

BIBLE AND CHILDREN

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Tamil literature adores children. The evidence is the rise of *Pillaittami!* literature. But it is not the case with regard to children in other ancient literatures of the world. Children are viewed differently, perhaps, as manpower to enhance the labour force or the army, or as objects to be used in occult cult or magic. Although we have evidences about paternal and maternal love for children, yet a good number of ancient writings do not give much attention to them, as our Tamil literature does. The child is estimated low. In antiquity the individuality of the child was not even considered. In this background we intend to see what the Bible says about them. In the first part of the paper we focus our attention on the Old Testament. In the second part, we shall see what the synoptics say about Jesus and the children. Our aim in this paper is to show that Jesus had high regard for the children and even made them as models of discipleship.

I. THE OLD TESTAMENT

1. Children are Gifts from God

The Old Testament considers children as God's gift and a guarantee of the covenant between God and the people. This is evident from the life of Abraham. In spite of all material blessings, Abraham felt at a complete loss without children (Gn 15:1-3), although God had promised him earlier that he would make him a "great nation" (Gn 12:1-3). It was only when Isaac was born, Abraham felt that God had fulfilled his promises (Gn 21:1-7).

In fact, a large family was considered as a blessing from God (Ps 127:3-5). It was also the first blessing of God to man, "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Be masters of the sea, the birds of heaven and all the living creatures that move on earth" (Gn 1:28). Hence there arose in the mind of the Israelite a favourite image of father, mother and numerous children around the table. "Your wife a fruitful vine in the inner places of your house, your children round your table like shoots of an olive tree. Such are the blessings that fall on those who fear Yahweh" (Ps 128:2-4). Birth of a child was considered a divine gift and particularly if it takes place in old age it was attributed to extraordinary divine intervention (Gn 17:17; 21:6).

Although having a number of children is held as a blessing from God, a wise man does not desire a multitude of unprofitable children. Ben Sira advises him, "Do not long for a brood of worthless children, and do not take pleasure in godless children. However many you have, take no pleasure in them, unless the fear of the Lord lives among them... for better have one than thousand, better die childless than have children who are godless" (Ben Sira 16:1-3).

In the early biblical period, immortality was linked to living on through children who carried on the name of their parents. This is seen in the blessings of Jacob towards the end of his life to his children. When Joseph brought to him his two sons, Jacob blessed them in the following manner: "May the God in whose presence my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the god who has been my shepherd from my birth until this day, the angel who has saved me from all harm, bless these boys, so that my name may live on in them, and the names of my ancestors Abraham and Isaac, and they grow into teeming multitudes on earth" (Gn 48:15-16).

This is the reason we have to see in the Levirate law that provides a possibility for this continuity: "If brothers live together and one of them dies childless, the dead man's wife must not marry a stranger outside the family. Her husband's brother must come to her and, exercising his duty as brother, make her his wife, and the first son she bears must assume the dead brother's name. By this manner his name will not be obliterated from Israel" (Dt 25:5-6).

This levirate law (from Latin *levir*, 'brother-in-law', translates the Hebrew, *yabam*), found also in Assyrian and Hittite legislations, had for its purpose the perpetuation of the family and the stability of the family property. The case of Tamar (Gn 38) and Ruth (Rt. 4) can be cited as examples of this custom.

2. The Role of Children

Children were considered as important participants in worship, prayer and ritual. The firstborn son belongs to Yahweh, and must be presented to him and redeemed by a sacrifice. Children present themselves at family offerings (1 Sam 1:4). They are thus nurtured in the practice of religion. For example, concerning the feast of the Unleavened Bread, the elders were advised in this manner: "For seven days you will eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there must be a feast in Yahweh's honour... And on that day you will explain to your children, 'this is because of what Yahweh did for me when I came out of Egypt'... You shall observe this law at its appointed time, year by year" (Ex 13:6-10; cf. Ex 13:14; Dt 4:9; 6:7). "You must love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength. Let the words I enjoin on you today stay in your heart. You shall tell them to your children, and keep on telling them, when you are sitting at home, when you are out and about, when you are lying down and when you are standing up (Dt 6:4-7).

Thus we notice children participate in the rituals and worship and learn from their parents the meaning of such rituals and customs. Hence, we can notice that the Old Testament attaches much importance to the training of children in faith and religion.

Another important aspect that we notice also is the blessing given to the children. Children are blessed before the death of parents. Thus Isaac blesses Jacob (though by fraud) and Esau (Gn 27). Jacob in his turn blesses his sons and grandchildren (Gn 48,49). The ancient Jewish custom of blessing the children is taken from these texts. The priests too bless the children. "Yahweh spoke to Moses and said, 'Speak to Aaron and his sons and say: This is how you must bless the children of Israel. You will say: 'May Yahweh bless you and keep you. May Yahweh let his face shine on you and be gracious to you. May Yahweh show you his face and bring you peace"' (Num 6:22-26).

In Judaism, particularly after the destruction of the Temple, we notice a shift of emphasis from the cult to the knowledge and practice of the Torah.¹ Differentiation between boys and girls was made. At the age of 13 a Jewish boy became a *bar mitzvah* (an adult). He was subject to the obligations of the Law. In later Judaism we notice a formal teaching was given to the boys. Joshua Ben Gamla (high priest, c.63-65) even ordered that there should be teachers in every province and city, and that boys from age of 6 or 7 should be brought to them to learn Torah. A transition takes place: from the informal teaching of religion by the parents to a formal teaching by rabbis.

3. The Least in the Society

Despite this special esteem for the children, they were the powerless ones. They were ranked as the least in the society. Tradition and custom, in fact, gave much importance to the elders (Prov 16:31; Job 12:12; Sir 25:4-6), but not to the children. Further, we notice that the parents had almost absolute authority over their children. They educated them through strict obedience, often enforced by severe physical punishment. For example, the book of Proverbs points out that leniency is hatred, whereas discipline is love. "Whoever fails to use the stick hates his child; whoever is free with his correction loves him" (13:24). In another instance it says, "Discipline your children while they are young to learn. If you don't, you are helping them to destroy themselves" (19:18). It also advises the parents to whip the children if needed: "Children just naturally do silly, careless things, but a good spanking will teach them how to behave" (22:15). Also, "Do not be chary of correcting a child, a stroke of the cane is not likely to be fatal. Give him a stroke of the cane, you will save his soul from Sheol" (23:13). In similar manner the book of Ben Sira also points out, "Whoever loves his son will beat him frequently so that in after years the son may be his comfort" (30:1). Ben Sira also advises the parents not to give their children undue freedom: "While he is young, do not allow him his freedom and do not wink at his mistakes. Bend his neck in youth, bruise his ribs while he is a child, or else he will grow

¹ For details see "Pais," TDNT, vol. V, pp. 647-648.

stubborn and disobedient, and hurt you very deeply. Be strict with your son, and persevere with him, or you will rue his insolence" (30:12).

The Law also reinforced parental authority over their children with severe sanctions. For example, "anyone who curses father or mother will be put to death; having cursed father or mother, the blood will be on that person's own head" (Lev 20:9).

4. God and Children

Yet, in contrast to human ways in dealing with the children, God has his own ways. He respects the children and the young people. Often he places them in high esteem above the elders and wise-men of the land. For example, God gives wisdom to the young Joseph enabling him to interpret dreams (Gn 41:38). To young Solomon he gives wisdom to govern his people in a worthy manner (1 Kgs 3:5-9). The book of Wisdom, while expanding this event, describes Solomon as asking for wisdom as a child and pursuing it throughout his youth as if searching for a bride (Wis 6:3-7; chaps. 7, 8).

That God favours the young is evident in the OT. He does not prefer Cain, the firstborn son of the human race, but the younger Abel (Gn 4:4-5). Similarly, he prefers Jacob instead of his elder brother Esau loved by his father Isaac (Gn 25:23). He inspires Jacob to give a double blessing to the youngest, Joseph (Gn 48:1-22; 49:22-26). Joseph in turn desires Jacob's special blessings for his elder son Manasseh, but Jacob blesses the younger son Ephraim (Gn 49:13-20). Likewise, when the prophet Samuel searches for a new king to replace Saul, it was the "little one", David, out in the field watching the sheep was chosen (1 Sam 6:1-13). God enables David, too young even for battle, to defeat the Philistine champion, Goliath (1 Sam 17).

To sum up, the Old Testament regards the child with mixed feelings. Although the child is considered as a gift from God, yet, the child does not enjoy a high esteem in the society. The OT had little understanding of the individuality of the child. At times the children were despised, considered as immature and mischievous. Yet, God takes their side. He gives them wisdom. They do play an important role in his plan for Israel. Even the messianic expectation was placed on a child of David's line (Is 7:14). Prophet Zechariah also foresees a messianic era when "the

streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in them" (8:5) and where there will be peace and joy.

II. THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

Jesus was opposed to the low estimation of children common among his people. He regarded them with great admiration. He considered them as persons and related with them well. He even sets them before his disciples as models for receiving the kingdom. Without physical power and status, children know best how to receive. Thus they become examples for receiving the kingdom as a gift, for no human power or status can create it or force it. In a number of sayings of Jesus we notice that children are taken seriously as persons and enjoy a relationship with Jesus and the kingdom.

Jesus held that children have a share in the kingdom of God (Mk 10:13-16) and it should be received as a child (Mk 10:15; Mt 18:3; Lk 18:17). Further he also placed special importance on receiving the children with kindness and hospitality (Mk 9:33-37). Although Matthew and Luke made use of the sayings found in Mark (9:33-37; 10:13-16), each one of them has a different purpose and focus. Commentators have always noticed that these sayings reflect not only the attitude of Jesus towards the children but also the attitude of the early church towards them.² Child, for both Jesus and the Evangelists, remains a powerful metaphor for teaching.

For Mark, children are models of discipleship. The first saying (9:35-37), following Jesus' second prediction of death (9:31), links with the disciples' argument over the greatest among them. Jesus confronts them by setting a child as model to be followed. Again without breaking the sequence, Jesus once again confronts John who wants to forbid someone outside the twelve from working miracles in Jesus' name (9:38). Then once again Jesus gives priority to the child by stressing the danger of leading little ones into sin (9:42). In another saying (10:15) Jesus states the necessity of

² See for example, H.R. Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, Geneva: WCC, 1979, 49.

receiving the kingdom as children. Here children are models of total childlike reception of Jesus' teaching.

For Matthew too children are models of discipleship. However, unlike Mark, they are not set in sharp contrast to the twelve. Yet Matthew places the "little ones" as models for a much larger group in the church.³ Matthew uses this term in at least three different contexts. First in 10:42 it is used in the context of sending the disciples on mission. The second is in 18:6-10 where the "little ones" could very well mean those who are esteemed least in the world's rating system. They could be also those of marginal worth to the church. The third is found in the parable of the Last Judgement in 25:40: "In truth I tell you, in as far as you did this to one of the least of brothers of mine, you did to me". Here the "little ones" would mean the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked and the criminal in prison. In all these texts, the "little ones" call for reflection. Child is the image for conversion (18:3) and humility (18:36). Above all Matthew notes also an identification of the child with Jesus (18:5). He also highlights the importance of little ones having a guardian angel (18:10).

Having analysed in general what Mark and Matthew say about the attitude of Jesus towards the children, we now focus our attention on the Gospel of Luke. Our intention is to study here how Luke has made use of the Markan texts to highlight his point of view with regard to Jesus and the children.

1. Jesus and the Children in the Gospel of Luke

The Gospel of Luke can well be called as "the gospel of little children".⁴ In fact, Luke utilises the stories of Jesus' birth and childhood to introduce an important theme of discipleship later in his gospel. As in Matthew, the child Jesus is the promised descendent of David, and the narrative is structured in such a way that it resembles Scripture mediations on the OT. For example, God directed the prophet Samuel to choose a "little one" as the future king, the youngest David who was shepherding the flock (1 Sam

³ See for details, P.A.Sampathkumar, *The Gospel of Matthew, 13:1-18:35*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1999, 50-51.

⁴ Joseph A. Grassi, "Child," *ABD*, vol. I, p. 906.

16:1-13). In similar manner, the shepherds were directed by the angels to discover the "little one" at David's city, Bethlehem. They immediately recognise the child through Isaiah's sign of the manger (Is 1:1-3; Lk 2:7-16). The child's place in the manger symbolises what he would be, the food and nourishment for his flock. Further in telling that "the child grew in wisdom" (Lk 2:39) and manifesting that wisdom in the Temple at the age of twelve (Lk 2:46-52), Luke asserts that God bestows wisdom on little ones, even infants (10:21-22). Again, during the Last Supper, Jesus is portrayed as teaching that the greatest of the disciples should be like the "little ones".

Thus we notice, Luke is keen to associate the image of the child and its natural qualities as model for discipleship. Following Jerome Kodell⁵ we intend to highlight this point of view. The focus is the Lukan travel narrative which begins in 9:51. In that narrative, Luke focuses on children as model for the new teachings on discipleship. It is done through opposing pairs and parallels. We shall now go into some details.

2. Lukan Pairs and Parallels

Luke is fond of pairs and parallels.⁶ He pairs *people*: Simeon and Anna (Lk 1:25-30), people addressed with blessings and woes (6:20-26), Martha and Mary (10:38-42), the judge and the widow (18:1-5), the Pharisee and the tax collector (18:9-14), Herod and Pilate (23:1-12), Theudas and Judas (Acts 5:36-37), Aeneas and Dorcas (9:32-43).

Luke also pairs *examples*: the disaster in Galilee and at Siloam (Lk 13:1-5), the prudent builder and the prudent king (14:28-32); *parables*: the lost sheep and the lost coin (15:1-10); *narratives*: the centurion's servant and the widow's son (7:1-17), Barnabas and the couple, Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:36-6:11). Similarly there are two men dressed in bright dress at the empty tomb (Lk 24:4) and two men in bright dress at the ascension (Acts 1:10).

⁵ Jerome Kodell, "Luke and the Children: The Beginning and End of the Great Interpolation (Lk 9:46-56; 18:9-23)," CBQ 49 (1987) 415-430.

⁶ For details see C.H Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes and the Genre of Luke-Acts*, Missoula: Scholars, 1974.

Larger patterns of parallels could be noticed also. For example, Zechariah and Mary; John the Baptist and Jesus; the descent of the spirit on Jesus and on the disciples (Lk 3:21-22; Acts 2:1-4); the healing and raisings by Jesus, Peter and Paul; the journeys of Jesus and Paul to Jerusalem under divine necessity (Lk 13:33; Acts 20:22) and declarations of innocence in favour of Jesus and Paul.

We also notice that Luke often links a parable or story with a teaching of Jesus as explicit or implicit illustrations. For example, the parable of the two debtors (Lk 7:41-42) illustrate the attitude of Simeon with regard to the penitent woman (Lk 7:36-40). The parable of the rich fool (12:16-21) illustrates what Jesus was saying about greed (12:15). The parable of the widow (18:2-5) is an instruction about prayer (18:1). The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (18:14) is a lesson for the self-righteous.

J. Kodell calls this type of paring and illustrating patterns as "*exemplary pairs*".⁷ In this, two ideas or figures in a passage are illustrated by ideas or figures in the following passages. As examples of this type of technique we can cite the parable of the Good Samaritan and the narrative that concerns Martha and Mary. Both of them illustrate Jesus' teaching on the two great commandments: Love of God and love of neighbour (10:25-42). The first commandment is illustrated in the action of Mary and the second commandment is illustrated by the action of the Samaritan.

A similar technique is used to illustrate Jesus' teachings on the discipleship. We shall now focus our attention on two texts: 9:46-56 and 18:9-23.

3. 9:46-48: True Greatness

V.46 introduces an argument among Jesus' disciples. It concerns about "which one of them was the greatest", of course, in the sense of rank, position, and prestige. To that concern of the disciples, Jesus answers by an action. He "took a child, stood him by his side" (v.47). The place besides Jesus suggests honour for the child. He, then, identifies so closely with the child that reception of the child is a reception of Jesus himself. And he who receives Jesus

⁷ Jerome Kodell, "Luke and the Children," 418.

receives the sender – namely, the Father. Then he adds, “he who is least among you all is the greatest” (v.48). While the Markan text (9:33-35) focuses on the question of greatness in being a “servant of all”, Luke emphasises on the situation of lowliness. He stresses on the receptivity and humility: “One who learns leastness learns greatness.”⁸ The word “least” (*mikroteros*) is a reminder of what Jesus has said concerning John the Baptist (7:28). Since Jesus is the one who “shall be called great” (1:32), all claims to greatness are to be measured in terms of Jesus’ attitude towards it. The “least” is the child in the midst of the disciples and therefore the child is the “greatest”. Hence the disciples should learn to forget their desire for prestige and position. Instead, they should be content to serve the lowly who are truly great in the eyes of God. When they are “least” in this manner, “greatness” will follow them.

4. 9:49-50: The Unknown Exorcist

The exorcist story is closely linked with the previous one with the same theme. While the previous story concerned relationships within the group of disciples, the present one deals with the attitude towards outsiders. A person was casting out demons in the name of Jesus. But he does not belong to the group. Hence the disciples stop him from doing so; but Jesus takes a different attitude. He clearly points out that a person who is not against the disciples is on their side. Hence the disciples must retain an attitude of openness and tolerance. As in the previous story the theme of “welcoming” others is stressed. The reception of the “little child” with esteem is paired with the reception of those who are outside the group of disciples, yet do something in Jesus’ name.

5. 9:51-56: The Samaritan Village

These verses introduce an important new section in the Gospel. Scholars see this as a travel account. The Samaritans’ refusal to receive Jesus corresponds to the Nazareth incident at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee (4:14-30). In both cases, Jesus is rejected as he inaugurates a new stage in his ministry.

In introducing the journey, J. Kodell points out that Luke follows the technique of exemplary pairs. “The wrongheaded

⁸ F.W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age*, 205.

disciples and the child of 9:46-48 are exemplified by the Samaritans in 9:51-56 and by the exorcist in 9:49-50: the Samaritans paralleling the disciples and the exorcist paralleling the child."⁹ Besides this fact of exemplary pairs there are also contrasting pairs within these three texts: disciples are contrasted with the child (9:46-48); John is contrasted with the exorcist (9:45-50); and the Samaritans are contrasted with Jesus.

To sum up, we notice that Luke places an incident involving a child to highlight his teaching concerning discipleship. The contrasting images of the child and the disciples interlock with the figures of the exorcist and the Samaritans as exemplary pairs.¹⁰

6. The Composition of Lk 18:9-25

In this section Luke returns to the question of qualifications for discipleship. At the beginning of the journey narrative Luke introduced a child episode, now towards the end of it, he once again uses another episode involving a child. It is to highlight Jesus' teaching on discipleship. This is demonstrated by three narratives which concern the Pharisee and the Tax collector, the attitude of the children and the rich ruler. Following the same technique of "exemplary pairs" two contrasted figures, the Pharisee and the tax collector, are paralleled with the rich ruler and the children (18:15-25). The saying about the "little children" is placed in between. As in the previous case (9:48), this saying also focuses on humility and receptivity (18:14).

7. 18:9-14: The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Like some other parables (15:13-32; 16:19-31; Mt 21:28-32), this parable also contrasts the attitude of two figures: a Pharisee, conscious of his own righteousness, is aware that he was better than the others; a tax collector, conscious of his sinfulness, pleads for divine mercy. Jesus announces authoritatively that the tax collector was the one accepted by God. It is clear that God favours the humble and the needy and rejects the proud and disdainful. Ultimately the attitude of the heart is what matters. The tax collector found favour in the eyes of God because of his penitent attitude and belief in God that he would show mercy to the sinner.

⁹ Jerome Kodell, "Luke and the Children," 421.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 423.

8. 18:15-17: Jesus and the Children

Luke uses the Markan material concerning the children (Mk 10:13-16) but changes its emphasis from the Markan focus on receptivity of the children to lowliness as a mark of discipleship. In Mark this narrative is part of Jesus' teaching on marriage, children and possession (Mk 10:1-31), but in Luke it is part of a series describing what is involved in becoming a disciple.

It is a pronouncement story when the disciples attempt to prevent the parents from bringing their children to Jesus for his blessing. Jesus states that the kingdom belongs to children and people like them.

9. 18:18-23: The Rich Ruler

The story about the rich ruler who asks Jesus how he might gain eternal life, is also from Mark. But Luke uses this as a contrasting example. The attitude of the Pharisee and the tax collector are contrasted with the attitudes of the rich man and the children. Uprightness in God's sight, entrance into the kingdom, and the inheritance of eternal life are placed in parallel and the various actors are clearly contrasted. The parallelism between the Pharisee and the rich man is clear, particularly, in the statement of the Pharisee (v.11-12) and the rich man (v.21). Both of them obey God's commandments, yet they do not find favour with God. The reason stated is their pride and boastfulness. The attitude of lowliness on the part of the tax collector and the children are placed as a mark of discipleship.

To sum up, we notice that the contrasting figures of the Pharisee and the tax collector interlock with the figures of the rich ruler and the children as exemplary pairs.¹¹ This sharpens the theme of lowliness as a mark of discipleship.

10. The Lesson of Luke

Not entering into a detailed study about the intention of Lukan journey narrative, I consider positively the proposal of J. Kodell:

¹¹ Ibid., 426.

By framing the special material in 9:51-18:14 with the stories of Jesus and the children and by use of the technique of interlocking at the beginning and the end of the section, Luke is pointing to a theme of discipleship which focuses many of the stories and sayings of the journey: the lowliness and defencelessness of Jesus (and his true followers) as expressed in an expectancy of God's action and a willingness to follow his way of salvation, dependent on him; in other words, the disciples of Jesus must receive kingdom like a little child.¹²

Basing on this point of view, we can sum up our discussion on what exactly Luke would say about discipleship utilising the model of a child. A few conclusions can be made:

- * **Lowliness:** For Luke the least is the greatest. The humble figure of the tax collector (18:13) and the children are set as examples for the disciples. God favours the least.
- * **Readiness for God's action:** The disciples should be available for God acting through them. Like the Good Samaritan they should be ready to serve others. Jesus himself is described as one at the service of the others, receiving the sinners, sick and all those who needed him. This should be the mark of discipleship. Further, disciples should imitate the extravagant receptivity of the father in the parable of the prodigal son (15:11-32). Also they should have humble faith to forgive a brother over and over again (17:4) and experience the kingdom of God that is in their midst (17:21).

Dependence on God: As the OT shows it is evident that God reverses human expectations by working through the powerless, children and little ones. Hence the disciples should learn to depend on God. Even their hairs on their heads are taken care of (12:11-12). In fact, dependence on God's providence is clearly expressed in the discussion concerning the bodily needs. "Your father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things shall be yours as well" (12:30-31). Material possessions do not offer the needed security. What is needed is the simplicity of the child totally depending on others. Here, for the disciples, it is God.

¹² Ibid., 427-428.