</sup> ‘Abortion and infanticide are prohibited in the Law’, Josephus, *Contra Apion* 2.202.

It is not surprising then that children have a valued place within the ordering of the nation's life.<sup>368</sup> Nowhere is this more clearly shown than in the commemoration of Passover. Children are central to the celebration to the extent that *m.Pesah* 10:4, recognizing the possibility that the children involved in the family commemoration may not have 'understanding', makes provision for their participation by directing the father to instruct the child how to ask the questions about why the night is different, and to answer in accordance with the child's capacity to understand.

In Nehemiah, where the residents of Jerusalem commit to a covenant of faithfulness to the Law of Moses, the participants, described in Nehemiah 8, 9 as 'all the people' and in 10:28 'the rest of the people' are listed as 'priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, temple servants and all who separated themselves from the neighbouring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all of their sons and daughters who are able to understand'.

The question of a child's intellectual competence is recognized again in the case of the regulations for participation in the regular reading of the scriptures in synagogues,<sup>369</sup> and at the festival of Purim.<sup>370</sup> In general, however, the degree and nature of the qualification for a minor's participation in Israel's cultic life is determined by the particular core value in focus in each religious act. This variation of permissions can be interpreted positively as an expression of openness to including minors in the cultic life of the people of God. On the other hand, however, the occasional grouping of children with those unable to hear, see or speak and those with learning difficulties, suggests a

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<sup>368</sup> Philo, *Legibus Specialibus* 1.316–7, affirms that belonging to the family of God, recognizing filial honour to Him, should outweigh natural family bonds.

<sup>369</sup> *m.Meg.4* deals with the questions as to whether minors may present the reading from the Prophets and the Law: 'He that gives the concluding reading from the Prophets recites also the Shema' with its Benedictions; and he goes before the Ark, and he lifts up his hands [in the Benediction of the Priests]. If he is a minor, his father or his teacher goes before the Ark on his behalf'. *m.Meg.4:5*.

<sup>370</sup> In *m.Meg.4.6*. minors (with or without 'understanding') are grouped along with 'He whose clothes are ragged', i.e. the poor, and, by inference, the blind.

readiness to attribute limited social status to children that might marginalize them from participation.<sup>371</sup>

In general, it might be concluded that from the religious or cultic perspective the prime value of children is focused upon their hereditary status as conveyors of the covenant, whilst their participation in the active cultic life of the community would be qualified by specific gender or educational requirements.<sup>372</sup>

As Luke takes the reader beyond the world of Jewish culture, Paul's encounter with a young slave girl, παιδίσκη, in the Roman colony of Philippi (Ac 16:16–17), is indicative of a perception in the Greco-Roman world that children, considered to live at the margins of the adult world defined in terms of socio-political influence and specifically of citizenship, were especially qualified to act as intermediaries with the spirit world. The 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.E. Roman poet Albius Tibullus writes of how a child acolyte might be deemed most qualified to interpret divining lots,<sup>373</sup> and his contemporary, Catallus, made reference to the role of children, boys and girls, in choirs employed in the cult of Diana.<sup>374</sup> A marble inscription from the reign of Augustus similarly recounts the activities of a cultic group called the 'Fratres Arvale', who employed boy acolytes to assist at their ritual sacrifices.<sup>375</sup> The sexual purity of children was understood to contribute to their value in the cultic context, as evidenced in a reference by the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. agricultural writer Columella, who describes child participation in a procedure for the religiously correct preparation of food.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> Such groupings are not uncommon in the Mishnah: e.g. *m.Hul.* 6.3. Jacob Neusner observes, 'These sorts of people are deemed able, when properly supervised, to do a suitable deed. But they cannot impart to that deed the status lent by appropriate intention, because they are assumed to be unable to express or even formulate it'. *Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 260.

<sup>372</sup> 'Children were important essentially as schoolchildren.' Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, 73.

<sup>373</sup> Albius Tibullus (c.55–c.19 B.C.E.), *Tibullus* 1.3.11, recounts the procedure for the casting of lots to determine if a woman's sweetheart would return safely from a journey.

<sup>374</sup> 'We girls and boys who are still whole under the protection of Diana, we boys and girls, who are still whole, sing praises to Diana.' Catallus (1 B.C.E.), *Poems* 34.1–4.

<sup>375</sup> Cited by Weidemann, *Adults and Children*, 184.

<sup>376</sup> Lucius Columella (4–70 C.E.), *Res Rusticae* 12.4.3. in L. Junius Moderatus Columella of Husbandry, in *Twelve Books*, and his book, *Concerning Trees, translated into English, with illustrations from Pliny, Cato, Varro, Palladius and other ancient and modern authors*. (London:



However, their primary cultic qualification in Greco-Roman culture would seem to be derived from their social marginality in relation to citizenship and adult belonging to society. This stands in contrast to Jewish tradition which values children primarily because they are perceived as members of the nation and bearers of the covenant and would tend to limit cultic participation only in accordance with necessary comprehension and capacity to fulfil the Law.

### **The Child in the Context of Societal Influence and Status**

Evaluated from the standpoint of the socio-economic or political dynamics of the adult world where the exercise of authority and power are the primary instruments of influence, the child, by virtue of its innate characteristics of physical vulnerability, social incapacity and dependence upon adults, is generally perceived as having little or no status or value.<sup>377</sup> Matthew's omission of the children, along with the women, from the head count of those present at the first of Jesus' mass feeding miracles (Mt 14:21), is indicative of their perceived social irrelevance — they literally 'didn't count' in a consideration of what was going on. That such a dismissive attitude might easily underpin a more derogatory one, is exemplified by the comment of Rabbi Dosa ben Harkinas, c. 90 C.E., who comments that a man's associating with children is comparable to sleeping in of a morning, sitting in meeting houses of ignorant people, and drinking at midday.<sup>378</sup> The exclusion of children from the affairs of adults was enshrined in the determination of the age of legal majority. Whilst this provision exempted a minor from responsibility in regard to the keeping of the Mosaic Law, it

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A. Millar, 1745). xiv, 600. Explicit references to the moral purity or innocence of children can be found in the early Christian *Hermas*, *Mand.* 2.1, 'ἔση ὡς τὰ νήπια τὰ μὴ γινώσκοντα τὴν πονηρίαν' — 'the children, having no knowledge of evil', or again in the Jewish corpus, as at 2 Mc 8:4 'ἀναμαρτήτων νηπίων' — 'the sinless infants.'

<sup>377</sup> An exception is when, by belonging to a circle of aristocracy, the child potentially enjoys coercive status even whilst being physically dependent e.g. Herod's persecution of the infant born to be king (Mt 2:1-16). An example of the potential power-status of children from a Greco-Roman context is found in Suetonius, *Claudius*, 3, quoting letters between Livia, the mother of the emperor Augustus' wife Scribonia, concerning his son Claudius who was generally held in contempt as foolish and socially inept, 'The public...must not be given a chance of laughing at him and us. I fear that we shall find ourselves in constant trouble if the question of his fitness to officiate in this or that capacity keeps cropping up'.

<sup>378</sup> *m. 'Abot.* 3.11.

also limited a child's rights in other areas, such as to enter into agreements sealed by vows that would be binding upon adults.<sup>379</sup>

The framework of national and community life was determined by those who were able to exercise power to influence matters considered by those in authority to be of economic, social or political value. As a general rule, children had little or no significance in that context.

Socio-political influence in Roman society was similarly demarcated by an age-related moment of societal, though not legal,<sup>380</sup> emancipation whose force of inclusion-exclusion was even more fundamental than that of Jewish society. Physical vulnerability rendered a child unable to contribute towards the security of the state, and whilst still in education, unfit to engage in the debate and decision making of the citizen's world. Only from around the age of 16 would the male child of a citizen family exchange his red-trimmed *toga praetexta* for the plain white adult *toga pura*, denoting the transition into adult citizenship with all the attendant rights and responsibilities of participation in the life of the state. For girls, marriage would represent the gateway to adulthood.

Given the absolute centrality of citizenship to the government and psyche of the Greco-Roman world, the pre-adult status of the infant and child was one of complete insignificance with, as has been noted above, its merit lying primarily in its potentiality as the citizen of tomorrow.<sup>381</sup> For the slave who did not own citizenship rights, their

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<sup>379</sup> *m.Nid.5.5–6*.

<sup>380</sup> Roman law did not set an age of majority, but the principal of '*pater potestas*' was considered to prevail in all legal matters such as property ownership throughout the lifetime of the *paterfamilia*.

<sup>381</sup> See Cicero's comment in n.357 above. See also Pliny's comment upon the merits of Trajan's concern for the support of poor children exemplified in his '*alimenta*' programme, whereby the interest on money lent by the imperial treasury to landowners in Italy was used to support poor children: 'from these, the camp [the legions] and from these the tribes [the citizen's voting unit] will be filled up', *Panegyric* 28, in Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*, 6675, 6509, and Pliny, *Letters*, vii.18. This reference is cited with additional comment in Wells, *The Roman Empire* (London: Fontana Press, 1992), 184–6.

social status was considered as one of perpetual un-emancipated childhood.<sup>382</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, to find the deprecatory use of child-related vocabulary in debates amongst socio-political opponents, illustrating the low regard in which children were held in the context of adult state affairs. So, the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius decries ‘unphilosophical’ political opponents who are obsessed with questions of honour and status, as behaving like ‘children who laugh one minute and cry the next’.<sup>383</sup> Christians would face invective using similar imagery in the decades to follow.<sup>384</sup>

It remains now to determine, from the context given in the narrative, which cultural perspective will be most appropriate to appreciate the intended impact of Jesus’ sign-act response to the disciples’ discussion about greatness.

### **The Child set at Jesus’ Side**

As indicated by the discussion above, the probable impact of the sign-act may be expected to depend upon the perceived social context of the child as well as upon any particular qualities attributed to the child within the narrative.

In fact, in the narrative context of the disciples’ debate, the child has been attributed no distinctive qualification. There is no hereditary right to acknowledgment or deferment, nor any conferred capacity to exert social or political influence. There is no suggestion of family context or spiritual condition. Green tentatively suggests an identification with the child freed from demon possession (9:37–43),<sup>385</sup> but his argument is not compelling as Luke gives no clue regarding the child’s location, identity or even gender; παιδίον (9:47) is anarthrous.<sup>386</sup> The child enters the dramatic scenario

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<sup>382</sup> Contrast Cicero’s mention of his own son Marcus’ reception into citizenship with the mere acknowledgement of growing up of the ‘excellent’ slave boy, Alexis. *Ad Att.* 9.19.1 and 7.7.7.

<sup>383</sup> Marcus Aurelius (ruled 161–180 B.C.E.), *Meditations* 5, 33.

<sup>384</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsus*, ANF 4.3.50 and 55, where Christians are accused of addressing themselves to ‘young men and a mob of slaves and a gathering of unintelligent persons’, chapter 50 and preaching to ‘children...and certain women as ignorant as themselves’, chapter 55.

<sup>385</sup> Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 391.

<sup>386</sup> Unlike Mk 9:33, which provides the child with a domestic context, locating the discussion as ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ.

without introduction to take centre stage. The child becomes the significant *τοῦτο τὸ παιδίον* (9:48), solely because Jesus has reached out and placed her at his side, the place of ultimate Kingdom honour and status.<sup>387</sup> Prior to this, the narrative has provided the child with no other context. The child-sign is therefore most appropriately interpreted in the context provided by the adult preoccupation with relative social status that is the focus of the discussion amongst the disciples, *τὸ τίς ἂν εἴη μείζων αὐτῶν*.

The use of *εἰσῆλθεν* to describe the emergence of the debate further darkens the hermeneutical context as it is suggestive of thoughts coming in from ‘outside’,<sup>388</sup> recalling the comparable use of the verb in 22:3 where Satan is described as entering Judas. Certainly, their attitude is foreign and inimical to the vision of Jesus, and as the reference to Jesus perceiving the thoughts of their hearts makes clear,<sup>389</sup> it is the disciples themselves who are in need of radical transformation and to whom Jesus’ response of the child-sign is directed.

### Conclusion

It is therefore the concern for socio-political status and influence that Jesus knows to be the disciples’ mindset and heartset that defines the immediate social and therefore hermeneutical context of the sign-act pericope. Notwithstanding the more varied and positive appreciation of children that can be seen to characterize both the family and religious contexts in which children figure, the ‘generic’ child that Jesus sets before the disciples and the reader is an unambiguous symbol of societal marginality and

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<sup>387</sup> ‘I recognise the hand of Jesus resting on (ἐπι) the chosen child. By this act of Jesus, the child is honoured’, Bovon, *Luke 1*, 394. Similarly, Alfred Plummer, *St Luke*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1922), 257, and Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 396.

<sup>388</sup> C. Evans, *Saint Luke*, PTI New Testament Commentaries (London: SCM Press, 1990), 427, notes that there is no other Luke–Acts use of the classical sense of the verb, *εἰσῆλθεν*, to mean ‘arise’.

<sup>389</sup> The reference to Jesus being able to perceive what was ‘in their hearts’ appears elsewhere in Luke: Simeon prophesies that through Jesus’ ministry the *ἐκ πολλῶν καρδιῶν διαλογισμοί* will be revealed (2:35); the critical thoughts of the Pharisees and scribes are perceived by Jesus in 5:22, 6:8, and significantly at 16:15 where he affirms to the money-loving Pharisees that God sees their hearts and that ‘what is highly valued among men, *ἐν ἀνθρώποις*, is detestable in God’s sight’, Mk 13:14, Mt 24:15.

insignificance for both Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures. It is this perception that Luke's narrative offers to indicate the motivation and the intended impact of Jesus' child-reception sign-act. The child that Jesus sets at his side, in the place of ultimate status and honour within his Kingdom, is to be seen as powerfully symbolic of those others excluded to the margins of society whom he has been receiving and honouring from the outset of his messianic mission. In doing so, the bringer of the Kingdom challenges all who witness his sign-act to re-evaluate the core values underlying their own perceptions and aspirations of greatness, before they continue their journey with him towards Jerusalem.

## THE SYMBOLIC POTENTIAL OF CHILDREN TO REPRESENT THE LOWLY, THE POOR AND THE LITTLE-ONES

### Introduction

Three word-groups are particularly used by Luke to describe those who are the special focus of Jesus' messianic mission: ταπεινοί (the lowly)', πτωχοί (the poor) and μικροί (the little-ones).<sup>390</sup> It is the intention of this section to examine the extent to which these categories relate to each other and to the motif of the child, especially as expressed in the child-reception sign-act of 9:46–48 and its co-text 18:15–17.

### The Lowly: ταπεινοί

At the outset of his gospel, Luke signals the eschatological mission of Jesus with all its promise of radical social inversion: through the Spirit-inspired lips of the Messiah's mother Mary (1:46–55), her pious priestly relatives Elizabeth and Zechariah (1:68–79), the devout Simeon (2:30–35) and the prophetic baptizer, John son of Zechariah (3:4–6). In this introduction, he employs the ταπεινός word group three times:<sup>391</sup> 1:48, in the description of Mary's personal social status in conjunction with δούλη, 'handmaiden' or slave;<sup>392</sup> 1:52 as a class reference over against the δυνάστας ἀπὸ θρόνων, 'ruling class',<sup>393</sup> and 3:4–6 where the Isaiah 40:3–5 citation employs the metaphorical potential of the word to describe the 'eschatological levelling' that will

<sup>390</sup> In a contemporary and memorable phrase, the dust cover review of Patrick Whitworth's *Gospel for the Outsider* (Durham: Sacristy Press, 2014) describes those in view as 'the loser, the lonely and the lowly'.

<sup>391</sup> Ταπεινός appears eight times in the NT in its substantive form and fourteen as a verb, with a further twelve cognate uses. Of the total of thirty-four, Luke has nine: seven in the Gospel and two in Acts. 'It has fundamental significance in Luke's work as a whole', Walter Grundmann, 'Ταπεινός,' *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel. Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 15–26.

<sup>392</sup> In a socio-political system in which slaves were non-people without rights, R. E. Brown comments, 'That Mary designates herself a handmaid (δούλη) is poetically beautiful in our hearing, but to outsiders in early times, it would be another confirmation that Christianity was bizarre: a group consisting of many slaves, worshiping a crucified criminal. Whether or not the Magnificat came from an early Christian group of "Poor Ones", it clearly shares their mentality. Mary has become a spokeswoman of their ideals'. *The Coming Christ in Advent* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1988), 68.

<sup>393</sup> Compare with the similar collective usage by Luke of μικροί, 'the little-ones', at Ac 8:10 and 26:22 to describe that section of society with little socio-political status.

occur at the coming of the Lord. Luke's extended Isaianic citation, unique among the synoptic gospels, forms the scriptural grounding for his presentation of the Baptist's annunciation of Jesus.<sup>394</sup> It is striking, and suggestive of a carefully crafted narrative link between the messianic mission to the ταπεινοί, presented in chapters one and two, and Jesus' self-declared mission to bring good news to the poor, πτωχοί, that it is the crucial messianic disclosure made at Nazareth in chapter four.

In Luke's ongoing presentation of Jesus' mission to address and redress the status of the poor, the introductory expression of this mission in relation to the ταπεινοί is recalled, as Jesus is twice presented as warning the proud and worldly-status seekers that their eschatological end is to be brought low, ταπεινωθήσεται (14:11; 18:14), whilst the one looked down upon, ταπεινῶν, will be raised up (18:14).<sup>395</sup> The use of ταπεινώσει in the Isaiah citation at Ac 8:33 is a further example of the force of the word in Luke, as the Messiah is described as one who 'in his lowliness, ταπεινώσει... was deprived of justice and his life was taken away'.

### **The Poor: πτωχοί**

The idea of status-restoration and socio-religious rehabilitation in God's eschatological society is fundamental to Luke's use of ταπεινός, and is developed as a marked characteristic of his narration of the acts of Jesus' ministry that demonstrate this commitment to the poor.<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>394</sup> Intentionality in the use of the extended quote from Isaiah is widely, though not exclusively, recognized. Joel Green concludes that the language of Isaiah 40:4–5 'echoes the earlier language of (social) transposition', *The Gospel of Luke*, 172. Marshall observes that, 'Since Luke could easily have omitted material not needed on the way to his desired goal in the next verse, it is probable that the verse has some metaphorical significance...in the use of ταπεινώω to express the humbling of the proud...in the use of σκολιός to typify perverse men (Acts 2:40)'.. *The Gospel of Luke*, 394–99. Similarly, Bock, *Luke-Volume 1*, 294, whilst Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, surprisingly makes no reference to the issue.

<sup>395</sup> The repetition of the saying is unique to Luke and indicative of the importance of the motif to his narrative.

<sup>396</sup> Of the ten occurrences of πτωχός in Luke, seven are in either first or final place in lists including such categories as the crippled, the blind and the lame (14:21), suggesting that 'the poor' was used epexegetically and is to be understood as an umbrella term for other marginalized and excluded groups. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, 80–81.

Especially significant in examining the interconnectedness of the categories of lowliness and children, is that the dimension of social restoration is made explicit by Luke in the child-focused examples of Jesus' messianic intervention which he sets at the heart of each section of his cyclical narration of the Galilean ministry to the poor. In the narratives of the son of the widow of Nain (7:12, 16), Jairus' daughter (8:52–53) and the demon-possessed child (9:37–38, 43), the children are not only freed from the threat of death, but each in turn is 'given back' to the family, in the presence of the local community.<sup>397</sup>

So also, as his narrative proceeds, the personal and social situations of a whole range of people, considered as excluded from those considered blessed or accepted by God, are redefined as Jesus exercises his mission: the woman, ἀμαρτωλός, at Pharisee Simon's house, is declared forgiven and sent on her way, εἰς εἰρήνην (7:50);<sup>398</sup> the woman oppressed by a πνεῦμα ἔχουσα ἀσθενείας is restored physically and spiritually and also declared rehabilitated as a daughter of Abraham (13:10–17); the wayward son is restored to his intended place and status in the father's household (15:22–32); and Zacchaeus, ἀρχιτελώνης, is declared a son of Abraham and Jesus eats at table with him (19:1–10), with all the implications of social acceptance implicit in that act.

### **The Little-Ones: μικροί**

The little-ones, μικροί,<sup>399</sup> like ταπεινοί and πτωχοί, carries the sense, exemplified in Ac 8:10 and 26:22, of describing those conventionally categorized as of low-status social class. It is also present in a collective sense in the common synoptic tradition

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<sup>397</sup> So also, in the narration of Jesus' immediate post-Nazareth ministry: the healing of the leper and instruction to fulfil the demands of social reintegration (5:14), and the healing of the paralytic sent εἰς τὸν οἶκόν σου after the declaration of forgiveness (5:24).

<sup>398</sup> In distinction from the common greeting or farewell where the invocation of 'peace' takes the preposition ἐν, indicating a momentary state of well-being before God, Jesus sends the woman out from the place of exclusion *into*, εἰς, a new experience of messianic salvation and Kingdom inclusion. The same form is used again, and with similar force, at 8:48 in the case of the woman with a haemorrhage. The use of εἰρήνη as descriptive of eschatological salvation is typical of Luke: in Zechariah's song (1:79); the angelic proclamation at 2:14; and in Jesus' instruction to his missionary disciples (10:5–6). See Werner Foerster, 'Εἰρήνη,' in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Vol. 2, edited by Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 406–420, and a particularly helpful discussions in Plummer, *St Luke*, 44, 214.

<sup>399</sup> 7:28; 12:32; 9:48; 17:2; 19:3, Ac 8:10; 26:22.



employed at 17:2. Both Mk 9:42 and Mt 18:6 build the pericope into their settings of Jesus' encounter with children who they present as examples of faith, and qualify the term with the phrase ἓνα τῶν μικρῶν τούτων τῶν πιστευόντων εἰς ἐμέ, thus applying the saying to vulnerable or poor disciples. Luke, however, omits any contextual linkage to the child encounter, or reference to 'those who believe', rather placing the saying in immediate co-textual relationship with the story of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19–31), a story directly illustrative of the eschatological agenda of bringing down the rich and raising up the marginalized and lowly.<sup>400</sup> Following this interpretation, and taking seriously Marshall's observation of the 'curious' use of τούτων (17:2), which would normally refer to those who were actually present,<sup>401</sup> it would be consistent with a recognition of the careful narrative development that Luke brings to his material, to understand that the people referred to would be those present in the last contextual reference, namely πάντες οἱ τελῶναι καὶ οἱ ἁμαρτωλοὶ, who gathered round to hear him (15:1).<sup>402</sup>

The precise nature of the threat posed to these μικροί, at 17:1–2, is determined by the meaning of the word group, σκάνδαλιζω. The limited use of this word group outside of the Old Testament and Judaism, noted by Stahlin,<sup>403</sup> would appear to lie behind Matthew's more frequent usage in contrast to Luke's tendency, later typical of the Greek Fathers, to understand the word in the more 'common' sense. Luke's preference for ἀφίστανται in the account of the parable of the soils (8:13) suggests a meaning for the verb as loss of the initial joyful acceptance of the word of the Gospel in times of persecution, and the noun as something that brings about that loss. Whilst the context

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<sup>400</sup> 'In the prior Lukan material, we may find referents to the phrase "the little-ones" in Lazarus, 16:19–31; the lost son 15:11–32; and the poor, crippled, blind and lame 14:12–14 in which case 'cause to stumble' would refer to the injustice and indifference of inhospitality on behalf of those in need.' Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 612. Pace Thomas Walter Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1950), 138f, which maintains that Mark and Matthew reflect the original context of the saying, an encounter with actual children, while Bock, *Luke, Volume 1*, 1385, prefers a reference to weak or poorly instructed disciples who might be brought down in their faith by opponents of the Jesus community.

<sup>401</sup> Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 641.

<sup>402</sup> Zacchaeus, Luke's final example of lost being sought and saved (19:10), is famously described as being μικρός!

<sup>403</sup> Gustav Stahlin, 'Σκανδαλόν,' in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Vol. 7, edited by Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 339–358.

of the parable might or might not be taken to imply culpability on the part of the incipient believer, the focus of Luke's usage at 17:2 is clearly upon the dire consequences for any 'enemies of the vulnerable μικροί', who might be instrumental in provoking their loss and fall from faith. The most natural targets for such a warning in the narrative context that Luke gives to the saying would be: the Pharisees and teachers of the law who muttered against Jesus because of the attention he was giving to the socially and religiously excluded 'lost' in 15:1–7; the 'older brother', representing an intransigent and elitist Jewish hierarchy in the parable of the lost son (15:11–32); the Pharisees again who are identified as active stakeholders in a wealth and influence power structure that Jesus declares to be abhorrent to God (16:13–15); and those represented by the compassionless 'rich man' in 12:19–31. However, the admonition at 17:3a, immediately following the warning in 17:2, is perhaps best associated with that warning rather than as an introduction to the subsequent saying about brothers sinning amongst themselves.<sup>404</sup> Either way, the warning as a whole is articulated in the presence of the disciples (17:1), who are thus not exempted from the danger of being the cause of μικροί being excluded from the blessings of the Kingdom. This danger has already been exposed in the 9:46–48 passage and Luke is to do so again in his account of their rejection of the children at 18:15–17.

The significance of the setting of the second of the child-reception passages at the heart of a collection of teaching and events in 18:9–14; 18–30; 35–43; and 19:1–10, that exemplifies the challenging nature of the messianic agenda has already been noted. This narrative structure strongly suggests that Luke presents the report of the disciples' negative reaction to children as a way to confront any persistent misunderstanding or unreadiness on the part of his reader to embrace the Nazareth declaration of Jesus' messianic mission to the poor. Luke has emphasized that this mission, from its beginnings in the conception of the Messiah as a child of a ταπεινή, is grounded in the radical commitment of Israel's God to the Kingdom restoration of the socially and spiritually disenfranchised. Such is the imperative of this commitment for

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<sup>404</sup> This is the position of the majority of commentators. See Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 639, 642.

the would-be disciple, that the appropriate, receptive, response to 'such as a child' is declared to be the *sine qua non* of entry into the Kingdom experience and agenda.

### Conclusion

The vision of socio-religious restoration that is foundational to the revelation of the 'salvation of God' (3:6) is expressed in the principle of 'exalting' the ταπεινοί (1:52), through the practice of εὐαγγελίσασθαι πτωχοῖς (4:18), and by the preferential Kingdom status attributed to the μικροί.

As Luke goes on to develop his narrative, he exegetes the Nazareth mission declaration of the eschatological evangelization of the poor. Jesus is presented demonstrating empathetic Kingdom affirmation of the poor, the lowly and little-ones in his transformational dealings with them. This is especially signalled in Luke's treatment of children and his presentation of the Messiah's birth and childhood upbringing amongst them in their lowliness.

The messianic mission is defined from beginning to end by Jesus' readiness to identify with and receive those whom the prevailing socio-religious order rejects; to receive those whom it excludes. This gracious proactivity is signally exemplified in the acts of calling and receiving the children in the face of the disciples' status-dominated attitude. It is an imperative of Luke's narrative that the disciples embody this radical commitment dramatically set before them in the child-reception sign-act. In this singular and central episode, Jesus' own messianic mission to the poor is expressed, and simultaneously the disciples within the narrative, and those 'in front' of the narrative, are challenged to abandon their commitment to worldly ideas of greatness and instead embrace both the values and missional demands of the Kingdom bringer.<sup>405</sup> As the child, and all symbolized by her, are received in Jesus' name, he is

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<sup>405</sup> Cf. Stephen Wright, 'Hearing Jesus and Understanding God,' in *Reading Luke: Interpretation, Reflection, Formation*. Vol.6: 221-224, Scripture and Hermeneutics, edited by Craig Bartholomew, Joel B. Green, Anthony Thiselton (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005). In a discussion of the literary function of parables as metonyms within the context of Luke's gospel narrative as a whole, he writes, 'They offer "slices of life" which make an implied suggestion about "the way things might be" on a much broader canvas. In their indicative form they

himself received by the disciple, who is thus enabled to act as a true ambassador of the One sent to raise up the lowly, proclaim the good news to the poor and restore to the little-ones their place in the eschatologically envisioned social order.

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narrate the presence of God's Kingdom in surprising yet graspable ways, with implied imperative corollaries, changes of attitude or action looked for in the hearers', 221, and that they 'function as the Gospel in miniature', 224. It is the contention of this study that the parabolic sign-acts of the child-reception events have a comparable quality and function within Luke's gospel presentation.

## RECEIVING ‘THIS CHILD’, AND RECEIVING JESUS AND THE ONE WHO SENT HIM

### Introduction

Jesus sets the child at his side, as an expression of his Kingdom values that stand in contrast to those dominating the disciples’ worldview. As they follow his example, δέξεται τοῦτο τὸ παιδίον, Jesus affirms that they receive him, ἐμὲ δέχεται, and the One who sent him, δέχεται τὸν ἀποστείλαντά με. It is the purpose of this section to explore the potential significance of this saying for the reader-disciple, within Luke’s carefully crafted narrative presentation of Jesus’ messianic mission.

### The Uses of δέχομαι, λαμβάνω and Cognates in Luke–Acts

The verb δέχομαι, to receive or welcome, lies at the heart of the child-reception pericope, appearing four times in 9:48. A detailed study will therefore be made of its use by Luke, considering semantic, contextual and narrative perspectives. Since Johannes Louw and Eugene Nida judge that any distinction of nuance between the verbs δέχομαι and λαμβάνω ‘cannot be determined from the existing contexts’, consideration will also be given to λαμβάνω and its cognates.<sup>406</sup>

#### δέχομαι in Luke’s Gospel

The verb is favoured by Luke, who uses it sixteen times in his gospel and eight in Acts, compared to ten in Matthew, six in Mark and only once in John.<sup>407</sup>

The seminal significance of Simeon’s receiving, ἐδέξατο, of the child-Messiah (2:28) establishes the crucial dynamic of acceptance or rejection of the Kingdom that the

<sup>406</sup> Johannes Louw and Eugene Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*. Vol. 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (New York: UBS, 1989), 572 n.31.

<sup>407</sup> Mk 9:37 and Mt 18:5 also have δέχομαι describing the appropriate action of the disciples in regard to the child, whom they describe in slightly different terms. Both qualify the receiving-action with the phrase ‘in my name’. Mk 9:37 has the comment, ‘he who receives me, does not receive me, but him who sent me’, whilst Matthew omits the second part about receiving the ‘One who sent me’. Luke gives emphasis to the receiving of the ‘One who sent’ Jesus, by using a positive in place of Mark’s negative. There are no significant grammatical differences between the synoptic texts; in 9:48 Luke uses an aorist middle over against Mark’s less grammatically correct present indicative.

verb and its synonyms will carry throughout Luke's gospel narrative. The Spirit-enabled recognition and acceptance of the child-Jesus by Simeon and Anna will contrast starkly with the early experience of Jesus, the man-Messiah, in the response to the Nazareth declaration of his mission. There, he attributes his rejection to the unacceptability of the familiar, and the cognate adjective used, δεκτός, acceptable (4:24), has a related semantic field to δέχομαι.<sup>408</sup>

In 8:13, the word of the Kingdom is received, δέχονται, with joy but without roots. In 9:5 the possibility of a negative reaction to the Twelve, sent ahead of Jesus as messengers of the Kingdom, is spelled out and reiterated later to the seventy-two whom Jesus prepares to experience rejection, μὴ δέχωνται ὑμᾶς (10:8, 10). Jesus' own non-acceptance by the Samaritans in 9:53, οὐκ ἐδέξαντο αὐτόν, comes as no surprise to the reader.

As the narrative journey to Jerusalem draws to its close (18:15–17), Luke re-presents the 'child challenge', echoing the 9:46–48 pericope which had marked the completion of the opening section of his narrative and the beginning of the journey narrative. As the disciples fail to follow his earlier admonition and emulate his receptive action, the crucial importance of their response is reiterated by Jesus, only now it is cast in terms of 'entry into the Kingdom', rather than that of 'receiving Jesus and the One who sent him'. The extent to which 18:15–17 can be considered as an 'intertext' or 'co-text' for 9:46–48 will be discussed at length below.

The final Lukan gospel use of the verb, δεξάμενος ποτήριον εὐχαριστήσας (22:17), fittingly describes Jesus' invitation to the disciples and reader-disciples at his table, to receive the cup and share in the New Covenant meal, 'until the Kingdom of God comes' (22:18).

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<sup>408</sup> Louw and Nida, *Semantic Domains*, 454, section 34.54.

It can be seen that, with the exception of three of the four uses in the parable of the unjust steward in 16:1–9,<sup>409</sup> every gospel use of the verb expresses the reception or rejection of the Kingdom, its blessings, its message and its messengers.

### **δέχομαι in Acts**

Although at 3:21 and 7:59, δέχομαι is used to describe Jesus' and then Stephen's reception in heaven,<sup>410</sup> Luke continues his first volume preference for employing the verb to refer to the reception and acceptance of the word of God: by Moses (7:38), the Samaritans (8:14), the Gentiles (11:1) and the Bereans (17:11).

The final two instances, 22:5 and 28:21, see the verbs referring to the reception of communications from the Jewish authorities regarding the probity of Paul and his teaching.

### **δέχομαι with Prepositional Prefixes**

The predominantly Kingdom focus continues in the nine gospel uses of the verb with prepositional prefixes, which sometimes add nuance to the meaning appropriate to the context.

### **προσδέχομαι**

Simeon received, ἐδέξατο (2:28) the child Jesus into his arms, but both he and Anna (2:25,38), along with Joseph of Arimathea later (23:51), are described as looking forward to receiving, προσεδέχετο, the Kingdom's coming, a perspective that reflects the preposition and is found also in the parable of eschatological fulfilment in the usage at 12:36. At 15:2, which records the accusation that Jesus received sinners and ate with them, Louw and Nida make the comment that the προσ prefix 'may suggest a

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<sup>409</sup> Even in the parable cited, the overall emphasis is upon being 'received into the eternal habitations'.

<sup>410</sup> The AV and RSV translate δέξασθαι as 'received' (in heaven), whilst the NRSV and NIV have 'remain'. Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 208, captures the richness of the word most happily when he paraphrases the clause as, 'Until then, heaven must be the home of Jesus. i.e. the place where Jesus is unreservedly and naturally welcome, accepted and honoured as belonging'.

kind of reciprocal relationship which exists with outcasts'.<sup>411</sup> This suggestion is of particular interest when considering the usage at 9:48, and the potential of children to symbolize outcasts and their relation to the messianic mission of Jesus and his disciples.

### **ὑποδέχομαι**

The only two gospel uses of δέχομαι with ὑπο emphasize the positive reception of Jesus into the homes of Martha (10:38) and Zacchaeus (19:6) at the beginning and the end of his journey to Jerusalem, a reception which stands in marked contrast to the rejection of the Samaritans.

### **ἀποδέχομαι and παραδέχομαι**

This verb-prepositional use, ἀπο, unique to Luke in the New Testament, appears twice in the gospel in the context of positive Kingdom acceptance, as it does also in Acts 2:41. The remaining five occurrences in Luke's second volume, and also the three verb-prepositional uses of παρα with δέχομαι in Acts, are used according to common parlance and not as 'vocabulary of the Kingdom'.

In the account of the dinner at the house of Simon the Pharisee (7:36–50), even though words from the semantic field of δέχομαι are not employed, Luke gives a striking example of how the manner of welcoming a guest demonstrates the values and social vocabulary of those present. Despite having been admitted as an invited guest, it is evident that Simon has not 'received' him since he had failed to affirm Jesus' social acceptability through the traditional courtesies of foot washing, a welcoming kiss and anointing with oil (7:44–46). Jesus dramatically contrasts this behaviour, which is according to 'worldly' norms of acceptability, with the values of the Kingdom demonstrated by the 'sinful' woman.

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<sup>411</sup> Louw and Nida, *Semantic Domains*, 454 n.10.



### The Synonymous Use of λαμβάνω and προσλαμβάνω

Λαμβάνω, occurring twenty-three times in Luke and thirty times in Acts, shares the semantic field of δέχομαι, but in comparison with the other gospel writers, does not receive the preference Luke shows toward δέχομαι. However, the five Pauline uses of the prefixed form προσλαμβάνομαι (employed by Luke in five instances in Acts, out of the twelve New Testament occurrences), can be held to inform the semantic potential of the group to which δέχομαι belongs. At Romans 14:1, 3; 15:7 (twice) and, significantly, Philemon 17, the verb is specifically employed to describe the reception or welcoming of people, because Christ has first accepted them. The context of these Pauline usages, the ‘weakness’ of the one to be welcomed (Ro14:1, 3), and the servant nature of Christ, the receiving one (Ro 15:7), and especially the whole context of Onesimus’ situation before Philemon, is particularly suggestive of the quality of receiving that is in focus in the Lukan child-reception pericope.<sup>412</sup>

#### 18:15–17 as Co-text to 9:46–48

The preceding study has established the general scope of the semantic field of δέχομαι, employed preferentially by Luke to represent Jesus’ missional Kingdom-action. The significance of the event and saying in Luke 18 will now be considered.

The context of the sayings in 18:16–17 is established by the event described in 18:15 where the disciples are shown trying to impede people who are bringing infants<sup>413</sup> to Jesus so that he might touch them, ἵνα αὐτῶν ἄπτηται,<sup>414</sup> and by Jesus’ contradictory

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<sup>412</sup> The case of Philemon and Onesimus is an exceptionally well elaborated presentation of the contrast between the social status code of the Kingdom and that of the Greco-Roman world that can be seen as comparable to, and indeed a practical application of, Jesus’ sign-acts with children in Luke 9 and 18.

<sup>413</sup> Whilst Mark (10:13) and Mt (19:13) use παιδιά, Luke uses βρέφη. Although the tradition that Luke draws upon (18:17), uses παιδιά, as in 9:46–48, his use at 1:41, 44; 2:12, 16 and Acts 7:19 clearly implies babes.

<sup>414</sup> William Arndt, and Felix Wilbur Gingrich, ‘ἄπτω,’ in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957): ‘frequently as a means of conveying a blessing’. Luke uses ἄπτω to describe Jesus acting through touch to mediate the healing power of God with a leper (5:13), as a prelude to raising the son of the widow of Nain (7:14), in the healing of a woman with a haemorrhage (8:44) and the healing of the ear of the high priest’s servant (22:51). There is no recorded use of ἄπτω in

act of calling them to himself. Unlike Mark 10:16 and Matthew 19:15, Luke does not actually state whether Jesus fulfils the carers' wishes that he should 'touch' the infants, though the account leaves no doubt that he does so.<sup>415</sup>

The similarity with the passage at 9:46–48, both in terms of the wrong attitude of the disciples and the corrective action of Jesus, is striking and suggestive of a desire on Luke's part that the reader should have the earlier text in mind when considering the significance of the event in focus. The imperative which drives the action of Jesus is that, despite their social insignificance and 'un-greatness', even the βρέφη should know the welcoming acceptance of the bringer of the Kingdom and receive his blessing, because the 'the Kingdom of God is for such as these'.

Following the receiving action of Jesus and this declaration of the children's Kingdom value, which here is made explicit in contrast to the implicit affirmation of 9:47, Luke goes on to present a challenging critique of the disciples' action in such a way that the reader-disciples are also confronted by it, as they are at 9:48.<sup>416</sup> The actual nature of the response being called forth by Jesus, however, turns on the understanding of the comparative phrase ὡς παιδίων. This question will now be addressed and will determine whether this second recorded incident of Jesus' receiving children represents a basis for new teaching regarding the Kingdom, or whether Luke intends the reader to understand its message and place in his narrative as a reiteration of the principle set out at 9:48.

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this way in Acts although the phrase, 'by the hand(s) of', is used as a means of describing the mediation of divine power or authority: in healing (Ac 9:12, 17 Ananias heals Saul and 28:8 Paul heals Publius' father); in acts of divine commissioning (Ac 6:6; 13:3); and in mediating the Holy Spirit (8:17–19 in Samaria and 19:6 in Ephesus). More generally, the phrase is used to mean 'through the agency of', as in Ac 5:12; 14:3 and 19:11.

<sup>415</sup> Matthew (19:15) informs his reader that the prayers of Jesus are being sought and Mark (10:16) talks about the blessing that accompanies the placing of his hands upon the children.

<sup>416</sup> Luke shows the same wording and order as Mark 10:14–15, unlike Matthew who relates the saying in a modified form directly to the earlier sign-act of Jesus (18:3).

### The Meaning of ὡς παιδίον in 18:17

ἀμήν λέγω ὑμῖν, ὅς ἂν μὴ δέξηται τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ ὡς παιδίον, οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθῃ εἰς αὐτήν (18:17).

#### Grammatical Considerations

As it is not possible to distinguish between the nominative and accusative cases of παιδίον, the comparative phrase may be considered to qualify, by comparison to children, either the subject, ὅς, or the object, βασιλείαν, in relation to the action in view, δέξηται. The sentence might mean either that the Kingdom of God should be received as a child would receive it, or that the Kingdom of God should be received as one would receive a child.

The first option invites the reader-disciple to find in the example of children, or childlikeness, guidance regarding the heart and mindset necessary for receiving God's Kingdom. This reading is made explicit in Matthew's presentation of the saying (Mt 18:3) and is adopted for Luke by a majority of commentators. Of these, Taylor, Fitzmyer, Nolland and Bock amongst others suggest that the saying commends a response to the Kingdom modelled upon subjective qualities commonly associated with childlikeness such as innocence, humility, readiness to trust without reserve, or receptiveness.<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>417</sup> Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV*, The Anchor Yale Bible 28A (New Haven: Doubleday / Yale University Press, 1985). However, he acknowledges that Luke's use in 18:15 of βρέφη, emphasized by the preceding καὶ, highlights the infancy of the children in view in the comparison and comments on page 1193 n.18 that this 'creates a bit of a problem', for it is less appropriate in that 'some conscious capacity in the children seems needed to give point to the saying concerning receiving the Kingdom of God as a little child'. Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, 880 refers to 'The childlikeness called for in this unit...', though he fails to identify what subjective qualities of childhood might be most appropriate, and concludes on 882, 'somewhere among their openness, willingness to trust, freedom from hypocrisy or pretension, conscious weakness and readiness for dependence Jesus finds those qualities that are essential for entry into the Kingdom of God', whilst Bock, *Luke Vol. 2*, writes, 'The simple dependent attitude of little children is a picture of the disciple's attitude in walking with God', a position shared by François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27*, Hermeneia (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2013), 559.

Others, such as Charles Cranfield, followed by William Lane (commenting on the verbatim passage in Mark) and Evans, prefer to focus upon the gracious nature of the Kingdom offer and highlight those objective qualities of childhood such as weakness, vulnerability and dependence, as those which should determine the attitudes of the disciple in relation to the Kingdom being presented by Jesus.<sup>418</sup>

The grammatical possibility of the alternative reading is, however, recognized,<sup>419</sup> and Green, after considering the different interpretational possibilities, opts for the second alternative on the grounds of cultural perceptions of the child in the Greco-Roman world; it is this position that I will now argue for here.<sup>420</sup>

In a short study published in the *Expository Times* in 1966, Fredrick Schilling presented an analysis of the use of the comparative phrase which calls into question the grammatical neutrality of the interpretational options in Mark 10:15/Luke 18:17. Examining the sentence construction of seven texts in which the comparative ὡς is employed he affirmed 'that it connects closely the two members which are likened to each other', and that consequentially 'παίδιον should be read with its adjoining τὴν βασιλείαν, but not with ὅς, the distant pronominal subject of the verb'.<sup>421</sup>

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<sup>418</sup> Charles E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St Mark*, Cambridge Greek New Testament Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 324. 'The reference to ὡς παίδιον again is not to the receptiveness or humility or imaginativeness or trustfulness or unselfconsciousness of children, but to their objective littleness and helplessness'; See also William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 360, 'The ground of Jesus' surprising statement is found not in any subjective quality possessed by children but rather in the objective humbleness and in the startling character of the grace of God who wills to give the Kingdom to those who have no claim upon it'; Evans, *Saint Luke*, 648, reading 'to receive as a child receives', i.e. with subjective childlike qualities of trust etc., effectively separates the verb 'receive' from the rest of the sentence which has to do with an adult action. Evans finally opts for 'by becoming a little one' in the sense of a 'renunciation of pretensions to greatness'.

<sup>419</sup> Vincent Taylor, commenting upon the corresponding verbatim use of the pericope in Mark 10:15, whilst ultimately preferring the first option, acknowledges, '...It is however possible to read παίδιον as an accusative with the meaning "as one receives a little child"'. *The Gospel according to Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1959), 423.

<sup>420</sup> Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 651 n.131.

<sup>421</sup> Frederick Schilling, 'What Means the Saying about Receiving the Kingdom of God as a Little Child?' *Expository Times* 77.57 (1966): 56–58. The texts cited by Schilling: Mt 10:16; 19:19; Mk 1:10; Lk 6:22; 10:3; 1Th 5:4; Phm 17.

A full study of every use of the twenty-nine occurrences of ὡς in Luke's gospel shows seventeen examples of its use introducing a comparative-figurative element.<sup>422</sup> Of these, in nine instances the comparative-figurative element works in apposition to and complementing the description of the subject of an intransitive main verb. In every other instance, the case or number of the comparative element indicates its link to the object of the main verb to which it is always located in immediate proximity. A question remains, however, as to whether the comparative element is qualifying only the substantive object, or the object linked to its verb.

In three of these instances (10:3, 18; 17:6), it is clear from the sense of the sentence that the comparative element is qualifying the substantive object; for example at 17:6 the smallness of the seed is a measure of the faith in view. In 10:27 and 15:19, 21 the comparison is not with the substantive alone but with the object linked to its verb (e.g. 15:19, 21: 'Treat me as (you would treat) one of your hired servants'). In 6:22 either option gives a sensible reading.

Schilling, however, considers only the substantive-substantive comparison and so is left to seek meaning in the difficult interpretation of τὴν βασιλείαν by παιδίον, a

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<sup>422</sup> Sixteen comparative uses of ὡς in Luke's gospel are shown below (excluding the use in 18:17). In nine instances ὡς, of necessity, links the comparative element to the subject of an intransitive verb:

3:22 the spirit in bodily form ὡς a dove descended upon him

11:44 You are ὡς unmarked graves

12:27 Solomon was dressed ὡς one...of these

18:11 I am not ὡς this tax-collector

21:35 that day, ὡς a snare

22:26a ...the greatest will be (γινέσθω) ὡς youngest

22:26b the one who rules (γινέσθω-understood) ὡς the one who serves.

22:27 I am...ὡς the one who serves

22:52 ὡς (men-understood) after a thief, you have come out.

In the remaining seven instances, those where the sentence contains an object, the case or number indicate that the comparative element complements the object, to which it is always located in immediate proximity and not the subject of the main verb:

6:22 Men reject your name ὡς an evil thing (πονηρον)

10:3 I am sending you ὡς sheep

10:18 I saw Satan ὡς lightning fall from heaven

10:27 Love your neighbour ὡς yourself (σεαυτον)

15:19,21 Treat me ὡς one of your hired servants

17:6 If you have faith ὡς a seed of mustard.

search which is ultimately unconvincing. When, however, the verb-object unit ‘receiving the Kingdom’ is compared with ‘receiving a child’, the meaning is not only intelligible but immediately evokes a clear recollection of the earlier saying of Jesus in 9:48.

Whilst Schilling’s analysis is incomplete, and some of his conclusions open to question, the close examination of the use of ὡς in Luke’s gospel leaves open an interpretation of 18:17 that reflects a Lukan preference for using the comparative element to qualify not the subject of the transitive verb, but rather the object and specifically the object in its relation to the verb.

### **Contextual Considerations**

The saying in 18:17 is presented in direct response to the disciples’ rejection of the infants and Jesus’ contradiction of their contra-Kingdom attitude. It is adult attitude rather than childlike quality that is the focus of Jesus’ words of correction and warning addressed to the disciples. It is not merely children that are in view, but the disciples’ equivocal response to their being brought to him for Kingdom blessing. The import of Jesus’ response to the disciples is clear: if they, or any Kingdom seekers, are ‘to enter it’, then they must eschew the rejection exemplified by the disciples and follow the corrective example of Jesus, receiving the children despite their societal insignificance.

Further support for this interpretation is provided by the setting given by Luke. The pericope is bracketed by two narratives which illustrate failure to qualify for entry into Kingdom acceptance: the Pharisee who rejected the religiously marginalized tax collector (18:1–14), and the rich young ruler who turned away from the call to commit himself and his wealth to embrace Jesus’ ministry to the poor (18:18–25).<sup>423</sup> The disciples’ persistent incomprehension of the socially inverted nature of Kingdom values

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<sup>423</sup> Kodell, ‘Luke and the Children’, 418, writes, ‘Sometimes, Luke links a parable or a story with a teaching of Jesus to illustrate the teaching explicitly or implicitly. The instances of explicit illustration are common...’ He goes on to cite 7:41–42 which gives teaching on forgiveness illustrated by the story of the penitent woman and 7:44–50, and 12:15 giving teaching on a proper attitude to wealth illustrated by the story of the rich fool, 12:16–21.

is further expressed in 18:26–30 and met by the third announcement by Jesus of his forthcoming death — the ultimate expression of the Kingdom confrontation of conventional value and power structures. The theme continues to dominate the closing section of the journey narrative as Luke recounts two final events that positively illustrate the Kingdom acceptance of the marginalized: the blind beggar whom the disciples try to silence, and the repentant tax collector, Zacchaeus, who is rejected as a sinner by the authorities but affirmed by Jesus as a son of Abraham (19:7, 9).

**‘Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as he would (receive) a Child’**

It is the contention of this study that both grammatical and contextual analysis offer robust grounds for adopting as a reading of 18:17: ‘He who does not receive the Kingdom of God *as he would receive a child*, will certainly not enter it’. This would suggest that the text 18:15–17 was intended to be read in an inter-textual or complementary relationship to 9:46–48, offering an ‘action-exposition’ of the primary child-reception event.

In harmony with what has been shown to be the prevailing emphasis of δέχομαι and its cognates in Luke–Acts, Luke uses the disciples’ show of persistent worldliness in 18:15–17 to demonstrate once again that Kingdom values are displayed in actively receiving the socially insignificant children and bringing them within the scope of Kingdom blessing.

**Receiving ‘in my name’, 9:48a**

The significance of this qualifying phrase in the immediate context of the pericope has already been noted in the preceding section,<sup>424</sup> as pointing not only to the character of acts performed, ‘in a way that is consistent with Jesus’ own commitments and commission’,<sup>425</sup> but also to the presencing of Jesus as the source of the authority and

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<sup>424</sup> The Narrative Setting of 9:46–48: ‘Although the disciples had “received” the child brought to them by the anxious father 9:40, they were unable to become agents of the eschatological power present in Jesus himself and also present in the ‘outsider’ exorcist who acted ‘in his name’.

<sup>425</sup> Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 392.

power that enables them. Louw and Nida recognise that δέχομαι and λαμβάνω describe the reception or acceptance of an object or benefit, ‘for which the initiative rests with the giver’,<sup>426</sup> and Luke directly indicates Jesus, as the author of the act of receiving that is to be carried out ‘in his name’. The phrase ‘in my name’, therefore, emphasises the identity of the giver as Jesus himself who, in response to the disciples’ contradictory position, presents the correcting sign-act of receiving the child, an action which represents the character of his own mission commitment and points to the possibility of their receiving the divine empowerment that they will need to become effective agents in the same mission.<sup>427</sup>

### ‘He who receives me receives him who sent me’, 9:48b

The phraseology of the affirmation that the disciples will receive Jesus and the One who sent him reflects a socio-literary convention current in 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish writing,<sup>428</sup> that a duly commissioned delegate can act as a plenipotentiary representative (*shaliach*) of the commissioning authority.<sup>429</sup> However, just as the authority and power of Jesus is derived from his faithful and active commitment to

<sup>426</sup> Louw and Nida, *Semantic Domains*, 572.

<sup>427</sup> References to the invocation of the ‘name’ of Jesus in Acts:

3:16 It is ἐπὶ τῇ πίστει τοῦ ὀνόματος αὐτοῦ τοῦτον, and the faith that comes δι’ αὐτοῦ

4:10 ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ Ναζωραίου;

4:12 ἐν ᾧ, ‘in which (name)’, i.e. by the agency of that person denominated by the name, ‘we must be saved’;

4:17 ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι τούτῳ ‘to speak in this name’, implying an active and authorized commissioning;

4:18 ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, ‘to utter or teach in the name of’;

4:30 διὰ τοῦ ὀνόματος τοῦ ἁγίου παιδός σου Ἰησοῦ, ‘signs and wonders through the name of your holy child Jesus’;

16:18 ἐν ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, in the exorcism of the slave girl in Phillipi;

19:13 ὀνομάζειν...τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ λέγοντες· Ὁρκίζω ὑμᾶς τὸν Ἰησοῦν ὃν Παῦλος κηρύσσει, ‘I exorcise you (by the power of) Jesus whom Paul preaches’.

See also 9:34, Peter’s healing of Aeneas, where only the name ‘Jesus Christ’ is cited, without mention of ‘in the name of’. Luke clearly understands that it is the presencing of the resurrected Jesus that enables the miraculous events and gives authority to teaching, and that this is given in response to faithful commitment and not verbal invocation.

<sup>428</sup> Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 426, reviews the uses of this convention as it employs different verbs in either positive or negative forms: to hear (10:16), to honour (Jn 5:23), to accept (Jn 13:20), to receive (Mt 10:40; 18:5, par. Mk 9:37). For usage in other contemporary literature, see Karl-Heinrich Rengsdorf, ‘Ἀπόστολος,’ in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol.1, edited by Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:413-37.

<sup>429</sup> For a discussion of the term, its origins and meaning, see Rengsdorf, ‘Ἀπόστολος,’ 413–37.



‘τον ἀποστελαντα με’ (9:48), so also the disciples will be dependent upon replicating the same mission activity as the one has commissioned them (6:13; 9:1–2).<sup>430</sup> By invoking the example and authority of their Lord Jesus in receiving the child in contradiction to the rejection characteristic of the prevailing social order, they will simultaneously carry out his purposes and be affirmed as his legitimate envoys.<sup>431</sup> As Luke’s ongoing narrative will show, especially in 18:15–17, this was a lesson that they found difficult to practice, and it is not until after they receive<sup>432</sup> the Spirit sent by Jesus for the very purpose of empowering them to become μου μάρτυρες (Ac 1:8), that they display their effective comprehension of the action-sign given in 9:47. In Acts 3 and 4, Luke clearly attributes both the miraculous power of their action and the persuasive authority of their teaching to the ongoing ministry of Jesus with which they are identified as they invoke his name. The extension of this power and authority beyond Israel in accordance with Simeon’s primary vision that accompanied the conferring of the name Jesus upon the infant child is expressed by Luke in his account of Paul’s invocation of the same name as he brings liberating Kingdom power to bear in the life of the slave girl in Philippi (Ac 16:18). Barrett’s comment in a discussion of the use of the phraseology in John 13:20 expresses the theological import evident in Luke’s usage: ‘the effect is to give the mission of Jesus and the mission of the church an absolute theological significance: in both, the world is confronted by God himself’.<sup>433</sup>

### **For he who is least among you all, he is the greatest, 9:48c**

The concluding saying is most naturally read as Luke’s summary of the episode as a whole. From the perspective of, and in contrast to, the disciples’ concern with ‘worldly’

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<sup>430</sup> Rengsdorf emphasizes the centrality of the concept of ἀποστολεῖν / ἀποστολὸς in Luke–Acts and particularly that it is the commissioned activity that is primary, not any concept of office: ‘Action too is essential, for in it the messenger has and gives proof that he is really the commissioned representative of Jesus’. *Ἀπόστολος*, 429.

<sup>431</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1, A Commentary*, 265, ‘the envoys cannot fail to sense their worth and feel protected by their ties to him, and through him to God’.

<sup>432</sup> ‘Receive power’ in Ac 1:8, λήμψεσθε δύναντες, will be understood in the light of 24:49, ἐνδύσησθε ἐξ ὑψους δύναντες, as ‘becoming empowered by’.

<sup>433</sup> Charles K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St John* (London: SPCK, 1955), 371.

μείζων, the Kingdom ideal and Kingdom greatness, signified by Jesus, are to be expressed by an ambition to become, as Jesus is in the world's eyes, μικρότερος.

### **Conclusion**

In 9:46–48 the act of receiving the child, the embracing and affirming of the 'un-great' as the proper and intended recipients of the Kingdom, expresses and models the dynamic of the Kingdom life that Jesus sets before the reader-disciple as the path to Kingdom 'greatness'.

By virtue of the symbolic potential of the child to represent the marginalized, vulnerable and dependent, the receptive action is admirably suited to expressing the transformational promise that characterizes Luke's presentation of Jesus' messianic vision and mission.

The power of the verb 'to receive' lies in its capacity to express both who the reader-disciple is called upon to receive as an act of obedient missionary emulation 'in the name of Jesus', and what, or better, who, they themselves receive, as a concomitant of that action. It is this dynamic interrelation between the two acts or experiences of 'receiving' that makes the child-reception sign-act presented in 9:46–48 so appropriate and empowering in the development of Luke's mission-focused narrative, as through it reader-disciples are invited and challenged to be both affirmed and empowered as children of the Kingdom.

It will be the aim of the reflective process that follows to explore, through dialogue between the child-motif of Luke's narrative and the narratives of congregational life and mission in deprived communities in São Paulo, the theological and missiological potential of 9:46–48 to catalyse further understanding and expressions of the Kingdom that 'turns the world upside down'.

## SECTION 4: MISSIOLOGICAL DIALOGUE

In 'Missiological Dialogue', the italicized sections are narrations of recalled child-centred events that significantly influenced my missio-cultural understanding and subsequent missional practice. They are presented here as 'thick' autoethnographical compositions to inform the purposes of this study.

### CHILD-RECEPTION EVENTS 1: THE GENERATIVE THEME OF ABANDONMENT

#### 'God sent you'

*The Valley of Virtues: The favela had inherited a name that parodied its present reality. In a matter of months, the once fresh green landscape bordering the meandering stream had spawned a rash of ill-constructed, insanitary lean-tos that had choked the life from the running water and daily threatened to do the same to its people.*

*Two older ladies, members of the small Baptist church at the head of the gully, were rapping on a section of wooden advertising hoarding that hung across the only opening to the otherwise barrier-like façade. Sounds of a TV reality show, an unseen dog barking, a distant argument, but no response from within the shack. No-one to ask if there might be pre-school-aged children inside who might enjoy the PEPE that the church was going to open. Looking at one another, their knuckles touched the flaking paint in a last attempt. A narrow gap appeared, less than half a face in shadow, and words that barely made it beyond the penumbra, '...What do you want?'*

*Attempting to breathe life into the moment... 'We're from the church...you know the one at the head of the gully'...the half-face looked as if she didn't know...'We wondered if you had any little ones who might enjoy coming along to the pre-school...it's free and they'll love it!'*

*A pause, the gap widened, the shadow retreated, and an explanation emerged, 'I didn't come to the door because when you knocked I was kneeling on the floor, with my two*

*children, with our heads in the gas oven. I was just going to turn on the gas...my husband left me six months ago, there is no food in the house, and as far as I know, there is no-one who cares if we live or die'. And then three words: 'God sent you'.*

In chapter 7, Luke narrates that Jesus had impossibly reached out across the frontiers of marginality, expressed by the coffin of a child already in the grip of death and by a destitute widow's tears of desolation, and the cry had gone up, *'God has come to help his people.'*

In that darkest moment of suffering, threatened by the untimely death of an only son, the community perceived God's intervention — they are not abandoned; God has sent them a saviour. In the Valley of Virtues, had the disciples of Jesus witnessed anything less dramatic? And would the consequences of an indifference toward the weakest and most vulnerable of that community have been any less fatal? Had they not been sent 'in his name', as that humanly abandoned mother had declared? And was their intervention not a prophetic affirmation that the God who sent Jesus continues to intervene, presencing himself in those disciples who reached out to receive her child; an affirmation of recognition and acceptance in the face of abandonment?

### **'Here comes Jesus'**

*...It was a little after 9 am and the smell from the open sewer that ran along between the wooden and breeze-block shacks of the favela of Jardim Olinda was increasing with the rising temperature. I had come to help. Sônia Costa had arrived over an hour earlier and with the enthusiastic help of a swarm of young children had already loaded and carried away two lorry-loads of the dank cardboard boxes and general detritus that had taken over the dark inside space of the wood and corrugated iron lean-to that Abel and an indeterminate number of younger brothers and sisters and cousins knew as their home.*

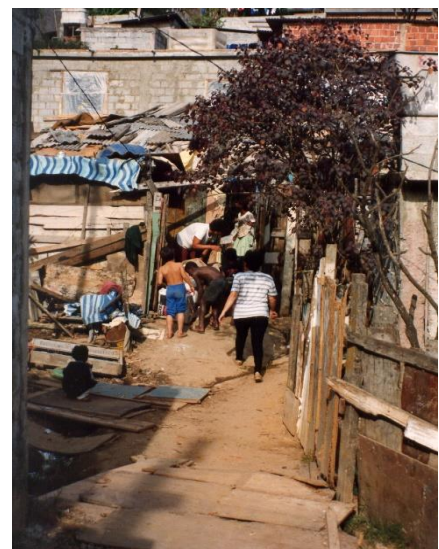
*Suddenly a shrill cry went up, 'Here comes Jesus!' Unbidden, a thought sprang into my mind, 'Thank God! ...to bring an end to all this suffering!' There was, however, no apocalyptic trumpet blast or rush of archangelic wings, only Sônia, a portly woman in her forties, gingerly descending the narrow alleyway that lead down from the road above to the sewer-side hovel below. But Jesus had been seen by a child, and a small church had been encouraged to continue being 'hands-on' in the name of Jesus.*

### **Recalled Experience and Text in Dialogue**

The voice crying in the alleyway and proclaiming the arrival of the Word made flesh was that of a child who lived, as millions of children continue to live, a life defined by



Children pushing the rubbish up the alleyway to the lorry.



Sônia entering the shack to get another load of rubbish.

the societal marginalization and deprivation suffered by his parents. The rubbish gleaned for recycling from the streets of the city was symbolic of their abandonment by mainstream society. Contact with the 'real' people in 'real' houses was mediated only through the things that they had abandoned, and their rejects had stolen Abel's space, shut out the light and brought dampness and rats, incarnations of abandonment, into his world. With the rats came the urine, bearing the leptospira bacteria that attacked his liver, kidneys, heart and lungs, and the teeth that chewed his baby sister as she slept. With the dampness came the bronchitic diseases that threatened his life only a little less than the violence of the big people who fought over the rubbish during the day and who drank and drugged themselves at night.

But why did Abel suddenly identify the Christ of God in the form of a forty-something female descending into his world? Well, had he not seen what Jesus was like?




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The author with puppets and children,  
Jardim Olinda, 1993.

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Sunday by Sunday in the lean-to which served as the 'church-without-walls' at the edge of the favela, puppets like latter-day prophets proclaimed a hands-on God who got involved and changed lives. Then suddenly, there was Sônia, talking like Jesus, caring like Jesus, doing the things that this Jesus did. So, Abel, used as every child is to understanding in terms of 'real time' and 'real things', perceived the Saviour in Sônia.

Children tell it as they see it. What from an adult might have been interpreted as a pious or even irreverent outburst conditioned by religious convention, from a child's lips hangs in the air as a disturbingly authentic exclamation of perceived reality, an epiphany that refuses to be dismissed. Despite the best efforts of my intellectual

firewalls to avoid or diminish the implications of the words, I was impacted by their ingenuous challenge to perceive the Jesus of 9:46–48 presence himself in the person of Sônia, the receiver of little children, and invade the reality of a 20<sup>th</sup> century Brazilian slum.<sup>434</sup>

Luke was so concerned that Theophilus should have no doubt as to the authenticity of Simeon's epiphany, that he three times affirmed the agency of the Holy Spirit in enabling the ageing saint to see the Lord's Christ in the child in his arms.<sup>435</sup> Does Abel's identification of the Christ in the adult merit comparable credibility, or is it merely an outburst of childish imagination, a charming irrelevancy in a grown-up world? Luke, with his positive and consistently developed motif of the child as a hermeneutical key to gaining an assured understanding of the teaching about Jesus, offers us grounds for reflecting theologically upon this question.

In 9:46–48, Luke presents his adult reader with a child, taken by Jesus and set at his side in response to his followers' discussion about 'grown-up greatness'. In the light of the child's presence he asserts that, in response to the disciples receiving/welcoming the child in his name, he would give himself to be received, side by side with the child, just as she stood before them. Furthermore, that a corollary of the 'Sent-One's' being received would be the receiving of the 'Sending-One' also. Herein is the critique of the question as to what constitutes the ground of true greatness: not an *attitude* toward, or imitation of, children, but the *act* of receiving the child in his name. The active response to the child born into abandonment, an embodiment of weakness, vulnerability and social inconsequentiality in the grown-up power-status dominated world of his day and ours, offers a lens by which to investigate the transformative nature of Jesus' messianic mission that is affirmed by Luke<sup>436</sup> — a hermeneutical perspective that for me became a defining missiological viewpoint as I saw the rats and

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<sup>434</sup> Karl Barth, acknowledging the impact that singing simple songs about gospel events and acting them out as a child had upon his own spiritual development, wrote: 'Yes it was very naïve, but perhaps in the very naivety there lay the deepest wisdom and greatest power'. *Church Dogmatics* 4.2.112–13. T&T Clarke, 1958.

<sup>435</sup> 2:25–35, esp. vss. 25, 26, 27.

<sup>436</sup> See the prophetic utterances of Mary (1:46–55) and Simeon (2:34–35) taken up by Jesus in 4:17–21 as he publicly embraces the Isaiah 61 vision of his messiahship.

smelt the sewage and helped Abel to push the rubbish up the alleyway towards Sônia's waiting lorry.

Sônia had indeed acted to receive the child in the name of this Messiah. She had opened her heart to receive the hopes and fears, the pleasures and the pains of the children of the favela of Jardim Olinda. She had opened her business schedule to make time and resources from her commercial woodyard available to remove the adult rubbish from Abel's world. Motivated and empowered by her own and her church's commitment to Jesus, 'in his name' she had reached out to 'this' child-on-the-margins. In doing so, had not Jesus made himself present as promised and in contradiction to the abandonment by society? And had Jesus not been witnessed by Abel that Saturday morning at around 9.30? To quote Pamela Couture, 'The means of Grace is built upon a reciprocity through which God becomes visible to us and we find God'.<sup>437</sup>

It is true that as I heard the words, 'Here comes Jesus', I saw only Sônia, but it does not follow that Jesus was not present to be witnessed. The cry of the child mediated to me a present, real-time epiphany. Whilst my mind had immediately leapt to an anticipation of the eschatological establishing of the Kingdom, the child alerted me to the glorious 'now' reality of that which is 'not yet'.

However, the extent to which this might be a valid perspective cannot be grounded upon any romantic or pre-critical association of children with some supposed primeval innocence or spiritual purity as has been occasionally evidenced in our study of cultural perceptions of children and childhood in antiquity or more recent western culture.<sup>438</sup>

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<sup>437</sup> Couture, *Seeing Children*, 48.

<sup>438</sup> Rupert Brooke, described as the most English of poets, despite being born into a literary world informed by Dickens' contemporary descriptions of childhood in Victorian slums, expressed such a romanticized view of childlikeness in the closing stanza of *Second Best*, drawing a word picture of some imagined paradise restored:  
 '...And the light  
 Returning, shall give back the golden hours,  
 Ocean a windless level, Earth a lawn  
 spacious and full of sunlit dancing places,  
 and laughter and music and among the flowers,  
 the gay child-hearts of men, and the child-faces,  
 O heart, in the great dawn'.



Carlos Queiroz, a Brazilian Protestant social theologian, in an albeit rather overstated and partisan critique of Latin American liberation theology, made a similar point when he wrote that, to consider the child per se as a source of absolute revelation, 'would be to commit the same error as the theology of liberation. The child cannot be sacralised in the way liberation theology did with the poor'.<sup>439</sup> Jesus' invitation to receive 'this child', τοῦτο τὸ παιδίον, is suggestive of his invitation at the Last Supper (22:20) to receive 'this cup', τοῦτο τὸ ποτήριον. Both are calls to faith-action in his name. Yet without the self-giving of Jesus promised in 9:48 both child and cup would remain only child and cup, full of symbolic potential but empty of revelatory or transformative power.

Sônia's role in this revelatory event is all the more significant in that she was not a *favelada*, a member of the favela community. She was an outsider like me. Indeed, the very trappings and symbols of her social difference were facilitating her transformative intervention. Yet despite her cultural and economic distance from Abel and the community of which he was part, she had become a key protagonist in this epiphanal drama, a drama that implies a challenge to the conventional missional wisdom that the pursuit of social equivalence between the missionary and 'target' community is a prime requirement of what is commonly termed 'incarnational mission'.<sup>440</sup>

It is common for the pursuit of 'missional incarnation' to be considered from a primarily sociological perspective, focusing upon the missionary, for whom the prerequisite goal is conceived to be that of achieving an 'incarnational' lifestyle identical to that of the target community. The seamless social absorption of the missionary into some subgroup of marginalized people has for many become the

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<sup>439</sup> Queiroz, *First Brazil Consultation on Child Theology, Itu, SP*. (London: Child Theology Movement. September 2006). 'Dizer que a criança não é apenas mais um tema, mas sim, uma revelação absoluta, seria cometer o mesmo erro da teologia da libertação. A criança não pode ser sacralizada como a teologia da libertação fez com o pobre.'

<sup>440</sup> For a detailed exploration of this question, see Stuart Christine, 'Incarnation: Connecting with Marginal Communities,' in *Mission in Marginal Places*, edited by Paul Cloke and Mike Pears (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2016), 33-56.

frustratingly unrealistic goal of missionary endeavour, in place of that of becoming available to God and the community as a mediator or catalyst of Kingdom experience.

I recall being challenged by a visitor to Jardim Olinda as to what right I had to presume to 'do mission' in the favela since I had a privileged background and did not share the living conditions of the community. Acknowledging the social mismatch, I suggested that we redirect the question to a woman from the community standing nearby, who responded, 'We know that you are rich compared to us, but that's how the world is. What makes the difference for us is that you treat us like *gente*, a Brazilian colloquialism for "proper folk"'.<sup>441</sup> For Maria Lourdes at least, what she experienced as empathetic identification through our interaction with the community in the name of Jesus bridged the gap between our differing social identities.

In Luke 9, Jesus takes the initiative to reach across the conventional boundaries of marginality to express his identification with the child and describes his action in terms of a welcoming acceptance, an active expression of positive mutuality. The presencing of Jesus in Luke begins with 'the Sending One' and goes on to be expressed through proactive, gracious action of 'the One who is sent'; action that is essentially relational in character and intention.<sup>442</sup>

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<sup>441</sup> For more background to this designation of self-worth, see Perlman, *Favela*, where she devotes the whole of chapter 12 to 'The importance of being Gente'.

<sup>442</sup> 'Identification', variously interpreted, is widely recognized as a key element in the pursuit of missional 'connectedness'. It is listed as one of principal values of the Urban Expression movement. See Juliet Kilpin, *Urban to the Core: Motives for Incarnational Mission* (Kibworth Beauchamp, UK: Matador, 2013), 160. Similarly, the appendix of Jenni Craig's overview of the history and principles of the Servants movement founded by the New Zealander, Viv Grigg, sets out the ministry ethos of the organization. Craig cites the 'incarnational model' lived out by Jesus but recognizes that full socio-cultural identity is not possible, affirming that the effective expression of the gospel is through 'relational commitment'. *Servants among the Poor* (Manila: OMF Literature, 1998), 326. Viv Grigg himself, in his seminal work *Servos entre os Pobres* (São Paulo, Brazil: COMIBAN-Editora Aura Livraria, 1984), 50, affirms: 'O ponto central da identificação está no fato de transmitir à outra pessoa a sensação de que também é uma pessoa de igual valor' [The central point of identification is in the fact of transmitting to the other person the sensation that they are also a person of equal value.] Couture, *Seeing Children*, 14, discusses the central importance of relationality in the context of what she describes as the 'poverty of tenuous relationships' that is characteristic of the deprivational experience of children.

Jose Miguel Bonino, in a seminal discussion of the fundamental principles of effective ecclesiology in relation to poor communities, writes:

It is through relational identification with the ‘common people’ that the church establishes a ‘matrix of authentic identity’ as effective representative of Christ: the church finds its identity when it ‘con-forms’ to Jesus Christ, that is to say, when it assumes his ‘spiritual structure’, his way of being. And what is his way of being? Here again the writings of the New Testament are unanimous. It is to be found in his identification with humanity, and, in particular with the poor and lowly. The logical conclusion is clear: the greater the church’s identification with the common people; the more the church will be driven to an identification with the people, the more it will be in a position to reflect the identity of its Lord. Identity pushes towards identification, and identification is the matrix of authentic identity.<sup>443</sup>

An important distinction between ‘missional identity’ and ‘missional identification’ is demonstrated by Sônia’s cross-cultural, yet catalytic, role in the epiphany of Jardim Olinda.

But what if the child had not been present? If the child and his startling acclamation had been absent from that day, the sanitization of the shack would no doubt still have been achieved and brought some short-term betterment to the living conditions of Abel’s family, but would, I suspect, have long since gone unremembered amongst many other similar enterprises — a mission task, scheduled for a Saturday morning between breakfast and an afternoon outing with my own family. Its lasting, or dare I say ‘everlasting’, value for me has been that as Jesus made himself present to that child, I was drawn into the encounter in a way that informed and enriched my understanding of Jesus and his mission to the marginalized. That place and that child, epitomes of worldly worthlessness, became infused with revelatory and transformational potential as Abel became for me a ‘John the Baptist to Sônia’s Jesus’.<sup>444</sup> Although the event, circumscribed by the transience of the human condition, has passed, the vision of the Son of God clearing away rubbish alongside children

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<sup>443</sup> Jose Miguel Bonino, ‘Fundamental Questions in Ecclesiology,’ in *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities* (São Paulo, Brazil: PUBLISHER, 1980), 147.

<sup>444</sup> I acknowledge the input of Stephen Finamore, November 2017, for this phraseology.

remains. For community and mission worker alike, the hope-sapping sense of abandonment by both human society and God, is negated — Jesus has come!

Are the cries of the young mother of two in the Valley of Virtues or the child Abel's cry in Jardim Olinda less than authentic? Had not Jesus revealed himself in and through those women as they reached out across the frontiers of marginality, affirming the lives of children and their families, as they laid their hands on the real-life symbols of that abandonment, the waste leftovers that barred and marred their homes? These recollections continue with me as an encouragement both to stand alongside and identify with the 'little children' in the mission of Jesus and to seek in faith, in even the most challenging contexts, for Kingdom revelation and transformation.

## CHILD-RECEPTION EVENTS 2: THE GENERATIVE THEME OF POWERLESSNESS

Eliane

*We wanted a 'way-in' and a 'way-forward' in Heliópolis.*




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A corner of the Heliópolis favela, 1993–4.

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*The oppressive size and labyrinthine impenetrability of the favela-world of the 'City of the Sun' as readily threatened to overwhelm and disempower the hearts and minds of the small mission group I was visiting, as it did so often the lives of its own 100,000 plus inhabitants.*

*I had met with the PEPE pre-school teacher, Iolanda, with the aim of finding a way through these physical and social barriers, and of meeting some of the people trapped in that web of poverty. Eliane, a five-year-old 'Pepita',<sup>445</sup> popped out from a half-*

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<sup>445</sup> *Pepito/a*, was an affectionate description of the children attending the PEPE pre-school mission programme.

*concealed alleyway and with a shout of glee ran up to Iolanda. “Auntie”, it’s you! Come and meet daddy. Follow me!’ Easier said than done, as we weaved through the maze of passageways, stepping over slime, avoiding dogs and squeezing past suspicious looking ‘friends of daddy’. Finally, Eliane crashed through a bead-curtained doorway into the shadowy interior of an anonymous breeze-block built shack and jumped onto daddy’s knee.*

*‘This is “auntie” Iolanda from the PEPE.’*

*Daddy was seated behind a wooden table with more of his ‘friends’ in nervous attendance. ‘So, it’s you who run the PEPE...well done, very good.’ And so, we talked with the local drug trafficker about his daughter Eliane and PEPE and Jesus and finally, in that place so distant from ‘church’, we prayed and left. A few weeks later Eliane’s father and family also left (it would not have been possible to stay and stay alive) to find a different life.*

The drug-trafficking father, an embodiment of contra-Kingdom greatness, power and influence, at the heart of the favela community, had been challenged by the church’s love and affirmation of that five-year-old embodiment of vulnerability and weakness: his daughter. After a journey only made possible by Eliane’s knowledge of, and access to, that world of shacks built one against and one upon another, the Kingdom of God had come near to one of the ‘greats’ in the second largest favela in Latin America. The status and authority of one of the lords of the City of the Sun had been challenged, not by AK47s in the hands of an invading drugs gang backed by the Comando Vermelho from Rio, but by the vision of a different ‘world-order’, mediated through a vulnerable child who had been ‘received’ in the name of Jesus and who, in her enthusiasm for the affirmation she experienced, had become an agent of the Kingdom.<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>446</sup> The value attached to this sense of affirmation for those who were influenced by the missional programmes undertaken by the favela ‘church’ in Jardim Olinda was well illustrated by the attendees’ undisputed favourite choice of worship song: *Quero que valorize o que você tem*, ‘I want you to value what you have, You are a being you are someone, so important to God, No more suffering anguish and pain, letting your inferiority complex tell you that

In and through this event, the missional enterprise of the church had been working itself out, enabled by the ‘insider’ knowledge of the ‘maze of misery’ that was Heliópolis. The child whom church had received in the name of Jesus had become a doorway to the Kingdom in a favela community otherwise barricaded in its marginality against outsiders.<sup>447</sup>

A second incident the following year, 1994, in the favela community of Vila Clementino, served to further inform this dialogue with the Lukan narrative:

### Joana

*Joana skipped homewards after another lively morning at the PEPE through the midday darkness of the narrow passageway and beneath the overhanging rooms of the second- and third-floor rooms which protected her from the rain — there was hardly space for sun or rain to find a way through to the world below.*




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One of three similar entrances to the favela of Vila Clementino, 1994.

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*She was met by a flood of anger and profanity spitting from her mother’s lips. ‘No more PEPE for you...out every day to find money on the street...that \*\*\* father of yours has left and now it’s up to you to help get food!’ Joana sat down, waiting for the deluge to pass, then quietly took her mother’s hand and without daring to look up into the eyes*

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sometimes you’re a nobody...’ For full Brazilian lyrics see Armando Filho, *Quero que valorize*, accessed May 2016. <https://www.letras.com/armando-filho/174200/>.

<sup>447</sup> Bob and Mary Hopkins, leaders since the 1990s in the development of church planting strategies for the Anglican church, reported that it was their experience of visiting the PEPE programme in São Paulo that had effectively demonstrated to them how appropriate missional activity can change ‘outsiders’ to ‘insiders’ in the conduct of mission to deprived communities. Personal conversation at the office of the Anglican Church Planting Initiative, Sheffield, November 7, 2016.

*of the storm said, 'We mustn't speak like that. Let's ask God to help us. You pray after me'. After coming to know about the Friend Jesus in the PEPE down the alley, she led her mum, word by word, to speak to him in the storm-centre of their home. The father told me later that he hadn't been able to sleep that night. Dropping off, he'd waken hearing the voice of Joana calling him to come home. The next morning with eyes still red from yesterday's drink and sleeplessness and tears, he went home.*

Joana's mother's world had come crashing down. The relationship with her partner had become just another victim of the pressure of poverty in a favela community where, to borrow from a description of favela life coined by Curt Cadorette describing the Peruvian slum that was home to Gustavo Gutierrez, 'residents are frantically trying to survive, to find or keep a job, to feed and clothe their children'.<sup>448</sup> From her perspective the support base of her world had shrunk, survival was threatened, her options had grown less and so Joana would have to give up being a child and take up a role as bread winner.

Joana's world, however, had been growing bigger since she had begun attending the PEPE. Despite the large, permanently drugged dog chained just a couple of meters from the door of the PEPE classroom and which threatened our passage each time we visited the children and their families, Joana had come to experience a new, unexpected and liberating relationship. The oppressive 'might is right' power structure that reduced her to impotence had been challenged. In the favela universe of unemployment, drink and domestic violence that was tearing her mother's world apart, Joana had no voice or influence; she had to stand there and try to weather the storm. She was only a child, sometimes listened to, more often ignored or made to do as she was told. But through the PEPE she had come to understand that she mattered, that she was loved and valued by her special Friend who was always there and shared his life with her. In that moment of crisis, the world had been turned upside down and Joana realized that the vulnerable one, the weak and dependent one, was her

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<sup>448</sup> Curt Cadorette, 'Peru and the mystery of liberation: the nexus and logic of Gustavo Gutiérrez' theology,' in *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez*, edited by Marc Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 49.



mother.<sup>449</sup> Inspired by the Spirit of the upside-down Kingdom she reached out from her small world to her mother. Like an unwritten sequel to the adults bringing children to Jesus in 18:15–17, she invited her mother to come near to the Kingdom and to pray and be blessed.<sup>450</sup> Whatever the thoughts and emotions behind that prayer, a dramatic expression of Kingdom status-reversal had taken place. Joana had simply invited her mother to emulate her own encounter with Jesus, to follow her in doing what was ‘natural’ in her Kingdom world. A child found herself empowered to take the lead in what proved to be a journey of transformation affecting the whole family and, through the intimate social connectedness of favela life, the whole community.<sup>451</sup>

### Recalled Experience and Text in Dialogue

Joana and Eliane became protagonists in stories that, had it not been for the intervention of the missional group, would, most likely, have had very different, and much darker, outcomes. As was the case with each of the children Luke sets before us — the daughter of Jairus, the son of the widow of Nain, the demon afflicted child of a distraught father — Joana and Eliane were also living under the threat of the destruction of their family life. It is a distinctive feature of each of Luke’s narratives that Jesus’ intervention is described in terms of the restoration of the child to the parental home. My own experience in São Paulo taught me that the life expectancy of those actively engaged in drug trafficking was likely to be very limited, either through internecine gang warfare,<sup>452</sup> or the repressive actions of a brutalized police force.<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>449</sup> Ute Craemer, *Favela Children*, loc.2150, describes a similar experience in the favela of Monte Azul. ‘Then we prayed the Our Father. The two new ones said it with us, Antonio somewhat hesitatingly. Probably he had never really prayed before. How good that the small ones are here to help give the older, spiritually starved ones...’

<sup>450</sup> In subsequent years, meeting the parents of PEPE children from deprived communities situated in locations from the Amazon to the Andes to the arid North East of Brazil so well known to Friere, I have repeatedly heard the same testimony that, ‘Everything I know about God I have learnt from my child’.

<sup>451</sup> Joana’s faith response to the crisis is reminiscent of the Israelite slave girl’s presumptuous, yet ultimately transformative, intervention on behalf of her master, Naaman, commander of the armies of Syria (2Ki 5:2–4).

<sup>452</sup> Around this time, the PEPE teacher in Joana’s favela became one of the very few outsiders allowed into the favela by gun-carrying gang members preparing to defend their turf against threats from a rival group.

<sup>453</sup> See for example the testimony of Glenny, *Nemesis*, 141.

Only a couple of years later, in the favela of Tiquatira, the teacher was prevented one morning from approaching the building we had put up for the PEPE, by police saying that they were dealing with a problem. Half an hour and half a dozen gun shots later she was allowed in only to find three of the fathers of her PEPE children dead at the front of the building. Without prejudging what kind of young men these were, they were none the less the only dads those children had. Favela children live powerlessly under constant threat of the destruction of the adult framework of their world by oppressive attitudes and actions of societal power structures beyond their understanding or control. Had Eliane not become a catalyst to her father's seeking a different life away from Heliópolis, it is more than likely that she would have been fatherless before she moved on from PEPE to primary school. Likewise, Joana, in Vila Clementino, would most probably have lost touch with her father for good. By the same token, Luke has set the crucial child-centred restatement of his mission agenda in 9:46–48 at a nexus in his gospel narrative: in the shadow of the cross, occurring as it does immediately after his restatement of the mortal threat under which that mission method was to be worked out, and at the outset to the fateful journey to the cross itself in Jerusalem.

Reassurance is also given, however, that the Father, author of the mission agenda, will give himself to be received by his missionary disciples as they commit to follow Jesus' example. At the outset of his narration of the post-resurrection mission of the disciples, in Ac 3:1–10, Luke exemplifies this commitment expressed towards the crippled beggar at the Beautiful Gate to the temple in Jerusalem. Richard Pervo draws attention to what Charles K. Barrett describes as a 'characteristically Lukan' wordplay on *ὑπάρχων*, the word he employs to describe both the worldly condition of the beggar in Ac 3:2 and also the worldly condition of Peter (Ac 3:6): the beggar's life is characterized by dependency born of disability, and Peter's by a lack of the silver or gold that could meet the beggar's expectations and needs.<sup>455</sup> Significantly, the term is

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<sup>455</sup> Richard Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 100; Charles K. Barrett, *Acts 1–14*, Vol. 1. *International Critical Commentary* (London: T&T Clark, 1994), 182.

employed in the summary sentence of 9:46–8 to describe the life-dynamic of ‘smaller- or smallest-ness’, μικρότερος, a Kingdom greatness, characterized by the humble self-giving example of Jesus. In the light of the usage in Acts 3, this summary could helpfully be read: ‘Whoever adopts an empathetic identification with the state of those who are μικροί, powerless and vulnerable’ — like Peter in Jerusalem and Joana in Vila Clementino, and as Jesus exemplified in the child-reception event— qualifies as μέγας in the Kingdom. Such a person, an emulator of Jesus, is empowered to become a mediator of Kingdom blessing ‘in the name of Jesus’, as Peter’s, Joana’s and Eliane’s experiences demonstrated.

The experience of the empowerment of the missional community promised in 9:48 is dramatically narrated in Luke’s following chapter recounting the mission of the seventy-two.

Luke’s commentary upon the joy of the disciples as they reported their own mission experience of the in-breaking of the Kingdom (10:1–20) presents Jesus filled with Spirit-inspired joy, praising his heavenly Father for enabling ‘little children’ to see and hear such expressions of the long-awaited Kingdom (10:21–24). The seventy-two had been warned (10:3) of the harsh and threatening environment of unbelief and opposition in which they were called to conduct their mission — unbelief and opposition that would overshadow their onward journey towards Jerusalem and eventually culminate in Jesus’ death. Yet even in that context, as also in the context of the Kingdom-denying reality of Joana’s favela world, the ‘little children’, and those who embrace their cause, are enabled to witness the transformative power associated with the name and presence of Jesus: ‘in your name even the demons submit to us’ (10:17). Prior to the momentous child-reception event of 9:46–48, the discouraging incapacity of the disciples to break the demonic thralldom over a child’s life has been recounted in 9:40 with the tersely dismissive phrase καὶ οὐκ ἠδυνήθησαν, ‘but they could not’. The empowerment and hope of joyful transformation that will underpin their participation in the ongoing mission of Jesus is predicated not only upon their own capacity to perceive and respond to marginalizing and oppressive forces but also

upon the self-giving and receiving of Christ whenever the ‘this child’, crippled beggar or favela mum, is received in his name.

Empowerment, then, may be considered a process that potentializes what Freire has described as ‘limit activity’, in which forces that limit, diminish and disempower an individual or community are challenged. This confrontational liberative challenge, whilst being open to envisioning and enabling activity by those outside the community, is essentially one to be embraced and expressed by the oppressed but empowered community itself. Ash Barker, answering to the theme of ‘An Incarnational Approach to Urban Poverty Alleviation’, writes of ‘the temptation of the non-poor to think they are gods’.<sup>457</sup> Referring to Jayakumar Christian, who argues that those able to ally with, manipulate and direct power, resources and influence, albeit on behalf of the poor, run the risk of undermining the process of acknowledging the dignity and enabling the liberation of the poor, and of ‘creating god-complexes within poverty relationships’.<sup>458</sup> The missional group seeking to participate in Luke’s call to transformative mission to the poor and marginalized might journey with the poor as a catalytic, enabling expression of Jesus’ love and commitment to transformation, but the liberative journey itself is best understood and most effectively undertaken by the poor themselves.

In Luke’s presentation of Jesus as Messiah to the marginalized, the genesis and telos of empowerment can be found in the proactive, ‘receiving’ love of God for the poor, signalled in 9:46–48. The ‘One sent by the Father’ receives, in loving affirmation, the socially inconsequential child, signalling to his own ‘little-ones’ how they can become joined with him in his mission to overturn the Kingdom-denying power structures in which they are themselves complicit and entrapped. For Friere, empowerment that can bring about social transformation grows out of the process of socio-political conscientization that engenders a sense of communal self-worth and points to potentially transformative limit-activity to be undertaken by the community. For Luke,

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<sup>457</sup> Barker, *Slum Life*, 254.

<sup>458</sup> Jayakumar Christian, *God of the Empty Handed: Poverty, Power and the Kingdom of God* (Monrovia, Liberia: MARC, 1999), 121.

both elements, the affirmation of the marginalized and the convocation to radical contra-cultural action, are also present, but grounded not in a socio-political ideal but rather in a declared eschatological agenda of 'the One who sent' Jesus. Whilst Latin American theologies of liberation share the theological foundation of the 'divine affirmation' of the 'poor' and the divine imperative for socio-political engagement, the Lukan presentation of the child-event points beyond the potential of 'merely' Christ-inspired limit-activity by the community, to a commitment to divine participation in the transformative process envisioned.

The child-catalyzed event-moments recounted in this section have been significant in developing my personal understanding of the interactive relationship between Christ, the community and the missional group. Each event exemplifies the potential of children to act as agents of transformation within their own marginalized communities. From their experience of being 'received in his name' at the PEPE run by the missional group, and from their knowledge of the ways and realities of their favela-world, Eliane and Joana opened doorways to Kingdom interventions that effectively confronted and brought liberation from oppressive forces that were threatening their family and community worlds.

As the disciples actively commit to identifying with the weak and vulnerable, mediating empowerment in the name of Jesus, they become themselves 'little-ones' in the estimation of the prevailing world-order, embracing the promise that Jesus has committed himself to them, effectively challenging powerlessness by enhancing the quality and potential of the empowerment that they experience for this mission.

### CHILD-RECEPTION EVENTS 3: THE GENERATIVE THEME OF HOPELESSNESS

#### **'Now we have hope'**

*I didn't recognize the young mother who had taken the microphone from me. She had been saying how thrilled she was that her six-year-old was attending the PEPE. Mum had never learnt to write her own name, but now her daughter could. For mum, school was synonymous with the experience of failure and exclusion, but her daughter was looking forward to starting 'big' school in January. Then, with the promising aroma of the roasting Christmas turkey gradually pervading the hall where the parents of the first term of PEPE children had gathered, she turned and spoke the words, 'Before you came to Jardim Olinda we had no hope, but now we have hope'.*

Not, 'My daughter has hope', or, 'I have hope', nor even, 'Our family has hope', but, 'We have hope'. Somehow, anonymously, for I never did find out her name, a young mother, assuming the role of community spokesperson, articulated a community truth, that through the experience of their children being embraced and 'enlightened' educationally, socially and spiritually, a light had shone that challenged their sense of community hopelessness.

It is important to restate what has been asserted throughout this thesis, that the source of the hope articulated by the mother is not the child per se, but rather the experience enjoyed by the child and communicated to the community through the PEPE ministry — an act of receiving the child in Jesus' name. The child 'unreceived' is, in fact, an even more stark and distressing sign of hopelessness within a deprived community.<sup>459</sup> When Jürgen Moltmann speaks of constructing childhood as a metaphor for hope, and speaks of the child being able to represent access to a 'world of unlimited possibilities',<sup>460</sup> the presumption is that the child inhabits a social environment that allows its potential to be developed. The socio-political world structured around power and influence experienced in Jardim Olinda and denounced

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<sup>459</sup> Jenson, *Graced Vulnerability*, 62, cautions against making a child 'a faceless symbol of hope'.

<sup>460</sup> Moltmann, *Child and Childhood as Metaphors of Hope*, 597.

by Jesus in the child-reception events, emphatically did not allow that. It is only in the 'receiving' according to the mission of 'the One who sent Jesus', that the possibility of positive possibilities is restored. It is this restoration that the mother is declaring.

Although the initial years of favela life in Jardim Olinda had been characterized by a sense of hopefulness that is not uncommon to newly formed migrant communities, much of that hope drained away in the face of urban realities where attitudes were nurtured by unforgiving prejudice and unremitting exploitation.<sup>461</sup> Hope had become little more than 'a thin thread that holds human lives together'.<sup>462</sup> It was in the light of this negative and negating history, that, only three months after starting the PEPE, the hugely positive response of the community in the favela of Jardim Olinda had taken us by surprise. Informal observations and conversations with mothers had indicated the relevance of the initiative.<sup>463</sup> We had, however, failed to take into account two key factors which would accelerate and amplify its impact across the community: children's natural propensity to chatter to others about the things they enjoy, and the extended family networks in which they lived.<sup>464</sup> There was no doubt that the community, taken as a whole, had priorities for social improvement other than their children's pre-school development, such as less aggressive policing, better water and electricity provision, and better staffed and more local health clinics. But, as is suggested by Luke's use of a 'child-motif' to represent the 'poor', children have a particular capacity to empathetically symbolize the vulnerability, weakness and marginalization of all people. Unlike the older children who soon became seen as

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<sup>461</sup> Perlman contrasts the sense of hope that she had experienced when she first lived in the favela communities of Rio in the late 1960s to the hopelessness that she found when she revisited in 1999: 'but where there had been hope, now there were fear and uncertainty'. *Favela*, 279.

<sup>462</sup> From Cadorette's description of the favela in Peru where Gustavo Gutierrez lived and worked, *Peru and the Mystery of Liberation*, 49.

<sup>463</sup> Later, with the help of students from the Faculdade Teológica Batista de São Paulo, we conducted a community survey of one hundred families, to discover that seven out of ten households had at least one child of pre-school age. Primary school entry at that time in São Paulo was at six years-old.

<sup>464</sup> It is an important insight of Margaret MacDonald's recent publication, *The Power of Children*, 153–4, that due to prevailing social dynamics of the Roman society known to Luke and his readers, children typically had an extended or 'patchwork' experience of 'family' — a situation that is characteristic of favelas and many deprived communities around the world.

'public enemies' and a social problem, the vulnerability and dependence of pre-schoolers made them everyone's concern, especially if they were counted amongst your extended family. Children had a special place in the heart and social dynamic of the community. To help *them*, was to capture the positive attention of everyone.

### **'Oi Pastor'**

*Pastor Gerson had become dispirited. He had sensed the call to lead a small Baptist church set at the heart of a poor and violent community in the south of São Paulo, in the hope of 'making a difference'. The reality was that his mornings were spent sitting alone in his church office waiting for troubled people who never came to seek his help and coming and going from the church building through the streets of the community where he went unrecognized and un-greeted. It was as if he was invisible and made no difference at all. Having heard how making the PEPE mission pre-school part of the life and mission of the church had enabled similar congregations to make effective connections with the local community, he decided to give it a go. Barely a month after beginning the programme, he unexpectedly turned up at one of the regular training meetings arranged to develop local church members as educators for the five- and six-year-olds in their PEPE. 'I came along because you all need to hear this!' he announced. 'For two years, I've been walking to and from the church without a soul saying a word to me. Since beginning the PEPE, it takes me twice as long to make my journeys home. It's "Oi pastor!" here and "Oi pastor!" there! Suddenly I've become visible! I've even been invited to explain the Bible to a group of escaped prisoners who are holed up at the bottom of the favela'. After that he was known to everyone as 'Oi pastor!'*

Identifying a relevant and relational activity that reached out to the least and the most vulnerable in the community and affirming the Kingdom value of the community as a whole, Pastor Gerson was seeing the Kingdom breaking in. His hope was restored, he was re-energized to live out his calling, and for a small church group with very limited resources, wanting to find an authentic expression of the gospel that could impact the community as widely as possible, it became apparent that the PEPE represented not



only a pathway for the development of children individually but a doorway of hope into the heart of the community as a whole.<sup>465</sup>

### **Recalled Experience and Text in Dialogue**

The PEPE, in preparing the children to enter school, socially, spiritually and educationally, was also offering help that many families understood to be important for the future well-being of their children.<sup>466</sup> I was impressed by observing that it was the mothers in particular, the most stable, yet paradoxically the least empowered adults in the community structure, who saw in the PEPE a chance for a change to the otherwise grim social prognosis that hung over their children's futures. The caring affirmation of the PEPE was perceived as offering a way out of the hopelessness engendered by the toxic cycle of school drop-out, teenage criminality, early pregnancy and further economic deprivation.

Just as the affirmation and dignifying of the individual child by Jesus in 9:46–48 is presented as a hope-inspiring sign of the Sending-One's commitment to a transformative inversion of society's oppressive power structures, so in Jardim Olinda, one mother's appreciation of what she had experienced with her own child had become a beacon of hope for the whole community.

In an insightful discussion on the negative aspects of adult cultures and their effect upon children in deprived communities, Couture asserts that 'Culture creates an assumptive world in which children live'.<sup>467</sup> Whilst the role of adults in creating the child's world is evident, incidents like those recounted above strongly suggest that children also, albeit voicelessly, can shape the world in which their parents live, by pointing parents and community alike to horizons of hope, sources for personal

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<sup>465</sup> Cf. Freire's emphasis on the importance of actions that promote the 'unity of the oppressed'. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 143.

<sup>466</sup> The effects of falling behind and falling out of school were all too well understood. Of the twenty or so young adolescents who became associated with the church one way or another in the early years, almost half had died a violent death before they got to twenty years old, caught up in drug-related crime and gang violence.

<sup>467</sup> Couture, *Seeing Children*, 110.

fulfilment and self-worth, and indeed social possibilities, that would otherwise be obscured from them.<sup>468</sup>

Likewise, in the introduction to his gospel (1:16–17), Luke embraces this appreciation that children have the potential to symbolize attitudes and lifestyles appropriate to *true* sons and daughters of God, to whom the leaders of the current community need to look for renewal. The infancy narratives prepare the reader to find a reassertion of the prophetic hope of an eschatologically established messianic Kingdom in the future mission of the child Jesus. Simeon’s inspired recognition of ‘the light to the Gentiles and glory to Israel’, in the form of the infant Jesus (2:32), affirms the calling of this child to become a beacon of the promised hope of God’s commitment to transform and restore communities.<sup>469</sup>

As the missional group in Jardim Olinda acted to express this commitment to the community’s children, it emulated Jesus’ example according to the challenge of 9:46–48. The gospel of hopeful transformation was reaffirmed, and the adult community was encouraged to hope again, even in the face of their own hope-denying experience.

The anonymous mother articulated a transformative change in her experience of her world; one that spread through her community. ‘Now we have hope’ is an affirmation of transformation which stands over against the community’s previous experience, when, by inference, ‘we’ *did not* have hope. It is a hope that has grown, not from a

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<sup>468</sup> ‘We are always tempted to “do for” children, not recognizing the potential for transformation that children represent.’ And, ‘We need a change in thinking that allows us to see children as potential agents of transformation’. Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor – Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 113, 227. Susan Greener, ‘Children-at-Risk and the Whole Gospel: Integral Mission to, for and with Vulnerable Agents of God,’ *Transformation* 33, no.3 (July 2016): 159–70. See also innumerable reports and publications by organizations such as UNESCO, The World Bank, and the Bernhard van Leer Foundation.

<sup>469</sup> For a similar view from the perspective of Ash Barker, working in the slums of Bangkok during the same period as myself in São Paulo, see *Slum Life Rising*, 192–3: ‘That Jesus has inaugurated the coming of God in the Incarnation is therefore crucial for slums in a number of ways...without this promise there would be no hope in a Christian sense. Hope in the possible defeat of the death, demonic forces and despair that are so embedded in slum life would be unfounded.’

romantic wish that things might be different, but in response to a change in the community's social environment. It is not just that someone from outside has expressed concern for them, but that through the agency of the missional group acting in response to and in cooperation with the community, her child's horizons have been widened beyond her own, and she can now view the world from a new, more hopeful, perspective.<sup>470</sup> Such hope might perhaps be likened to a seed which, whilst it might originate in belief and action 'imported' from outside the hope-less community, has become transformative as it takes root and grows within the community itself.

In this process of hope-renewal, the missional community might well be described as having an essentially 'catalytic' role. Chemical catalysts, however, are characterized by the fact that they themselves remain unchanged in the process that they enable, whilst the impact of that mother's declaration of hope not only pointed to a change in attitude within the community brought about through the activity of the missional group, but also had a tremendously reenergizing impact on the group itself. To continue the seed analogy, her testimony pointed to the appearance of the 'first fruits' of what Jesus taught his disciples to understand as the 'eschatological harvest' of 'the One who sent me' (10:2). They can be hopeful in their missional activity, even in the face of an implacable and mortal opposition from the elite and powerful in society, and even in the face of their own exposed complicity with the values and mechanisms of oppressive dominance, because their mission is ultimately grounded in the eschatological intent and purpose of God — the One who sent Jesus.<sup>471</sup>

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<sup>470</sup> I recall during a parents' open-day at the PEPE in Jardim Olinda, watching a mother from the community looking at her child's work and nodding enthusiastically with a smile at what she had written, even though she was herself unable to read or write.

<sup>471</sup> Maintaining a sense of hope in the mission of the 'One who sent Jesus' in the face of the apparent contradictions experienced in a world that is still set against God's Kingdom agenda represents an existential challenge to the disciple's commitment to that mission, as Luke emphasizes in his account of the post-crucifixion flight from Jerusalem in ch. 24.

## REVIEWING THE TEXT-EXPERIENCE DIALOGUE: MISSIONAL SECOND *NAÏVETÉ* AND BEYOND

### Introduction

The epistemology of Ricoeur, grounded in the metaphorical potential of narrative and explored through the interdisciplinary application of methodologies drawn primarily from literary biblical criticism and autoethnography, has served to bring the different narrative knowledge-sources of Scripture and recalled experience into missiological dialogue.

The application of Freirean principles to identify significant ‘generative themes’ from amongst recalled missional experiences involving children has resulted in the elaboration of three illustrative missiological dialogues with the Lukan text. In Ricoeurian terms this dialogue has generated a ‘second *naïveté*’, or critically informed reappraisal of both Scripture and recalled experience which enhances their potential to inform contemporary missional responses to other situations of social deprivation.

### **‘Receiving the Child’: Missional Interpretation and Inspiration Grounded in the Shared Contexts of the Textual and Experiential Narratives**

Two particular aspects of the narrative character of the child-reception event at 9:46–48 have been seen to contribute to a productive missiological dialogue: the dramatized event nature of the passage, and its prophetic potential in respect of both the narrative world of Luke itself and the world of missional challenge faced by the reader.

The dramatized quality of the event, set within what has been identified as a Lukan ‘child-motif’, shares empathetic resonance with the concrete expressions of the acts of ‘receiving the children’ recounted from the favelas. This has catalyzed and conditionally legitimized a creative and inspirational process of ongoing mutual interpretation.

Similarly, the prophetic call to embrace, and be embraced by, the messianic mission of Jesus in contradiction to the prevailing contra-Kingdom worldview, impacts successive

generations of reader-disciples and produces the potential for fresh and transformative 'limit actions' in the differing missional contexts of social marginalization and deprivation that they face.

Conducting the study within the framework of a Ricoeurian epistemology has provided a framework for identifying and critiquing the narrative and existential contexts shared by the Lukan text and the favela incidents, offering a critical foundation for a subsequent constructive dialogue between Scripture and experience: a process which might properly be described as one of 'missional conscientization', which from a Freirean perspective is a necessary precursor to fresh and potentially transformative missional praxis. Mutually interpretive dialogue has been fostered from the perspective of the missionally significant actors in each of these narrative contexts: the marginalizing society, the missional community and those suffering social marginalization and deprivation. Key dynamics governing the interaction of these missional actors can then be identified.

### **The Context of the Prevailing 'Power-Status' Society**

The societal context of a violently inimical status quo is witnessed to by Luke as he sets the child-reception event against the threatening backdrop of Jesus' reiterated passion prediction, his warnings about the cost of discipleship, and the commencement of the testing journey toward the seat of earthly dominance in Jerusalem. This context corresponds to the equally contra-Kingdom societal order which generates an oppression that envelops the whole of favela life, compounding the effects of substandard housing, criminality, poor education, unemployment, deficient healthcare and other such social deficits. Whilst oppressive marginalization is a many headed Hydra threatening every age and demographic, many of its expressions are writ largest and seen most clearly in the lives of children whose inherent vulnerability is made all the more acute by their living within favela communities which suffer from the economic and social rejection of the dominant society. Jesus' urgent call to missional reorientation expressed in the child-reception events is given in a world in which

disciples and ‘children’ alike, continue to face, as he did, a life-journey largely characterized by social oppression and personal suffering.

### **The Context of the Compromised Missional Community**

The child-reception events confront the would-be missional community with their own need of radical re-orientation: a missiological conversion. The complicity of the missional community in the prevailing societal attitudes of power seeking, prejudice and political and economic self-preservation that were exposed and opposed by the liberation theology movement born within the Latin American Catholic Church, also became evident in my experience of a prevailing indifference and prejudice within Baptist circles in São Paulo in the early 1990s. The antidote to the invasive threat and influence of this inimical world order presented by Luke in 9:46 is acceptance, by the would-be reader-disciples, of the prophetic call of the child-reception event of 9:47–48; a call to a reorientation of the missional community in relation to society, re-echoed and dramatically re-expressed in the experiences of ‘receiving’ children in favelas; a call for that community not only to become a church *for* the poor, but a church that ‘receives’ the poor to the extent that the church becomes the church *of* the poor.<sup>472</sup>

### **The Context of the ‘Child-Received’**

The specific context of the ‘child-received’ has been identified as a crucial expression of a Lukan motif of ‘child’ and as especially representative of the situation of the marginalized and oppressed, the ‘poor’, who are the focus of the messianic mission of the ‘Lukan Jesus’. Despite the tendencies of an uncritical interpretative tradition, that has favoured the Matthean usage, often linked to a romantic understanding of children and childhood, the social analysis of the São Paulo favelas and

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<sup>472</sup> For a restatement, from a UK perspective, of the potential for ecclesial renewal through the mutuality of receiving the poor, see Mary Beasley, *Mission on the Margins* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1997), 93. ‘There is therefore a mission in reverse, emanating from the “magisterium of the poor”. The church does not only enter the world of marginal people in order to change their situation; it enters that area in order to be first changed itself.’

autoethnographical presentation of the child-focused events has sought to demonstrate that ‘the child-in-need-of-reception’ remains an effective symbol of oppressed vulnerability, and is able to function as a comprehensible and compelling locus for missional dialogue across temporal and cultural divides.

### **Confrontation and Affirmation: Key Dynamics of Missional Engagement**

Within the three contextual dimensions of ‘world’, ‘missional community’ and ‘child-in-need-of-reception’, two conflicting dynamics become apparent in and through the missiological dialogue: confrontation and affirmation.

From a first *naïveté* or pre-critical perspective of mission in deprived communities, the prophetic imperatives of confrontation and affirmation are most immediately understood to characterize a Lukan missional posture in the first instance in opposition to the prevailing, oppressive, world order, and secondly in supportive affirmation of the ‘child-in-need-of-reception’. However, what has become apparent through the explanatory and dialogical processes is that both confrontation and affirmation are also to be experienced by the missional community itself.

The prophetic missionary call of 9:46–48 begins with the challenge to the disciples to expose and disavow their internalized complicity with the dominant contra-Kingdom worldview. This confrontation, as it continues to be internalized by the missional community, must also be externalized by them through an active agenda of confrontation of the ‘rulers on their thrones’,<sup>473</sup> expressed as an explicit and essential counterpoint to missional proclamation on behalf of the ‘poor’. The prophetic sword is two-edged; both ‘world’ and ‘church-in-mission-for-the-world’ are confronted with the radical demands of Jesus’ messianic mission.

Similarly, the affirmation of the received child, so central to ‘lifting up the humble’, becomes an integral dynamic of missionary experience for the disciples as well. They too receive the affirmation of Jesus’ presence as they accept his call to become agents

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<sup>473</sup> Cf. 1:52 and 2:34.

in his mission; an affirmation that is vital to embolden and enable a church that not uncommonly finds itself marginalized, vulnerable and under threat.

### **Receiving: A Principle for the Conduct of Mission in Deprived Communities**

The hermeneutical exercises conducted around the widely applicable generative themes of abandonment, powerlessness and hopelessness elucidate missiological principles that merit consideration in the conduct of mission in deprived communities.

From the perspective of a first *naïveté* it might be considered paradoxical that the fundamental missional principle brought into focus through the dialogue between the child-reception events of Luke and the recounted experiences with the children of the São Paulo favelas, is the importance not of giving but of receiving. The different dimensions of missional receiving highlighted in the subsequent critically informed dialogue between the Lukan text and the child-catalyzed favela events are helpfully reviewed from the three narrative perspectives of 9:48: the child received in mission, the Christ received through mission and the receiving of the commissioner of mission.

#### **Receiving the Child in Mission**

In an act that dramatically confronts the structures and the exercise of coercive self-interested power and affirms the vulnerable, such as those suffering abandonment, disempowerment and hopelessness in the favelas of São Paulo, Luke presents a paradigm for mission which the would-be reader-disciple is challenged to emulate. Running the risks of misunderstanding, rejection and reprisal, by religious and political establishments, embracing the messianic mission is to be expressed through embracing 'this child'. The existential specificity of such interventions, highlighted by Luke in the child-centred examples of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, and echoed in the missional experiences recalled, is to be grounded in a re-posturing of the missionary disciple in relation to 'the world'. The restoration of self-worth and social dignity, denied to the 'poor' by contra-Kingdom society, is predicated upon, and paralleled by,



the disciple's renunciation of any ambition for, or indebtedness to, this society.<sup>474</sup> Whatever vehicle of restoration may be identified and facilitated by an agent of mission, its authenticity is necessarily grounded in an empathetic identification between 'missioner' and 'missioned', embodied in the Brazilian term '*gente*'. Transformative mutuality lies at the heart of the child-receiving mission paradigm presented by Luke.<sup>475</sup>

### Receiving the Christ through Mission

Faced with overwhelming opposition from the prevailing world order and its hegemony both within and beyond the community of the disciples, Luke presents Jesus as giving not only a radical example of mission praxis, but an equally radical commitment to 'presence' himself with the disciples as they emulate this example, and to do this with all his authority as the messianic 'Sent-one'.<sup>476</sup>

The recalled instances of transformative missional activity catalyzed by children who embodied worldly inconsequentiality have offered examples of the enabling and ennobling potential of Christ's self-giving in the experience of the missional groups engaged with and for the poor.<sup>477</sup> To echo Pamela Couture's well-expressed testimony from her own work amongst deprived communities and their children:

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<sup>474</sup> Rowan Williams employs the suggestive vocabulary of 'dispossession' to describe this intentional self-giving. See 'Editorial Conversation,' in *Mission in Marginal Places* edited by Paul Cloke and Mike Pears, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2016), 33–56.

<sup>475</sup> Couture very helpfully explores the concept of *Han* in Korean Minjung theology, which expresses the oppressive quality of the *consequences* of sin as experienced by its *victims* and writes: '*Han* is resolved when it meets understanding, hope, engagement in action and compassionate confrontation', *Seeing Children*, 65.

<sup>476</sup> This central and enabling dynamic of 9:46–48, of the promise of the presencing of Jesus in response to the disciples proactively living out their missional calling in imitation of Jesus, receiving the child 'in his name', offers a complementary perspective to an understanding of the *Missio Dei* in which the church's role is sometimes represented as being that of identifying and aligning itself with activity that God promotes in and through the community, without reference to the church.

<sup>477</sup> Writing about the impact of such missional involvement by members of charismatic evangelical churches in Chester, Andrew Weir records: 'Several respondents also mentioned that their involvement had brought them to a deeper awareness of God's love and their identity in Christ'. '*Tensions in Charismatic-Evangelical Urban Practice: Towards a Practical Charismatic-Evangelical Urban Social Ethic*'. (DMin diss., University of Chester, 2013), 77.

When we practice the means of grace and seek the revelation of God in our works of mercy, religious experience is heightened as a means of intimacy with God. When such reconnection occurs, it brings vitality in personal devotion and public worship. Life becomes more vivid...we may actually begin to sense what Jesus might have meant when he said that an alternative reality of God's reign is with us — now.<sup>478</sup>

In the dialogues between recalled experience and the Lukan text, I have sought to attest to what I have observed of the renewing and sustaining value of such spiritual enabling: perhaps the most significant spiritual dynamic I have experienced in 'receiving children' in favela communities.<sup>479</sup>

### **Receiving the Commissioner of Mission**

The experiences of abandonment, disempowerment and hopelessness as explored through the application of the Freirean process of 'missional conscientization' are identified as threatening, in equal measure, both the deprived communities and the often vulnerable and resource-weak missional disciples who are looking to be representative emulators of Christ's mission. For both groups, it becomes an existential necessity to understand their life-experience within a context that is greater and more hopeful than that offered by a rational, time- and space-limited reading of their own situation and potentiality. Hope is an essential nutrient of life for both 'missioners' and 'missioned' in such an environment.<sup>480</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> Couture, *Seeing Children*, 58–59.

<sup>479</sup> For a similar testimony to the spiritually empowering quality of mission in and amongst the poor in San Francisco and London, drawing upon the imagery of Is 58:6–8 and Lk 7:22, John Hayes writes: 'Both Isaiah and Luke suggest that this work has the ability to impact and convict with supernatural power. Appreciating work among the poor as a miracle is a critical, sustaining motivation for mission workers among the poor. Understanding that God "magnifies our light" when we serve the poor allows us to persevere in ministry even though we are few in number and even though returns on our personal investment often seem slow to come in'. *Sub-Merge: Living Deep in a Shallow World: Service, Justice and Contemplation amongst the World's Poor* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2006), 145.

<sup>480</sup> See the telling comments born of experience amongst the poor of Filipino slums and written by Charles Rigma in the foreword to Jenni Craig's history of the Servants' movement, 'The crippling powers of this age do not yield easily', Craig, *Servants*, 7. See also Evelyn Miranda-Feliciano writing in the epilogue of the book who emphasizes that to live missionally amongst the poor 'requires spiritual resilience deeply rooted in hope'. Craig, *Servants*, 322.

The affirmation of Jesus that not only will he be received, but also ‘the One who sent him’, the commissioner of his mission, firmly establishes the disciple’s call to ‘child-reception mission’ within the eschatological context already set out for Jesus’ own messianic tasking. In doing so he grounds that mission in a hope that is greater than the threat of existential despair.<sup>481</sup> This eschatological framing of the child-reception event and its call to real-time action in the pursuit of God-centred social transformation, saves the missional activity of both Jesus and the favela faith group, from being drained of existential hopefulness and losing its power to inspire.

‘Now we have hope’ continues to resound as an authentic word of inspiration for the faith community to continue to receive the child in the name of Jesus. The joy of the messiah as the ‘little children’ perceive the drawing near of the Kingdom is not drowned by his tears at the popular and institutional rejection of his mission.<sup>482</sup> Notwithstanding the tears and the fears, the disciples’ joy is not to be denied as they perceive a fulfilment of the eschatological vision of the coming Kingdom.<sup>483</sup>

Kevin Vanhoozer has described Paul Ricoeur as the ‘Philosopher of hope’, and in this thesis Ricoeur’s epistemological framework has offered the space to explore and affirm the place of eschatological hopefulness in mission to the ‘poor’, in and through the dialogical interaction of the child-reception narratives from gospel and favela.<sup>484</sup>

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<sup>481</sup> Frances Young, in her profoundly moving reflections upon intractable suffering, proffers a critique of a liberation theology that offers a vision of liberation through social transformation, writing: ‘How is God on the side of these poor people? Hope lies not in the removal of their condition but in another dimension...What develops is a theology of presence, in communion and community...we find, like Paul, that God is present in the midst of this weak and creaturely existence, and that our calling is to reveal God’s power in weakness’. Frances Young, *Arthur’s Call: A Journey of Faith in the Face of Severe Learning Disability* (London: SPCK, 2014), 94. In tension with this position, Cesar Rossatto writes of Freire being more closely tied to a belief in the potential for major social change as the measure of a liberating hopefulness. See *Engaging Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of Possibility: From Blind to Transformative Optimism* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 45–46.

<sup>482</sup> 10:21; 19:41.

<sup>483</sup> 19:37–38; 24:40.

<sup>484</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 6. For a fuller discussion of hope by Ricoeur, see ‘Quest of Hope,’ *Restoration Quarterly*, 13 (1970) . See also the discussion in the chapter ‘Biblical

### Receiving 'This Child': From Representativity to Missional Focus

Despite the representativity of children as the little ones, the poor and the humble, the 'hands-on' and focused reception of 'this' child in 9:48, and the infants as distinct actors in 18:15–17, encourages the reader to look beyond the albeit powerful *symbolic* potential of children in Luke, to give particular missional attention to children per se.

...the blessing of children offers privileging, visibility, and order in the creation, a vision of God's heavenly world and intention, a sign, a message, and a profound affirmation of the child as a child.<sup>485</sup>

The double vulnerability of children who can be considered to be amongst the most vulnerable members of already vulnerable deprived communities, taken together with the influential potential of early-years intervention in the name of Jesus, represent persuasive grounds for giving special attention to child-reception action as a particular focus in missional strategies. The vulnerable children of deprived communities inhabit a liminal place in social space and developmental time, that is characterized both by the potential for life and the threat of death and that brings into sharp relief the life-situation of the community as a whole. However, despite the real vulnerability of these children, the life events I have recounted bear witness to the potential for significant transformative interventions by even resource-limited local disciples who are empowered to respond in compassion and hopefulness to the prophetic challenge to receive the child in the name of Jesus.<sup>486</sup>

Under the heading, 'The church and theology as part of the social-structural ecology of poor and tenuously connected children', Couture argues for the efficacy of missional approaches focusing on children. She advocates for a recognition by churches of their potential to positively influence all levels of the social ecosystem of a child's development: The *micro* (the child's personal relationship contexts), the *meso* (the local community context), the *exo* (the state-wide legislative context) and the *macro*

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Interpretation,' in Ricoeur's, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 372, in which Jurgen Moltmann and Anthony Thiselton critique Don Idhe's introduction to Ricoeur.

<sup>485</sup> Richards, *Children in the Bible*, 128.

<sup>486</sup> Couture, *Seeing Children*, 46.

(the cultural/societal values context).<sup>487</sup> At each level of influence, appropriate missional activity is suggested, ranging from a valuing of direct child-family-school contact programs such as ‘congregationally sponsored pre-schools, Sunday schools and youth programs [that] are part of the microsystem of young children’ that also strengthen the local mesosystem in which the congregation’s children live, through to advocacy on national issues that indirectly affect children’s well-being, such as those currently experienced by churches in the form of increasingly regulatory child safeguarding legislation. Importantly she recognizes the role played by the church locally and nationally ‘in creating symbol and belief systems...that contribute to the theological and civil religious macrosystem that regards or disregards children’.<sup>488</sup> David Jenson has also highlighted the particular quality of care-responses that churches as socio-spiritual communities are able to make at local, national and international levels:

By paying attention to children’s lives, which are threatened on many sides by the violence of war, poverty, the sex trade, and domestic abuse, the church offers its own distinctive practices — peace-making, baptism, sanctuary, and prayer — that care for children in a broken world.<sup>489</sup>

The dialogue between the child-focused missional stories and biblical texts presented above has highlighted the centrality of empathetic mutuality in the Lukan model of ‘child-reception-shaped’ missional action. The missional expression of such empathy at a local level will require an informed and creative appreciation of local socio-cultural realities and norms as they affect the child and the particular ‘spirituality’ characteristics of the children,<sup>490</sup> their families and their community peer groups that

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<sup>487</sup> Couture bases this analytical framework for understanding the developmental world of children on the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

<sup>488</sup> Couture, *Seeing Children*, 46.

<sup>489</sup> Jenson, *Graced Vulnerability*, 12. As an example, in the context of the child’s place in Baptist church life and practice, see Andy Goodliff, *‘To Such as These’: The Child in Baptist Thought* (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, 2012).

<sup>490</sup> For helpful discussions, see Rebecca Nye, *Children’s Spirituality* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009), and Anne Richards and Peter Privett, *Through the Eyes of a Child* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009).

are to be engaged by the church. *Godly Play*,<sup>491</sup> and *Messy Church*,<sup>492</sup> recent examples of widely implemented child-receptive missional programmes, are offering effective pathways of empathetic spiritual engagement with some social/cultural groups. However, the missional contexts of both community and church must be carefully assessed and both the opportunities and challenges of the local context be identified. In particular, the limited educational background, fractured relational structures and social marginality that typically form the social ecosystem of children in deprived communities can present a challenging barrier to empathetic response from more socially mainstream churches. This is highlighted in the equivocal responses of the disciples evoked by Jesus' child-reception actions in 9:46–48 and 18:15–17 and echoed in much of my own missional experience. Acceptance and inclusivity in the life of the church group, for children and those that are important in their social and emotional worlds, will therefore need to be at the heart of authentic and effective missional engagement.

The potential of child-focused mission to impact socially deprived communities as a whole is also presented as an insight that was significant for the development of my own missional narrative. Both Pastor Gerson and I were awakened to this potential that was made effective through the 'evangelistic' enthusiasm and uniquely intimate community access of the children like Eliane in Heliópolis who had been received in the PEPE mission programme of our church groups. Did not those who brought the infants to Jesus for a blessing feel 'touched by the hand' of God as their children had been touched by the hands of Jesus? Through the reception of their children, families and communities that are emotionally invested in their loved and vulnerable members are also, as at Nain, invited to acknowledge the receptive presencing of God amongst them and for them. 'All that I know about God I have learnt from my five-year-old' is a

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<sup>491</sup> Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 1991).

<sup>492</sup> Lucy Moore, *Messy Church* (Abingdon: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2006) and *Messy Church 2* (Abingdon: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2008). For a reflective review in the light of experience, see *Messy Church Theology*, edited by George Lings (Abingdon: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2013).

refrain that has characterized the narratives of many mothers in contexts of community deprivation I have been involved with and has had a significant influence upon the development of my own missional narrative.

It is paradoxical that readiness to acknowledge and value the hope-bringing and transformative activity of God can, not infrequently, be found more readily within the community of the 'receivers' than that of the 'givers'. The typical dismissal of children, in dominant culture, as being insignificant in the 'real' world of adult life, commonly also relegates 'children's work' in churches to a secondary appendix in their life and mission. The messianic commitment to children modelled by Jesus, and his promised self-giving to those who receive them in his name, challenge this debilitating misconception and offer the potential for missional empowerment and impact to even poorly resourced missional groups.

It is a conclusion of this dialogue between text and missional experience that empathetic engagement with children in the name of Jesus can be transformative for both church and community, and that the expression that I coined to summarize much of my personal experience, namely that 'in a deprived community the doorway to the Kingdom of God has the shape of a child', offers a missional perspective worthy of wider consideration.

### **Beyond a 'Second *Naïveté*': Extending the Methodological Application**

I would point to two potentially fruitful applications of the methodology developed in the present study to inform the ongoing pursuit of creative and effective missiological study and praxis.

#### **The Potential for Further Contextually-Informed Iterations of the Ricoeurian Hermeneutical Cycle**

Throughout the process of explanation and retrieval of the current study, occasional supporting or comparative references have been made to insights or experiences that lie outside the closely defined parameters of the hermeneutical dialogues between the

child-reception text of Luke and those recalled from my personal mission experience in the favelas of São Paulo in the early 1990s.

Whilst, in every instance, the potential for authentic dialogue between sources must be critically assessed, areas of congruence, resonance or correspondence regarding Christian mission in deprived communities that reach across boundaries of history, geography and culture, can be identified. There is much to encourage an extension of the scope of the present dialogue, to include and appreciate voices and missional experiences from other times and places, bringing them to the Ricoeurian conference table. Such a trans-contextual reiteration of the hermeneutical cycle would offer the potential for a theological grounding of fruitful missional experience and could offer encouragement to often isolated practitioners to value and share their experiences of living out the call of Jesus as agents of the 'Sending One'.

### **The Potential to apply the Methodology developed in the Context of Luke's Gospel to Hermeneutical Study of his Second Volume, the Acts of the Apostles**

The results of the current study suggest that the hermeneutical framework adopted in this study of Luke's first volume might be fruitfully applied as a fresh interpretative approach to volume two. It is arguable that the account of Peter's dramatic vision (Ac 10:9–16) might be considered comparable, in terms of its narrative quality and role in Acts, to that of 9:46–48 in the gospel. Whilst in the gospel the missional challenge represented by social marginalization and deprivation has been developed by Luke through the hermeneutical lens of the child-reception event, in Acts, Peter's visionary experience dramatizes the post-resurrection challenge of the inclusion of the Gentiles: the outworking of the second part of the eschatological vision of Jesus as the Messiah (2:32) who was 'a light to be given to the Gentiles'. The focus of volume one on social-inversion, or turning 'upside-down', is seen as being complemented by Luke's volume two focus upon the 'outside-in' cultural-religious inclusion, dramatized in Peter's vision and interpreted in dialogue with the missional experience with Cornelius. An application to Acts of the methodology applied in the present study would create the opportunity to bring into the hermeneutical process a potentially creative dialogue



with the voices and experiences of mission practitioners who are engaged in contexts where religious and cultural exclusion challenge the missional impact of the church today.

**Luke 9:46–48. ‘Receiving the Child’: A Contemporary Missional Paradigm and Contemporary Missional Challenge**

It is sadly undeniable that deprivation resulting from the exercise of coercive and self-seeking power continues as a global reality, radically antithetical to the values and vision expressed in Luke’s recounting of the child-reception event. Transformative action in the name of Jesus remains as much of a missional imperative to the would-be disciple today, as when ‘this child’ first felt the touch of Jesus’ hand receiving her at his side.

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