"God Was With The Child": A Childist Hermeneutic for the Interpretation of Scripture

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Towards a Childist Hermeneutic for the Interpretation of Scripture

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ABSTRACT: Theological fields of study, including biblical studies, are hearing and responding to feminist critiques and have made notable progress towards feminist interpretations of Scripture. We are learning to hear the voices of women in the Scriptures and to be affected by them. We have not, however, been proportionately affected by the voices of children in Scripture. The central social actors throughout the scriptural narratives are adults. Seldom are children's voices heard and even more seldom are those voices presented as reliable or meaningful in their own right. This article seeks to raise this as a problem and offers a basic outline of the contours of a childist hermeneutic, following the key features of Childhood Studies, for the interpretation of Scripture.

The Problem: Hagar's Child or Ishmael?

The story of Sarah and Hagar in Genesis 21:15-19 is a deeply troubling story. Hagar, who was sent back to her oppressive mistress after trying to flee in chapter 16, is now sent away. She is banished with her child, Ishmael, wandering without enough water to survive. Once the water runs out, she is surrendered to hopelessness. She situates herself away from

her child, just far enough to spare herself from the sight of her dying child. Weeping and mourning, she waits for the child to die and she waits for death to take her. The reader is taken with her to imagine a share in her place, hearing the distant whimpers of the infant child's fading voice. Here in the wilderness, we may recall with irony that, when Hagar first fled her mistress, it was by a well (a "spring of water" Gen. 16:7) that the angel of the LORD found her and sent her back. But now, when she is banished, there is apparently no well to be found. But it is into this horror, where we are forced into the hopeless anticipation of the child's death, that God speaks. God shows Hagar another well, a nameless one.[1]

"God was with the boy...," it says (Gen. 21:20). In this simple statement, we are disrupted by the centrality of a character—a child—who, to this point, has served as little more than a prop in Hagar and Sarah's story. We have followed Hagar, we have sat in her place. As readers, when Sarah set the child down to die, we were taken with her to a distance away from the child's experience of death, but, as the text says, "God was with the boy."

Until this point the child's experience in the story is obscured and marginalized under a hegemonic "gerontocentrism,"[2] which assumes the experience of adulthood as normative for adequate accounts of what it means to be human, and instrumentalizes childhood as a "stage of development" in transition to adulthood. Throughout the Bible, children's experience is consistently marginalized. Even in the New Testament— which has explicit resources for centralizing children's experience, such that New Testament studies may be, according to O.M. Bakke, "…the only traditional theological discipline that has not systematically neglected the theme of childhood"[3]—children are positioned as passive objects of adult

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[1] The first well was called *Beer-lahai-roi*—where, ironically, Isaac eventually settled (Gen. 25:11).

[2] This term is coined by Chris Jenks. see Chris Jenks, *Childhood*, Second Edition (New York: Routledge, 2005), 9.

[3] O.M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 3. Cited in Kathleen Gallagher Elkins, "Biblical Studies and Childhood Studies : A Fertile, Interdisciplinary Space for Feminists" in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion,* vol. 29 no. 2 (2013): 151.

interactions and influences. As Kathleen Gallagher Elkins has pointed out, even Jesus "…uses children as stock characters to make a theological point (for adults) without asking the children themselves about their experience of childhood or what it means to welcome the *basileia* of God as a child."[4] Children are thus, throughout the Bible, of secondary or soft reality, subordinate to the voices and stories of *real* adults. The content of their experience, in its own right, is seldom (if ever) centralized and children's voices are almost never amplified. Though "God was with the boy," the child is merely a cardboard character—just Hagar's child, not Ishmael.

Throughout history, but in unique ways since the Enlightenment and especially since the emergence of developmental psychology, children's experience has been relegated to the status of *proto-adulthood*. As Jens Qvortrup points out, "All our knowledge on children and childhood seems to remain deeply and unreflectively centered around the experiences of adults, i.e., those who shaped the conceptual frameworks and methods of research."[5] Children's experience is taken for granted and neither studied nor heard in its own right as a mode of human existence. "As a consequence," to quote Jenks, "…the child is viewed, in juxtaposition, as less than fully human, unfinished or incomplete."[6] As Alan Prout and Allison James write, "…Childhood [according to traditionally gerontocentric accounts] is therefore important to study as a presocial period of difference, a biologically determined stage on the path to full human status i.e. adulthood…"[7]

Attention to gender and sexuality has powerfully awakened the academy (if not the church) to issues of paternalism, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity in regards to correcting prior essentializations of

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[4] Elkins, "Biblical Studies and Childhood Studies ," 150-151.

[5] Jens Qvortrup, "A Voice for Children in Statistical and Social Accounting" in Allison James and Alan Prout, eds., *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, Second Edition (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 1997) 89.

[6] Jenks, *Childhood*, 19.

[7] James and Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing*, 10.

"women's experience" and deconstructing hegemonic heteronormativity in Biblical interpretation. But it appears that there is still plenty of work to be done toward a childist hermeneutic that similarly deconstructs hegemonic norms for interpreting children's experience and constitutions of childhood. The term "childist" (and "childism"), as I am using it, originates from John Wall's "childist" ethic, in which "children's experiences must be allowed to disrupt and constantly open up even the interpretive assumptions that adults bring to them."[8] There is an intrinsic kinship between childism and feminism.

> Elkins writes,
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> Feminist conversations on childism are especially fruitful, because women's flourishing is deeply connected to children's flourishing, and vice versa; this is not to suggest that women and children necessarily have to be lumped together, in fact, "feminists in general have worked hard to undermine the inexorable tie between mothers and children."… Yet, "children suffer from the same or related social and cultural distortions or human rights and public policies that women have encountered for decades."[9]

In other words, the *androcentrism* suffered by women wherein maleness and masculinity become "…the norm for adequate accounts of what it means to be human, how I achieve a sense of self, what counts as verifiable and reliable knowledge…[etc.]"[10] is not dissimilar from the *gerontocentrism* suffered by children wherein "…society is identical with adult society."[11] What's more, the norm for masculinity imposed on women bears suspicious resemblance to the norm of maturity imposed on children through developmentalism. According to Erica Burman,

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[8] John Wall, "Childhood Studies, Hermeneutics, and Theological Ethics," *The Journal of Religion*, 86, no. 4 (2006), 537.

[9] Elkins quoting Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore: Elkins, "Biblical Studies and Childhood Studies," 153.

[10] Elaine L. Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an age of Uncertainty* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1996), 4.

[11] Jens Qvortrup, "Childhood as a Structural Form," in Jens Qvortrup, William A. Corsaro, and Michael-Sebastian Honig, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies* (New York, Palsgrave Macmillan, 2009), 24.

> …Developmental achievements are not neutral with respect to gender. The trajectory of development moves from *attachment*, a stereotypically feminine quality, to a culturally masculine *detachment…* There is a double repudiation of femininity [within developmentalism], as both motor of developmental advance and aspect of personal experience, structured within the achievement of autonomy.[12]

The "unexplicated, but nevertheless firmly established rational adult world… assumed to be not only complete, recognizable and in stasis, but also, and perhaps most significantly, desirable…"[13] bears a formal resemblance to masculinity.

It is not the intention of this project to advance a systematic hermeneutic informed by Childhood Studies, but only to provide an outline thereof. A childist hermeneutic can aid us in the interpretation of Scripture not only by deconstructing hegemonic masculinity, as feminism is doing, but also by cutting a layer deeper to raise suspicion regarding our conventional anthropological notions of maturity and what constitutes full humanity. In the following section, I intend only to trace a basic outline of the contours of a childist hermeneutic for the interpretation of Scripture. This is not an exegetical project so much as it is a project toward suggesting what exegetes might bear in mind in approaching texts.

The Contours of a Childist Hermeneutic

I offer the following as a starting point. In outlining the contours of a childist hermeneutic, since I have thus far taken my cues from the Childhood Studies movement in posing the problem of gerontocentrism in the interpretation of Scripture, it makes sense to draw from the same source in suggesting an outline for its solution. The six "key features" of the Childhood Studies paradigm, since their conception in 1990, have

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[12] Erica Burman, *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*, Second Edition (New York: Routledge, 2007), 142.

[13] Jenks, *Childhood*, 8.

been a helpful guide for scholars in various fields in interdisciplinarity and can become a guide for such an approach in Biblical Studies. These six "key features" will provide the basic outline I want to suggest for a childist hermeneutic.

1. Childhood as social construction. The first key feature of the Childhood Studies paradigm is that "Childhood is understood as a social construction."[14] There are, of course, stronger and weaker conceptions of "social construction,"[15] but what is meant here by this term is that the *meaning* of childhood is not fundamentally a product of nature, biologically determined, but a product of the structures and symbols of meaning within a society (i.e., culture). To say something is a social construction is not necessarily to say it is not real.[16] It is, instead, to say that it is an emergent reality (more than sum of its parts). Regarding childhood, neurology, biology, and physiology, though not irrelevant in the interpretation of children's experience, are not deterministic. Biology is not ascribed the normative authority that it has enjoyed under the positivist and nomothetic interpretive frameworks of traditional approaches to childhood. In other words, to say childhood is a social construction is to say that, while it exists in nature, its meaning does not come from nature. Similarly, to compare childhood to another social construction, a person with a disability may have physical and physiological differences from someone considered to be "abled," but all people are limited in their ability. The relevance of differences in limitation only comes from culture and the human limits that society is structurally willing to accommodate (in the valley of the blind, the one-eyed man is disabled).[17] So many of the problems we have confronted since the Enlightenment, including the

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[14] James and Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing*, 8.

[15] For a fuller discussion of this distinction, see Christian Smith, *What is a Person?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 119-206.

[16] For discussions on the "reality" of childhood within the paradigm of social construction, see Pricilla Alderson, *Childhoods Real and Imagined* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

[17] For discussion on disability as a social construction, see Ray McDermott and Hervé Varenne, "Culture as Disability" in *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* Vol. 26, No. 3 (1995): 324-348. And for discussion regarding limits and social disability see Deborah Beth Creamer, "Understanding Disability" in *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

hegemonic gerontocentrism suffered by children, have come from the sort of essentializing positivism that presumes gender, race, childhood, and disability (among other things) to be merely 'natural,' biologically determined realities. "Childhood, as distinct from biological immaturity, is neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies."[18]

For the interpreter of Scripture to take seriously the social construction of childhood, they will inevitably be drawn to notice the ways in which cultural ritual and social practice constitute the child. As such, they will not merely consider the ways in which the "natural" child inhabits a story or a poem in the text, but the ways in which the child *experiences* it. In this sense, we will be drawn to a more phenomenological approach. We "…have to study not only 'the child' but also the context (that is the interpersonal, cultural, historical and political situation) that produces her."[19] In the case of Hagar and Ismael, we must notice the cultural impulses to constitute the child only according to his potential to advance a bloodline, and we must notice our own impulse as readers to conflate the child's experience with his mother's.

2. Childhood as a variable of social analysis. Ironically, perhaps, it was Jean Piaget who wrote, "Child psychology is a branch equally of sociology and psychology, since the social environment is an integral component of development."[20] What Piaget was signaling, from within the psychological paradigm for interpreting children's experience (in most respects, keeping in mind that he was an epistemologist before he was a psychologist), is that "childhood is a variable of social analysis."[21] This is the second key feature of the Childhood Studies paradigm and our second contour of a childist hermeneutic. Its most relevant contribution is the suggestion that, because of the intrinsic indispensability of social factors and their variety, we are not interpreting a homogenous static

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[18] James and Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing*, 8.

[19] Burman, *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*, 9.

[20] Cited in Ibid.

[21] James and Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing*, 8.

social practice called "childhood." "Comparative and cross-cultural analysis reveals a variety of childhoods rather than a single and universal phenomenon."[22] For strategic purposes we may, as we have throughout this article, employ the term "childhood" or "children's experience," but it would be naïve and irresponsible to think that there is something ontological and extrinsic to which we can refer in every social context. Pia Christensen and Alan Prout elaborate on this suggestion,

> Children may share many everyday experiences because they are similarly positioned in relation to adults within an intergenerational ordering that places them as subordinate… At the same time, however, children's social experiences will differ because of factors such as gender, ethnicity, disability and social and economic inequalities. To ensure that children's accounts will be understood in the fullest way, researchers need to describe children's perspectives and everyday life accurately.[23]

As interpreters of Scripture, we are aided by an awareness of the situatedness of childhood within social analysis, so that we do not make the mistake of ascribing too high an interpretive correlation between, for example, the children who wandered in the desert with Moses and the child, Isaac, who was moments away from being murdered by his father in the name of stoic (read: mature) faithfulness. There is no single interpretation of children's experience that we can simply lay over every text in which we find them. As interpreters of Scripture, we are obligated, again and again, to begin at the beginning with the hard task of responsible exegesis and to discover *which* children's experience will come to bear on our interpretation and what ways it will do so. In this sense, our task is ethnographic. Isaac's experience, when we inquire concerning his own experience of the situation, will make its own unique contributions when we are willing to allow it to speak for itself, and the

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Pia Christensen and Alan Prout, "Working With Ethical Symmetry In Social Research With Children," *Childhood* 9 no.4 (2002), 484.

children in the wilderness will shed their own light on the text according to their uniqueness and the uniqueness of their social setting.

3. Children and childhood on their own terms, not mere objects of socialization. According to James and Prout, "Children's social relations and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults."[24] A childist hermeneutic promises to be instrumental not only in centralizing children's experience, but also in reorienting our concerns regarding socialization processes—the very processes which contribute to the various hegemonies which haunt our epistemological impulses—from the "problem" of the child (as an object of socialization) to the problem of society as a socializing agent. In other words, while a childist approach will re-theorize children as social actors and highlight their agency, in doing so, it will call into question the structures of socialization which have, for so long, taken children's passivity for granted.

"The importance of some contemporary accounts of socialization lies therefore in the way they see future shaping of a child's adult life in and through *present* adult constructions of childhood."[25] The center of the problem is not the child any longer, nor her future, but the present adult construction and constitution of the child. This contour, in important ways, calls the socialization process itself into question and may, in a sense, cut closer to the jugular of the hegemonies that continue to reify themselves in the structures and symbols of meaning within contemporary society. For Biblical interpretation, this shifts the conversation from the analysis of how a situation will effect the socialization and psychology of a child in a given situation and draws our attention, instead, to the ways in which adults attend to the child's experience. For example, if we only think about socialization from the traditional standpoint of its affect on the child's future, we might see Jesus' announcement in Mark 10—"whoever does not receive the reign of God as a little child will never enter it"— as

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[24] James and Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing*, 8.
[25] Ibid, 245. Italics mine.

unambiguously positive, we might never be inclined to ask "what would that child say about being a little child or receiving the *basileia*?"[26] And we might never think to consider how Jesus' listeners' present construction of childhood might color our interpretation of that question.

      4. Children as social actors. The fourth contour or a childist Biblical hermeneutic is that "children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes."[27] This point is indispensable for Biblical interpretation and this is where childhood has special potential to reshape and affect our interpretation of Scripture. Seeing children as social actors allows us to expect children's experience to actively disrupt our interpretations. The alternative, which may be in some ways traditional in Biblical Studies, is to see children as passive recipients of culture, being "integrated into adult society…,"[28] and thus orients the reader toward the child from a "top-down" position.[29] Nothing can be expected from the child in the story, if they are not regarded as a social actor, for they are always on the receiving end of the circumstances of the story. This is perhaps the greatest risk of being taken with Hagar to a safe distance from her child in the story from Genesis 21. We are tempted to presume that the child is ontologically nothing more than a victim of its circumstances, the child of Hagar. But the text's claim that, "God was with the boy," even while we as readers are taken with Hagar to a safe distance, exposes the child's affect on the story. We must note, however, that there is at work here an implied theological critique of the conventional notion of human agency in the Childhood Studies paradigm. The child's affect in shaping the story as a "social actor" in this case comes as a direct result of the activity of the text's true chief social actor, namely God, and of God's particular orientation toward the child, not of

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[26] Elkins, "Biblical Studies and Childhood Studies," 151.

[27] James and Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing*, 8.

[28] Qvortrup, "Childhood as a Structural Form," 24.

[29] See Wall, "Childhood Studies, Hermeneutics, and Theological Ethics," 529.

the child's ability to produce social change or of any orientation of the child toward God or the situation.

The New Testament, too, however ambiguously, gives us resources for a more "bottom-up" or reciprocal reading of the text. When Jesus says "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:14), for example, there is a clear sense that their experience, their very presence, has something to offer, even as a positive disruption.

5. **The ethnographic turn.** Regarding children as social actors also serves to guard against essentialism. If the reader is to regard the children in the stories of Scripture as not merely passive objects of socialization and pedagogical processes, then they are forced into an ethnographic posture, defamiliarizing themselves with totalizing preconceptions regarding the child's experience. According to Erin Raffety, "…research with children who are regarded as social actors aims to assess how children themselves interact in their various social worlds …and this perspective is necessarily constrained by judgments adults have made prior to conducting research with children."[30] This is descriptive of Childhood Studies ' fifth key feature and the fifth contour of a childist hermeneutic. James and Prout write, "ethnography is a particularly useful methodology for the study of childhood. It allows children a more direct voice and participation in the production of sociological data than is usually possible through experimental or survey styles of research."[31]

Unlike an experiment in a laboratory, the character of ethnographic research represents an emergent quality and a more ideographic form of knowledge which "presumes that meaningful knowledge can be discovered in unique, non-replicable experiences."[32]

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[30] Erin L. Raffety, "Minimizing Social Distance: Participatory Research with Children" in *Childhood* 22, No. 3 (2014): 412.

[31] James and Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing*, 8.

[32] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006) 43.

Ethnographers engage in a method of participant-observation, a hybrid mode of speech, action, and intensive listening, wherein they attempt to understand human experience by immersing themselves in another culture.[33] The ethnographer must relinquish control over research relationships. In the interpretation of texts, under the advisement of such an ethnographic turn, we as interpreters must see ourselves as guests in a foreign culture. We, of course, cannot bracket out our own cultural horizons completely, but an ethnographic approach nevertheless places us in what Rena Lederman has called a "one down position," in which we must rely on our informants to direct our interpretation.[34]

6. Constituting childhood is constructing childhood. Lastly, for the Childhood Studies paradigm from which we are taking our cues for a childist hermeneutic, "childhood is a phenomenon in relation to which the double hermeneutic of the social sciences is acutely present… That is to say, to proclaim a new paradigm of childhood sociology is also to engage in and respond to the process of reconstructing childhood in society."[35] In other words, the very approach we take toward constituting the child and childhood is instrumental in the social construction of childhood. For the interpreter of Scripture, this means that we take on great responsibility when we give voice to children in Scripture with a childist hermeneutic. In doing so, we are taking part in a reconstruction of childhood in our own context, including our churches. This is, perhaps, the most pastoral and practical contour of the childist hermeneutic. The ways in which we constitute and orient ourselves to children's experience in the text will affect the ways in which our churches, the places where these texts are preached and taught, share in ministry with children. Children's ministers and youth workers may become open to the discovery of and participation in God's action in the "depth of lived experience."[36] The

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[33] See Erin L. Raffety and Wesley W. Ellis, "Disruptive Youth: Toward an Ethnographic Turn in Youth Ministry" (Forthcoming).

[34] Rena Lederman, 'Ethics: Practices, Principles, and Perspectives,' in Carrier and Gewertz, Eds., *The Handbook of Socio Cultural Anthropology* (Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2013), 588-611.

[35] James and Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing*, 8.

paradigm of "integrating children into the life of the church" may be reversed and we may begin to imagine integrating adults into the life of God in the concrete and lived experience of young people.[37]

Conclusion

In conclusion, I must be clear that a childist hermeneutic for the interpretation of Scripture does not solve the problem of gerontocentrism in the text any more than a feminist hermeneutic solves the problem of patriarchy in the text. We cannot change the fact that the Biblical world may have been, in its own milieu, gerontocentric. But what a childist hermeneutic can do for us is give us resources to push beyond the gerontocentrism in the text, beyond the gerontocentrism in our own culture, and to begin to make constructive meaning of children's experience and child agency even under these conditions. And perhaps we will begin to see that even when we are drawn away from the child, to a safe distance, God is with the child, even in the texts of Scripture.

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[36] According to the German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, "…fulfilled life is not measured by the number of years that have been lived through, or spent in one way or another. It is measured according to the depth of lived experience." Jürgen Moltmann, *In The End – The Beginning* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 7.

[37] See Wesley W. Ellis, "Human Beings and Human Becomings: Departing from the Developmental Model of Youth Ministry," *The Journal of Youth and Theology* 14, No. 2 (2015), p. 119-137.

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