

## Children in the Gospel of Mark with special attention to Jesus' Blessing of the children (Mark 10:13-16) and the purpose of Mark<sup>1</sup>

- Calloused attitudes toward children still prevailed within Hellenistic society of the first century. A preserved letter from Alexandria around 100 CE from husband to wife about the coming birth of their child reads: 'If it was a male child, let it live; if it was a female, cast it out.'
  1. Jesus's disciples rebuke those bringing children to Jesus and he stops them.
  2. First-century Judaism assigned a higher value to children than the Greco-Roman world. Children were a blessing and a gift from God, and abortion, exposure, and infanticide were condemned [Josephus in Antiquities, Acts 7:19]
  3. Children nevertheless may have been denigrated for their lack of understanding and self-will, and not spared divine judgment.
  4. In Hellenistic poetry, painting, and sculpture, interest in children was for adults' pleasure.
  5. Philo of Alexandria [15 BCE – 50 CE] saw children as neither good or evil up to age seven, and thereafter they veer toward the bad.
  6. Early Christianity refers to their immaturity [1 Corinthians 14:20] and their dependence: 1 Peter uses a newborn's dependence on milk as a metaphor for Christians' need for spiritual nourishment [1 Peter 2:13].
- Jesus is depicted as overcoming both cultural and religious obstacles preventing followers from embracing children's full and equal participation in the coming Kingdom. It is noteworthy that the available scriptures, while inclusive of both boys and girls, seems to emphasize in example, attention to girls.
- Mark corrects the idea that discipleship is based on a 'theology of glory,' power and authority. Discipleship includes a 'theology of suffering.' It is likely he was writing for a Roman audience with a significant gentile component.
- Mark overcomes the prejudice that being crucified and dying negates Jesus' ministry.
- Vocabulary for kids: *Paidion* or *Pais* = very young child, infant, or child below the age of puberty; *Paidia* = little children; *thygatrion* = little daughter; *korasion* = little girl
- Throughout this Gospel, the needs of small or young children are captured:
  1. **Mark 5:22-24, 35-43:** The 12-year-old daughter of Jairus is raised from the dead.
  2. **Mark 7:25-30:** The young daughter of the Syrophenician woman is exorcized of an evil spirit.
  3. **Mark 9:17-29:** A young son who was probably epileptic was healed.
  4. **Mark 9:33-37:** Jesus holds a young child to demonstrate how to be great in God's kingdom

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5. **Mark 10:13-16:** Little children are brought to Jesus, he lays his hands on them, blesses them, holds them and teaches they are intended recipients of the Kingdom.
- Mark 10:13-16 is especially important because it shows the relationship between and combines Jesus' teaching about little children and the Kingdom of God and Jesus' ministry to children.
  1. Here, Mark mentions no miracles and instead, Jesus lays his hands on children and holds them.
  2. `...to such as these belongs the Kingdom of God [v. 14]
  3. They belong solely because they need it, a gift.
  4. The parents' subjective faith, standing in for the children, who do nothing and may not even believe, makes the parents role models, becoming childlike to enter the Kingdom.
  5. Submission is not oppression but liberation: `Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child receives it will never enter it [v.15]
  6. `...do not prevent [*Koluein*] them, is associated with baptism in the early church, where candidates for baptism underwent testing before being admitted.
  7. In Hebrew Bible/Jewish tradition, children were the objects of blessing on various occasions. The Jewish Talmud attests to the practice of bringing children to the elders [scribes] for blessing after the Day of Atonement – but this practice is post-Mark.
  8. Mark alludes to Jacob's blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh in Genesis 48. Jacob blessed Joseph through his two sons: `Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them.' The children who receive a parental blessing are adopted in order to be blessed. Mark uses a rare verb, *enankalizomai*, which means `take in the arms, hug,' which ties the blessing to Jacob.
  9. Whoever receives [*Dechetai*] a child in my name, receives Me. This alludes to the practice of taking in orphans.
  10. In 10:14, Jesus' anger is aimed at his disciples because they are opposing rather than aiding his mission: The double command forms a sharp and weighty rebuke; and there are double references in 10:16 `taking them in his arms' `laying his hands on them,' `blessing them' with an intensified form of the verb, *kateulogei*.
  11. Jesus puts the young before the old, disabled before the able, and poor before the rich. Like Jacob he overturns seniority by blessing younger ones before older. Jesus uses his authority to elevate children, including girls.

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- Jesus' new family is extended to all those serving the Gospel: 'No one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred-fold times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – along with persecutions.' (Mark 10:28-30). Some writers see this text as the culmination of Jesus' teaching in Mark 10 addressing marriage, children and property – the creation of an alternative social reality, in which a new 'household' consists of Jesus' disciples, compensating for the earthly household but not replacing it.