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The Child's Song

The Religious Abuse of Children

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The Child Jesus as Endangered Self

If Kierkegaard perceived Abraham as an idealized father—one who could meet emotional needs his natural father could or would not meet—I suggest that Jesus, too, engaged in a similar idealization, but that, in his case, the idealized father was God himself.

When I was a seminary student, my student colleagues and I were warned by our New Testament professors not to view the four Gospels as historical documents. We were especially cautioned against our natural but naïve inclination to use these texts to gain access to the historical Jesus. The Jesus of history, we were told, is inaccessible because the sources that attest to what he said, did, and intended were not written as history, much less biography, but for purposes of proselytizing in behalf of the early Christian movement.

Since the time that I was in seminary, there has been a dramatic resurgence of interest among New Testament scholars in the historical Jesus. This renewed interest has been prompted by the discovery and accessibility to scholars of extracanonical writings (notably, the Dead Sea Scrolls), and also by the emergence of new hermeneutical theories that are applicable to the Gospel texts, especially theories derived from literary criticism. There has also been renewed interest in the use of sociological theories that shed new light on the social and political context in which Jesus lived. Lagging far behind, and considered the most suspect of these new "secular" (or nontheological) approaches, is the use of psychological theory in the interpretation of the Gospels. While the sociological study of the early Christian movement has gained some acceptance within biblical studies, psychology remains quite suspect, and what little has been done to date has to some extent validated such suspicion.

It is noteworthy, however, that some very penetrating psychological interpretations of various biblical texts have been made by feminist biblical scholars, none of whom view themselves as psychologists per se, but who in fact engage in psychological interpretation by virtue of the topics they choose to address. The topic of women's victimization is, for example, inherently psychological. It is impossible not to engage in psychological interpretation when one addresses the theme of the victimization of women as revealed, directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, in selected biblical texts. This theme is inherently psychological.

When I was a graduate student at The University of Chicago in the late 1960s, I became familiar with the work of David Bakan (referred to in the previous chapter), who taught in the psychology department. In his writings, but especially in his lectures in his course on the psychology of religion, Bakan spoke with considerable passion and urgency about the theme of child abuse, and sought to demonstrate that this was a central, perhaps *the* central psychological theme in the Bible. His interpretations of the stories of Abraham and Isaac, of Job and his sons, and of Jesus, all in terms of the "infanticidal impulse" of parents toward their offspring were met with considerable skepticism by divinity students who attended his lectures, but, for reasons that I did not then understand, and now only imperfectly understand, I found them compelling and persuasive. I will never forget the evening when he pointed out that Freud's oedipal theory is a half-truth. Yes, it is true that Oedipus wanted to kill his father, but this desire was not inherent in Oedipus. He was not born with murderous impulses, but was provoked by his parents' prior action of exposing him in the forest, in the dead of winter, fully expecting him to die. Instead, he was found by a shepherd and reared as the shepherd's own child. It is not, as Melanie Klein and her followers have suggested,[1] that children are innately hateful toward their parents. These attitudes have been provoked by their parents' aggression against them. The same theme, according to Bakan, runs throughout the Bible, the most dramatic instance being the story of Abraham and Isaac, which Bakan, as we saw in chapter 5, interprets as the murderous impulses of Abraham against a child who was fathered by another man. This interpretation left my divinity school cohorts incredulous, and yet, the issue of illegitimacy is a very important theme in the Bible, reappearing (as briefly noted in chapter 3) in the case of Jesus, and I, for one, did not then or now find Bakan's interpretation difficult to swallow. As feminist biblical scholars have now begun to open up the whole question of women's victimization as a pervasive (or, should we say, evasive) theme in the Bible, Bakan's interpretations of biblical texts as concerned with the victimization of children no longer seem so far-fetched. What I will explore in this chapter is the convergence of these two themes in the life of Jesus.

Looking back on my own work as a psychobiographer, I recognize a common theme in my studies of John Henry Newman, Orestes Brownson, Abraham Lincoln, and Saint Augustine, namely, the theme of the suffering of children due to parental mistreatment or to emotional neglect, sometimes but not always owing to tragedy and misfortune.[2] Newman was raised in his grandmother's home during the first years of his life, prior to boarding

school, even though his parents were both living.[3] Brownson was raised by foster parents because his mother, after his father's death, could not support her family. Lincoln's mother died when he was a child, and his father, himself emotionally incapable of providing care and nurture, became the object of lifelong resentment. And, as we saw in chapter 2, Augustine was beaten by his teachers at school, and when he complained about his mistreatment, his parents mocked him, siding with the teachers. My studies of these particular historical figures—religious personalities—have supported Erik Erikson's much-debated interpretation of Luther as a child who experienced considerable emotional trauma, the victim of his father's abusive behavior and of his mother's acquiescence.[4]

My exploration here on Jesus as a victimized child continues the same line of inquiry. In centering on Jesus, I am aware that I am undertaking an unusually perilous task, as we lack the usual sources of information that are commonly used to develop a psychobiography. There are no personal letters and diaries, no reminiscences from the pens of siblings, parents, and friends, and no contemporary accounts of what it was like to be a child growing up in Galilee at the time that Jesus lived. The lack of such evidence would probably be enough to dissuade any responsible historian from embarking on this particular project. Even if there were no paucity of evidence, there is also the fact that such an investigation comes up against strong taboos that are present with any revered historical figure, but are dramatically magnified in the case of Jesus.

When I was describing the general argument that I planned to develop in this chapter to a group of our summer school students at lunch, one of the students, a pastor, said, "I have a church in a small town near Peoria, and I can tell you that what you are saying would never play there." He went on to say that the circumstances of Jesus' childhood are of no interest to his parishioners, or to him personally, as these things simply do not matter. What matters is that Jesus brought a new message of hope and deliverance, one that is as relevant today as it was in his own day. I responded by noting that even if we today may not be concerned about the circumstances of Jesus' childhood, we can assume that he himself was keenly interested in them, and it is his own concern with his childhood that I am trying to understand. How did *he* feel about his experience as a child? How did *his* feelings about these experiences influence his adult life, including his desire to bring a new message of hope and deliverance? Could it be that this very message had its origins in his childhood experience?

While I was basically satisfied with my response, I came away from this conversation with a much greater appreciation for the fact that the psychobiographical study of Jesus is a terribly risky enterprise, because it flies in the face of some deeply established taboos within the Christian community against opening up the whole issue of the victimization of children. By continuing to assert that we should not even be curious about Jesus' childhood, we place a veil of secrecy over the experiences of all children, including our own childhoods, using our religion to legitimate such secrecy, and to support the suppression of our curiosity, as adults, about our experiences as children.

As we saw in chapter 1, Alice Miller argues that we have very strong taboos against wanting and seeking to know what we experienced as children.[5] Such taboos serve mainly to spare the parents, to keep what they have done to their children a deep secret. Moreover, the theories we adults put forward to "explain" what occurs in childhood are typically designed to maintain the secrecy. She is especially critical of Freud's backpedaling on the issue of the sexual abuse of children, placing his own concerns for professional ostracism above his commitment to the truth as he knew it.

I am not primarily concerned here with Miller's criticism of Freud, as this whole issue has already been discussed. What concerns me instead, as I mentioned briefly in chapter 3, is the similar use of certain theological theories, particularly the theory that Jesus was born of a virgin. This theory serves a similar purpose, that of keeping what really happened in Jesus' case from coming to light, and thereby giving the practice of sparing the parents a religious legitimation. Once we as children learn how babies are actually conceived, we can then be introduced to the theory that Jesus was born of a virgin, the "father" being the Holy Spirit. Before the time that we know how children are conceived, this theory is not very relevant to us. After we know, it is incomprehensible to our natural thought processes ("Why should the conception of Jesus be any different from the conception of all the other children?"), but its very incomprehensibility enables the promoters of this theory to say that this is a matter of faith, and that we should not rely on our own powers of thought, but instead accept and believe what adults are telling us is so. How was he really conceived? What were the real circumstances of his conception? To ask such questions is to begin to lift the veil of secrecy which, in Miller's view, can only serve the purpose of sparing the parents. It does not serve the interests of the children, or of the adults who want to discover the origins of their present emotional distress in what happened to them as children.

Much contemporary biblical scholarship maintains this same prohibition against the desire to know about the circumstances of Jesus' conception, and their possible influence on his adult life. Today, however, the theories that are used to dissuade us from our natural curiosity about his childhood are less overtly theological and more related to historical method. While some biblical scholars today may actually believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, many probably do not believe this to be literally the case. Most believe that Joseph was his father. For them, the theory of the virgin birth is no longer a sufficient basis for maintaining the taboo against inquiring into the circumstances of Jesus' conception. Alternative grounds for suppressing our natural

desire to know become necessary, and the most common argument is now that as Jesus' childhood was not of primary concern to the Gospel writers, it should not be of great concern to us. As the Gospel writers have other more important issues they want to address (they are not, after all, biographers), we should take their cue and not pursue an issue that is tangential and ultimately unimportant. In support of this position, biblical scholars also note that there is very little evidence in the Gospels about Jesus' childhood, thus confirming that it was not of primary concern to the Gospel writers. They have reinforced this position by pointing out how unsuccessful have been the attempts of psychologists and others to create a psychological profile of Jesus, frequently citing Albert Schweitzer's conclusion, in his thesis written for his medical degree in 1913, that such efforts have been exercises in futility.[6]

I must admit that, throughout the years that I was engaged in psychobiographical studies of the figures noted above, I shared the same skepticism regarding a psychobiography of Jesus, and largely for the same reasons. I felt that the best one could do with a figure like Jesus would be to develop an interpretation similar to those frequently found in psychoanalytic and analytic psychology (Jungian) journals, which focus on a literary character in a novel or play. One would, for example, offer a psychological interpretation of Matthew's Jesus in much the same way that others have developed psychological interpretations of William Shakespeare's Hamlet or Herman Melville's Ahab. It would be understood that one was merely applying one or another psychological theory to a literary text, one that, in this case, happens to be of the genre of gospel rather than play or novel. A literary, not historical, Jesus would be the object of psychological interpretation.

I am now convinced, however, that to settle for half a loaf in this fashion is to accept uncritically the assumption by which biblical scholars have been able to dissuade us from our natural curiosity about Jesus' childhood, the assumption that his childhood was not of urgent concern to the Gospel writers themselves. I am persuaded that his childhood was of very great concern to the Gospel writers precisely because they were aware that the circumstances of his conception and birth were of great interest to prospective converts to the Christian movement. Even if the Gospel writers had not been curious themselves, and even if they had been personally disposed to the view that all that really matters is the fact that Jesus brought a message of hope and deliverance, the issue could not be ignored, and they knew this. Questions were being raised concerning the legitimacy of Jesus' conception, and two of the four Gospel writers—Matthew and Luke—were sufficiently concerned with these questions that they began their Gospels with these very questions in mind. While their manner of addressing these questions was partly influenced by the taboo against lifting the veil of secrecy, mainly in order to spare the parents (especially Mary, who was probably alive at the

time they wrote their Gospels), it was also influenced by their desire to show that Jesus' conception and birth were related to his message of hope and deliverance.

We might also ask: What is it that men and women, in their time and ours, seek deliverance from? And why is it that we are so much in need of the hope that Jesus' message offers? I believe that our desire for deliverance can be traced all the way back to childhood, when we experienced ourselves as captive and vulnerable selves, selves who were emotionally imprisoned and decidedly not the carefree individuals that adults imagined us to be. We were endangered selves. In fact, it is not too much to claim that childhood is the period in life when our selfhood is most endangered. This makes a certain kind of obvious sense, as it is in childhood (also in old age) that we are especially vulnerable, greatly dependent on others, mainly parents, for our very survival. But we need to go beyond the obvious, and beyond the issue of our physical survival, and to ask why it is that the *self*—the very core of our being and the locus of our self-reflective capacities—is most endangered in childhood.

Again, I find myself agreeing with Alice Miller that, for most of us, our endangerment as selves was not primarily because we felt physically threatened, but because we were learning to suppress our awareness of ourselves, of our own experiencing. We learned to deny our experiences, that which we most deeply felt within us, thus splitting off our conscious selves from much of what we felt. We did this, in Miller's view, largely from a need to spare our parents. Instead of expressing our deep grievances against them, we created excuses for them, rationalizing for them, and telling ourselves that our anger and hurt is immature, if not shameful, unbecoming of good children. After all, our parents deserve our gratitude, not our anger and accusations.

So we created a kind of fictive self, based on a romanticized or idealized view of our experience in the world, a self based on the assumption that we cannot bear to be aware. Once formed, this fictive self not only survives childhood, but its influence expands, as we find more and more reasons to be sparing: not only of other persons on whom we depend, but also of social institutions, on which we cannot but rely. We rationalize for them, finding plausible reasons for why they had no choice but to betray us and cause us to suffer.

On the other hand, childhood may also be a time when our sense of selfhood is *least* endangered, when we are still relatively free to be aware of what we are experiencing, and free to disclose such awareness to others. Miller's picture of childhood as a time when our true self is seriously endangered is undoubtedly one-sided, borne of her experience of being a therapist to adults who had miserable childhoods, and of the fact that her own awareness of her experience of being abused as a child emerged only after years of therapeutic practice and personal self-analysis. Childhood, then, may also be

a time when we may still exhibit a refreshing freedom to see things as they are, and to be unsparing in what we say about what we see. As Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay "Self-Reliance," notes:

> The nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature. A boy is in the parlor what the pit is in the playhouse; independent, irresponsible, looking out from his corner on such people and facts as pass by, he tries and sentences them on their merits, in the swift summary way of boys, as good, bad, interesting, silly, eloquent, troublesome. He cumbers himself never about consequences, about interests: he gives an independent, genuine verdict. You must court him: he does not court you.[7]

In contrast, says Emerson, "the man is, as it were, clapped into jail by his consciousness. As soon as he has once acted or spoken with *éclat*, he is a committed person, watched by the sympathy or the hatred of hundreds whose affections must now enter into his account. There is no Lethe for this. Ah, that he could pass again into his neutrality!"[8]

Here Emerson, himself deprived as a boy of love and affection by Calvinistic parents whose austere child-rearing practices included depriving the children of food while the parents ate their fill (an instance of what Miller calls poisonous pedagogy), reveals another side of childhood, the freedom to say whatever one pleases and not to measure the consequences. It is this freedom—the freedom to be unsparing in his attack on those social forces and conventions that deplete the true self, leaving it feeling empty and powerless—that Emerson now evidences in his celebrated paean to self-reliance, and that I want to believe is the impetus behind my own decision to explore the childhood of Jesus. As Miller shows, children learn very early to imprison themselves in their consciousness by learning not to be aware. But, as she also insists, such self-imprisonment is not irrevocable, as one can just as surely learn to violate social taboos and prohibitions against being aware, and to reject the theories about ourselves that not only keep us in the dark but also undermine our confidence in our natural, God-given capacity to know what we see and feel. It is in the spirit of such freedom that I now invade the parlor long dominated by professional biblical scholars, and offer my own "independent, genuine verdict" about Jesus. This is a verdict that I have presented previously in oral form as a respondent to a paper by John W. Miller on Jesus' "age-thirty transition,"[9] but am now emboldened to set down in writing because confirmation of my intuitions has recently been provided by a biblical scholar, Jane Schaberg, who, in spite of being a woman, has managed to gain entry to the parlor, as an adult!

Yet, from what I gather from the preface to her book on the illegitimacy of Jesus,[10] her efforts have been criticized for being "too imaginative." In what I take to be a kind of Emersonian protest, possibly borne of nonchalance regarding from whence *her* next meal is coming, Schaberg says, "Now that this book is finished, one of my own criticisms of it is that it is not imaginative *enough*."[11] It goes without saying that one of the ways adults squelch the awareness of children is to suggest that these little ones may be allowing their imaginations to run away with them. Yet, as Miller points out in her essay on the emperor's new clothes: "The cry of the child in Andersen's fairy tale—'But [the emperor] doesn't have anything on!'—awakens people from a mass hypnosis, restores their powers of perception, frees them from the confusion caused by the authorities, and mercilessly exposes the emptiness to which rulers as well as masses have fallen victim. All of this happens suddenly, sparked by the single exclamation of a child."[12] So, my views on the child Jesus are those of an adult who has nonetheless tried to take the perspective of a child for whom the real self lives in the free exercise of the gift of true imagination.

The Illegitimacy Argument

The infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke are concerned to tell the reader that Jesus' conception and birth were very special, that these events, as interpreted by Matthew and Luke, establish that he was God's chosen son, the one whose coming was foretold by the prophets. In making this affirmation, these narratives also reveal that Matthew and Luke were very much aware of the fact that many people had serious difficulty with such a claim because Jesus' conception and birth could easily be viewed as disconfirming evidence for this very claim. As Schaberg points out, one of the most persistent arguments mounted against the Christian movement's claim that Jesus was the promised one was the allegation that he was illegitimate, fathered not by Joseph, the man to whom Mary was engaged at the time and whom she subsequently married, but by some other man. While biblical scholars have traditionally dismissed this allegation on the grounds that it was concocted by the movement's adversaries in order to discredit it, Schaberg wonders whether these allegations may have had a basis in fact, as the two Gospel writers do not discount or even try to refute these allegations. Instead, through carefully chosen language that, especially in Luke's case, almost obscures the fact that such allegations were extant, the Gospel writers show that there is another way to consider the allegation of Jesus' illegitimacy, viewing the circumstances to which these allegations point not as merely scandalous but as positive evidence that God was acting in Jesus' life from the very moment of his conception. For both Matthew and Luke, Mary was the culmination of a long succession of biblical women whose victimization was transformed from being merely a scandalous event to ushering in a new era of hope for those who longed for liberation from oppression and abuse.