

To Receive the Kingdom as a Little Child The Social Implications of Mark 10,13-16

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0. Introductory Remarks

a. The famous pericope of Jesus and the children in Mark 10,13-16 is well known because it is (or was?) often used in the liturgy of the baptism of infants¹. But that will not be the topic of this paper since there is a growing consensus that the pericope has no role to play in this discussion in early Christianity². Mark 10,13 tells that people were bringing children to Jesus so that he could touch them. The disciples do not agree and try to stop this. In v. 14a, Jesus reacts indignantly (*Markan Sondergut*) and rebukes the disciples. He has a double explanation for his way of reacting: to such as these³ belongs the kingdom of God (v. 14b), and whoever does not receive the kingdom as a child will never enter it (v. 15). Then follows the conclusion of the anecdote (v. 16): Jesus fulfills in a supreme way the original intention of the people who were bringing children. The scene is clearly a reminiscence of Mark 9,36-37 but is not identical to it. In the latter one, Jesus takes the initiative by putting a child among the disciples as a kind of 'didactic' illustration of his teaching about service.

- 13 Καὶ προσέφερον αὐτῷ παιδία
 ἵνα αὐτῶν ἄψηται·
 οἱ δὲ μαθηταὶ ἐπετίμησαν αὐτοῖς.
14 ἰδὼν δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἠγανάκτησεν καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς,
 ᾿Αφετε τὰ παιδία ἔρχεσθαι πρὸς με,
 μὴ κωλύετε αὐτά,
 τῶν γὰρ τοιούτων ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ.
15 ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν,
 ὃς ἂν μὴ δέξηται τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ ὡς παιδίον,
 οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθῃ εἰς αὐτήν.
16 καὶ ἐναγκαλισάμενος
 αὐτὰ κατευλόγει
 τιθεὶς τὰς χεῖρας ἐπ' αὐτά.

¹ Other passages are, e.g., 1 Cor 7,14; Col 3,20-21; Eph 6,1-4; 1 Tim 3,4-5; Tit 1,6. There are many hypotheses about pre-Markan versions of the passage, especially with regard to Matthew who does not have a parallel verse for Mark 10,15 (but see Matthew 18,3). We think that the redactional work of Matthew 19,3-5 and Luke 18,15-17 is the best way to explain the differences with Mark. See SCHLOSSER, *Le règne*, p. 477. See also below, n. xx

² JGNILKA, *Markus II*, p. 83: "Die Antwort lautet, dass die Perikope von dieser Fragestellung freizuhalten ist". Compare FLEMINGTON, *Baptism*, in *IDNT I*, p. 352: "The direct evidence of the New Testament is insufficient to settle the question either for or against infant baptism; the case must be argued on other grounds" (quoted by YATES, *Why Baptize Infants?*, p. 35); see also the strong affirmation by WHITE, *Baptism*, p. 106: "To use the story to support a practice which emphatically Jesus did not follow on the occasion described ... is to leave no doubt that special pleading is misusing the narrative for illegitimate ends"; ELTROP, *Denn solchen gehört das Himmelreich*, p. 190: "Allerdings wird diese These in der neueren Forschung nicht mehr erwogen".

³ Genitive of possession; WOLFF, *Verkündigung*, p. 39: "Eine Reich-Gottes-Zusage in einer Genitivwendung begegnet ausser Mt 5,10 (*Sondergut*) und Mt 6,13 (einige Handschriften) nur noch in der ältesten Schicht der Seligpreisungen in Mt 5,3 (Q)".

b. In a session about gender in/and the gospel of Mark, the choice to present a paper on the blessing of the children by Jesus in Mark 10,13-16 is probably not the most logical one. Living in a context in which decades of feminist action and decades of feminist exegesis still have not been able to obtain equality between women and men, one would rather prefer to talk about pericopes with an explicit (positive) role for women or about studies that compare female and male characters. It is a well-known fact that Mark has special attention for individual female characters: the anonymous hemorrhaging woman, the anonymous daughter of the anonymous Syro-Phoenician woman, the anonymous woman with the perfume, the anonymous daughter of Jairus, the anonymous mother-in-law of Peter, the women at the tomb. Indeed, gender problematic mostly focuses on the issue of the relationship women/men. The aim of this paper concerns indirectly (but not less fundamentally) the problematic of gender. This paper proposes that the pericope about Jesus blessing the children is so fundamental to the message of the gospel that it precedes or transcends the question of gender, not in a way that makes this question a minor issue, but in a way that opens a perspective of equality between *all* men and women. This possibility to read Mark 10,13-16 as a fundamental text of the gospel has to do with the change in interpretation of the pericope that has started a couple of years before the turn of the millennium.

c. The history of the study of Mark 10,13-16 in the last 50 years is a nice illustration of how methodology in exegesis has changed during the last decades. Let me explain briefly the “genealogy” of this paper and it will become clear what I mean. I started looking at the literature, let us say, before 1995. What did I notice? As you might expect, most articles and commentaries on Mark 10,13-16 are about the history of the origin and the composition of the pericope. They contain very interesting and sophisticated research with arguments for and against the distinction between tradition and redaction, with great discussions about the literal or symbolic meaning of παιδίον, or about the meaning of “receiving”, or about the difference in meaning of v. 15 for the ‘historical’ Jesus and for the evangelist, and so on. The portrayal of the children was very often moralizing: Jesus loves the children because they are open, kind, innocent,... These characteristics of childhood were also the reason why they would enter the kingdom and why adults had to be or had to become like children. The condition for them to receive the kingdom is to become such as them. You will find some elements of this research in section 1 and 2 (“The Discussion of Tradition and Redaction”) of this paper (and you do not necessarily have to read them). I think if I would have proposed such a paper on “tradition and redaction in Mark 10,13-16” in 1995 at the SBL, there might have been a chance that it was accepted. When I continued reading articles published after 1995, a neat difference in the approach of the pericope became visible⁴. There is much more social-critical interpretation and much more interest in – what I call with a generalizing term – the practical theological consequences or the pragmatics of biblical research. There are several reasons that can explain this shift. I would like to mention at least the following four:

(1) There is clearly an influence of holistic readings of Mark. These readings open the eyes for the context. And context here means more than focusing on the narrative doublet of Mark 10,13-16

⁴ MURPHY, *Kids and Kingdom*, Electronic Theses and Dissertations, Denver University, 2011, p. 106, n. 299: “Bailey notes that whereas earlier commentaries focused on the characteristics of children as a key to interpreting this pericope, now they generally focus on their status as marginal members of society (see Bailey, ‘Experiencing the Kingdom,’ 58-59, where he credits Ched Myers as a pivotal figure in this transition)”. BAILEY, *Experiencing the Kingdom of God as a Little Child: A Rereading of Mark 10:13-16*, in *Word and World* 15 (1995) 58-67. Bailey refers to MYERS, *Binding the Strong Man. A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988, 266-271. See also MYERS, *As a Child: Jesus’ Solidarity with the Least of the Least*, in *The Living Pulpit* Oct-Dec (2003) 18-19, 33. – I did not have at my disposition the published version of Murphy’s text (Wipf and Stock, 2013).

in 9,35-37. The section 8,27–10,52 – if not the whole gospel – is the background that helps to understand the meaning of the pericope. In addition, the link with the central theme of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God starting in 1,14-15 becomes visible. Once the pericope is "liberated" from its isolation, the meaning of the saying about the children is further enriched by the characterization of Jesus and of the disciples.

(2) Another new element is a change in hermeneutics: there is more openness towards the input of the reader in the construction of meaning. How does the text affect the reader, both the implied reader(s) and the real ones? It has become clear that exegesis that is not open to the pragmatic aspect of the text is poor and insufficient⁵. The gospel contains an appeal to the reader to do something. Knowledge of the *Sitz im Leben* of the reader is a necessary aspect in understanding the text. Additionally, there is much more knowledge about the situation of children in Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts. What would be the impact on first century readers when they hear the anecdote of Jesus action and words vis-à-vis the children?

(3) Feminist approaches have built a bridge towards a new understanding of this pericope. Many authors recognize that it is through feminist exegesis that they have seen the deeper sense of Mark 10,13-16. Feminist approaches of the text allow biblical scholars to emphasize the particular function of women in the gospel, to correct the (sometimes explicable and understandable, sometimes voluntary) mistakes that have been made in the history of interpretation, and to promote the role of women in modern society and in ecclesiastical contexts. Such an approach is a kind of "applied exegesis" and focuses on one particular aspect of the text through a magnifying glass. It has the advantage of pointing at certain lacunae in traditional historical critical exegesis (just like psychoanalytical readings or liberationist readings do). It is a logical step to move from feminist exegesis to "childist" exegesis, and many authors recognize to have moved to childist approach via feminist readings⁶. Joyce Ann Mercer writes: "It seems likely that we might find clues in such a story [as Mark's] for a liberatory theology of childhood"⁷. And Bettina Eltrop states: "Durch die Hermeneutik und Methode der Feministischen Sozialgeschichte können so Kinder neu entdeckt werden und es kann ihre Stellung in der Nachfolgegemeinschaft der Jesus AnhängerInnen bzw. hier speziell der matthäischen Gemeinde sichtbar gemacht werden"⁸.

(4) Society has changed or at least we may hope that a change is going on. One has become more sensible for the vulnerable position of children in our modern world. (We may hope that) there is no longer silence about the abuse of children in the church and outside the church. The vulnerability of children is no longer an excuse to use them as 'toys'. Of course, there is still a long way to go. And, until now, I am afraid, this is an insight that is taking place mostly in Western

⁵ DILLMANN – GRILLI – MORA PAZ, *Vom Text zum Leser. Theorie und Praxis einer handlungsorientierten Bibelauslegung* (SBS 193), Stuttgart 2002.

⁶ For recent insights in "childist" approach and for interesting bibliography on research on children in both New Testament and Hebrew Bible as well as in the Greco-Roman world, see PARKER, *Valuable and Vulnerable. Children in the Hebrew Bible, Especially the Elisha Cycle*, 2013 (see the Introduction, p. 1-11). – It is remarkable how many papers at this SBL Meeting in Boston (2017) are treating the subject of "children"!

⁷ MERCER, *Welcoming Children*, p. 44. Although Sharon BETSWORTH's monograph does not give an exegesis of Mark 10,13-16, the title of the book *The Reign of God is Such as These. A Socio-Literary Analysis of Daughters in the Gospel of Mark* (LNTS, 422), London, 2010, clearly refers to the passage. The purpose of her analysis of Mark 5,21-43; 6,14-29; 7,24-30 is "that a comparative study of the daughters in the Gospel of Mark reveals that their literary placement and representation contribute to Mark's inclusive social vision of the Reign of God while further establishing Jesus' role as the Son of God. Furthermore, Mark's vision on the Reign of God includes a critique of the social location of daughters in the Greco-Roman world" (p. 19). See PARKER, *Valuable and Vulnerable*, p. 4: "Scholarship with a primary interest in women often includes children through attention to issues such as marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, domestic labor, and child rearing".

⁸ ELTROP, *Denn solchen gehört das Himmelreich*, p. 11.

society. We do not hear very often about the abuse of children in other parts of the world where children are victims of organized sex tourism, are forced to become soldiers, are working in the most humiliating and degrading circumstances, are excluded from education, are permanently on the run as refugees, and are dying from hunger⁹. Many publications on “children in the Bible” are found in books on pastoral theology. It is normal to call the gospel of Mark now a counter-narrative and some scholars do not hesitate to make a comparison between “the destructive narrative of empire” in Jesus’ time and in the 21st century¹⁰.

d. The older I get, the less I am convinced of the need to stick specific labels on the methods we are using in exegesis. I do not mean that we do not have to work methodologically, but that we have to read the *text* in the first place and, of course, when reading the text, many questions pop up and they all need a specific approach. A single approach can never be the be-all and end-all. It is in the combination of different perspectives that meaning comes into being and keeps on growing. So if you ask which approach I am using when reading Mark 10,13-16 – a question that is often treated at the beginning of dissertations or articles – I cannot easily reply. My approach is not exclusively focused on one method. It is not feminist although as a man I am aware that there is so much to learn from women, then and now, inside and outside the text. It is not “childist”, although I am aware that the perspective on and of children should be more integrated in exegesis. It is not historical critical, although taking into account the complex genesis of a text is fundamental. It is not psychoanalytical although when speaking about childhood or male/female psychology is never far away¹¹. It is not narratological, although I consider Biblical texts as stories in the first place. It is not reader response, although we all know there is no meaning without readers. I could go on. If one chooses for one single method, most of the time the scholarly debates that follow is not about the meaning of the text but about the use of the method, and that is not the essential thing in biblical interpretation. It is the story itself that will/should lead us towards the meaning.

So here are, as I promised, the two sections on “Tradition and Redaction” (which you could skip).

1. *The Discussion of Tradition and Redaction. Part 1.*

V. 14 and the Meaning of τοιοῦτων

a. The transition in meaning from “real children” (v. 14) towards “children as symbol” for a certain attitude or behavior (v. 15) is rightly called a “shift of the thought” (J. Schlosser: “glissement de la pensée”). For many scholars – and this is already correctly mentioned by Ambrozic¹² – it is the decisive argument to consider v. 15 an insertion in a traditional unit vv. 13-14.16¹³. Almost all authors mention this and other tensions between v. 14bc and v. 15. Gundry gives ten other reasons in favor of the insertion hypothesis (but he himself considers the whole passage as a logical “historical” unity¹⁴). While

⁹ When I had written these lines, I read the book by Eltrop and I found the same remark already in 1996 (*Denn solchen gehört das Himmelreich*, p. 213-214).

¹⁰ MERCER, *Welcoming Children*, p. 45-46.

¹¹ VAN AARDE, *Social Identity, Status Envy, and Jesus as Fatherless Child*, in ELLENS – ROLLINS (ed.), *Psychology and the Bible. A New Way to Read the Scriptures*, vol. 4: *From Christ to Jesus*, 2004, 223-246.

¹² AMBROZIC, *Hidden Kingdom*, p. 135-139; see also LÉGASSE, *Jésus et l'enfant*, p. 38.

¹³ For a survey of the many defenders of this insertion hypothesis (and the few opponents), see DUPONT, *Les Béatitudes*, II, p. 155, n. 1; SCHLOSSER, *Le règne*, p. 494, n. 11. See also ELTROP, *Denn solchen gehört das Himmelreich*, p. 188-189.

¹⁴ GUNDRY, *Mark*, p. 548-549. A similar list of arguments is found in DUPONT, *Les Béatitudes*, II, p. 155; SCHLOSSER, *Le règne*, p. 478; BEST, *Disciples and Discipleship*, p. 89-90; SAUER, *Sitz im Leben*, p. 35.

according to a widespread theory v. 15 is a traditional *logion* that was added by the evangelist¹⁵, the idea that vv. 14bc-15 are at the beginning of the *Traditionsgeschichte* and that vv. 13.14a.16 were created around them as a narrative frame, also has some supporters¹⁶. Anyway, those who accept the insertion theory have to make a distinction between the “traditional” meaning of the pericope (without v. 15) and the “redactional” meaning (with the inclusion of v. 15). The line of reasoning runs as follows: in the original story the kingdom of God belongs to children; in the Markan story there is a shift towards “people/adults” who are such as children. Some scholars presume that when v. 15 was inserted, the original form τοῦτων (or αὐτῶν¹⁷) in v. 14 was changed in τοιοῦτων (cf. *infra*).

b. τοιοῦτων is generally translated as “such as these” (NAS, NRSV). What does “such as” mean? It is common to think of a qualitative comparison which would mean “children *and* adults like children” or (only) adults who, because of a certain *childlike* aspect, possess the kingdom of God¹⁸. In addition to this literary-critical analysis, Ambrozic explains the comparison as follows: the original meaning about real children in v. 14 was spiritualized under the influence of catechetical interest and this easily made possible the insertion of v. 15. This verse 15 already carried the idea of children as a *symbol* for the attitude that was required to enter the kingdom of God¹⁹. Source criticism and redaction criticism walk hand in hand when it comes to the interpretation of τοιοῦτων. Because there is an opposition between real children versus children as a symbol, and because there is an opposition between a narrative event as a lesson for the disciples (vv. 14.16) versus a kind of spiritualized theology (v. 15), we must have an original τοῦτων versus a redactional τοιοῦτων and thus tradition versus redaction²⁰.

c. What would we propose? It is clear that τοιοῦτων (v. 14) is not only about some “real” children that were present and who are brought to Jesus (otherwise we would have expected τοῦτων indeed²¹). But, it cannot be denied that these “real” children continue to play a role in the anecdote, as can be seen in v. 16 and in the reason given by Jesus why he allows them to come to him: for (γὰρ...) theirs is

¹⁵ See SAUER, *Sitz im Leben*, p. 30, n. 17. Pre-Markan insertion: BEST, *Disciples and Discipleship*, p. 90. According to Best v. 14c as well is a redactional insertion to make a closer link with v. 15 and to make a change in emphasis from the action (v. 16) towards the *logion* (v. 15): the original story was about taking up and blessing children, an action that was perfectly understandable within its Jewish context. More information can be found in SCHLOSSER, *Le règne*, p. 496, n. 13 (ctr. K. Weiss). – On the traditional character of v. 15, see o.a. REPLOH, *Markus*, p. 187-188; BUSEMANN, *Die Jüngergemeinde*, p. 119 (he mentions the possibility that ὡς παῖδιον did not belong to the original verse and was only added when Mark added v. 14c (p. 124). Crossan thinks the term “receiving ... is not in any way pre-Markan but it represents Mark’s rephrasing of his pre-Markan 10:15 in order to underline the verbal and thematic parallel with 9:37” (*Kingdom and Children*, p. 85).

¹⁶ For CROSSAN, *Children and Kingdom*, p. 87, the whole of Mark 10,13-14.16 is a creation by the evangelist who added v. 15 after having made some modifications to it (compare ID., *In Fragments*, p. 315-318).

¹⁷ See DUPONT, *Les Béatitudes*, II, p. 158.

¹⁸ Representatives of this idea are mentioned in DUPONT, *Les Béatitudes*. II, p. 156, n. 3; LÉGASSE, *Jésus et l’enfant*, p. 38. Cf. KERTELGE, *Markus*, p. 99, ad v. 14: “Zugleich generalisiert er die Figur der Kinder zu ‘Menschen wie sie’ (einfacher: ‘solchen’)”; WOLFF, *Verkündigung*, p. 40: “Das Reich Gottes wird nicht Kindern verheissen, sondern denen, die wie Kinder sind. Es sind also die Geringen und Hilflosen gemeint”.

¹⁹ AMBROZIC, *Hidden Kingdom*, p. 152; LÉGASSE, *Jésus et l’enfant*, p. 39-40, and *Marc*, p. 604: the addition of v. 15 allows only one acceptable interpretation of v. 14 and this is “à leurs pareils (*toioutôn*)”.

²⁰ See for instance GNILKA, *Markus II*, p. 80. For a “Forschungsüberblick”, see RINGSHAUSEN, *Die Kinder der Weisheit*, p. 34-42.

²¹ On the grammatical possibility that the meaning of τοιοῦτων could be identical to τοῦτων, see SCHLOSSER, *Le règne*, p. 479. According to GUNDRY (*Mark*, p. 547), the emphasis lies on the quality of the children, which consists of their coming to Jesus. However, this interpretation goes against the idea that “people” were bringing children to Jesus in order that he might touch them (the initial situation that receives a concluding echo in v. 16). One could also wonder if τοιοῦτων does not concern more the aspect of “stopping” the children by the disciples than their “coming” (noticed by the Dutch scholar DE MAAT, “*Als een erfgenaam*”, p. 107, n. 2.).

the kingdom of God²². It is also clear that τοιοῦτος is a Markan redactional preferred word (Matthew 3 times, Luke 2 times, Mark 6 times: see also 4,33; 6,2; 7,13b; 9,37 [!]; 13,19) that in the case of 10,14 has an “enlarging” effect²³. The question remains however, whether the transition from v. 14 (children) to v. 15 (adults) is so substantial that the hypothesis of a redactional change by the evangelist upon a more original text is unavoidable. It looks like deliberately an opposition is created in order to be able to find a more primitive stratum. In this regard, Wolffs’ criticism against Busemann is true for all insertion hypotheses: “Die blosse Behauptung, dass Markus an konkreten Kindern der vormarkinischen Tradition nicht mehr interessiert ist, kann nicht beweisen, dass ursprünglich konkrete Kinder gemeint sind”²⁴. But Wolffs’ criticism can be turned around. It is not because there is a shift in meaning from children to adults that automatically one should think of an insertion: “the question is whether the shifts in meaning and expression are reasonably conceivable”²⁵. We rather think that reading a reference to adults already in v. 14c inhibits a fluent train of thought. Such an interpretation does not offer a satisfying explanation why the children may come to Jesus and why in v. 16 Jesus lays his hands on them. The form τοιοῦτων is not a comparison with other adult persons; it is a generalizing expression for the “class” (Beasley-Murray) or “group” of children (something like “that kind of”)²⁶. For Jesus, nothing else but being a child suffices to belong to the kingdom of God. Moralizing, psychological, or spiritualizing interpretations about specific characteristics of children that would make them and those “such as these” worthy of the kingdom should be critically evaluated²⁷. Children do not receive the kingdom because of their moral quality or because of a specific merit, but because of the fact that they are of no interest in the eyes of the world (see below). The real children who are there with Jesus represent all the children. The generalizing transition from real children to adults does not start in v. 14. This verse (simply) says that the kingdom belongs also to children. Against the expectations of the disciples, Jesus now gives the kingdom to children.

²² On the typical “explanatory γάρ” in this verse, see, e.g., DE MAAT, “*Als een erfgenaam*”, p. 107, n. 2: “The prothesis with *aphete ta paidia* and *mê kôluete auta* prepares for the literal meaning in 14b” (my translation of the original Dutch).

²³ Dupont, Busemann *et alii*. Differently: SCHLOSSER, *Le règne*, p. 479; SAUER, *Sitz im Leben*, p. 31, n. 23; WOLFF, *Verkündigung*, p. 40.

²⁴ WOLFF, *Verkündigung*, p. 40, n. 34. We do not agree with his conclusion that the Markan text excludes the “real” children.

²⁵ GUNDRY, *Mark*, p. 549.

²⁶ Good argumentation including references to other examples are found in BEASLEY-MURRAY, *Baptism in the New Testament*, p. 326-327 (cf. John 4,23; Rom 1,32; 16,18; 1 Cor 7,15.28; Gal 5,21; Heb 7,6; Acts 22,22; Heb 7,26); GRUNDMANN, *Markus*, p. 276: “Nicht nur diesen Kindern wird es zugesprochen, sondern den Kindern überhaupt (τῶν τοιοῦτων)”; GUNDRY, *Children in the Gospel of Mark*, p. 151, n. 29: “‘Belonging to such as these [i.e., little children]’ (τὸν ... τοιοῦτον) refers to children not at hand who are like the children at hand, rather than referring to adults who are like children (with Gundry, *Mark*, p. 547); cf. the similar construction, ‘one of such little children,’ in 9:37”. Eltrop thinks that in Matthew 19,14 “τοιοῦτων includes the children and “die, die gehindert werden, zu Jesus zu kommen, denen in der patriarchalen Gesellschaft und von eigenen Gemeindemitgliedern Grenzen gesetzt sind, die in der Nachfolge Jesu aber überwinden werden sollen” (*Denn solchen gehört das Himmelreich*, p. 195).

²⁷ WUCKELT, “*Wer das Reich Gottes nicht annimmt wie ein Kind*”, in *BibLit* 66, 1993, p. 138, mentions a.o. frankness, humility, willingness to receive, trustful, openness to receive, faithful openness, being of no account, powerlessness. D.O. VIA, who also gives a list of “qualities” of a child, adds this interesting remark: “The multiplicity of the meanings that have been suggested for the child image underscores the fact that Mark does not say what childlike quality he has in mind, if any, and it also points to the subjectivity of the answers that have been given” (*The Ethics of Mark’s Gospel – In the Middle of Time*, Philadelphia, 1985, p. 129). ELTROP, *Denn solchen gehört das Himmelreich*, p. 4, n. 6: “Es stellt sich damit die Frage, ob die Suche nach kindlichen Charaktereigenschaften überhaupt die richtige Fragestellung an die synoptische Texte ist”.

2. *The Discussion of Tradition and Redaction. Part 2.*
V. 15 and the Meaning of ὡς παιδίον

Whether v. 15 is considered an insertion or not, it is to be expected that scholars give an interpretation of the coherence of v. 14 and v. 15 at the synchronic level of the text. Of major importance for this interpretation is the meaning of ὡς παιδίον (“as a child”). Mark seeks to create a cohesion between both verses through this comparison (in combination with the expression τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ). Starting from the interpretation of ὡς παιδίον, we would like to present some hypotheses about v. 15.

a. A group of scholars thinks that ὡς παιδίον is an accusative and determines τὴν βασιλείαν: one should accept the kingdom as if it was a child. The influence of W.K.L. Clarke (1929)²⁸ can be seen in the interpretation of for instance W. Stegemann (1980), R.M. Fowler (1991) and P. Lamarche, whose only explanation is “à cause du verset 14”²⁹. More argumentation is given by V.K. Robbins who reacts against Bultmann (and many others) who consider v. 15 an isolated traditional logion. He explains the verse as a “maxim” (*gnomè*), a logical addition to the idea that Jesus is laying hands on the children³⁰. Because of the importance of the meaning of δέχεται, “as a child” cannot mean anything else but “just as one would accept a child”. “Just as it should be a natural response to accept a child into one’s arms rather than to refuse it, so it should be a natural response to accept the kingdom of God with all the benefits and responsibilities that accompany it”³¹.

Robbins rightly states that the addition of the *gnomè* (v. 15) is an illustration of the Markan tendency to bring together Jesus’ words and deeds, while at the same time he recognizes that the place of v. 15 is awkward. It would have been more logic to read it after v. 16: “the maxim exhibits a lack of completely satisfactory integration into the story”. Without minimalizing the importance of Jesus’ deeds compared to his words, it seems a little bit far-fetched to compare the kingdom of God to a child³². Moreover, one wonders what the “natural response” is in light of the disciples’ negative reaction in a society that is not at all child-friendly (see below)³³.

Most authors do not accept the interpretation of the kingdom as a child, a.o. Ambrozic, Best, Chilton, Gundry and Légasse³⁴. The most important argument against this interpretation is that

²⁸ CLARKE, *New Testament Problems*, London, 1929, p. 36-38.

²⁹ Stegemann is followed by Wuckelt (1993). See also LAMARCHE, *L’évangile de Marc*, p. 244; R.M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*, Augsburg, MN, 1991, p. 71-72, 172-173. And more recently P. SPITALER, *Welcoming a Child as a Metaphor for Welcoming God’s Kingdom: A Close Reading of Mark 10.13-16*, in *JSNT* 31 (2009) 423-446, followed by J. LAMBRECHT, *Mark 10,15 and Grammatical Parallels in Mark*, in *ETL* 88 (2012) 489-492.

³⁰ He does so via the literary affinity between Mark 10,16 and Luke 2,28: the verb δέχεται is used because of Jesus “laying hands on the children”. V. 15 contains more elements that can be explained through the context: “as a child” (singular) fits the typical introduction of a general saying with ὅς ἄν...; εἰσέλθῃ connects with ἔρχεσθαι πρὸς in v. 14.

³¹ *Jesus’ Blessing the Children*, p. 59.

³² See the critique by AMBROZIC, *Hidden Kingdom*, p. 153.

³³ For a general critique of Robbins’ (and Crossan’s) article in *Semeia* 29 (1983), see TANNEHILL, *Response to Crossan and Robbins*, in *ibid.*, p. 103-107. Tannehill criticizes the idea that v. 15 came out of v. 16. His commentary on the coherence between v. 14 and v. 15 is interesting: “A shift from a literal to a metaphorical sense of ‘child’ does not prove the point [of a hiatus between the verses], for precisely this combination can increase the tension in a metaphor and so heighten its metaphorical power (cp. ‘mother and brothers’ in Mark 3:31-35)”. But we do not agree that ὡς παιδίον is an apposition of τὴν βασιλείαν (“The disciples must receive the children because the kingdom, too, is ‘like a child’ – little, inconspicuous, unimposing (cp. The kingdom as mustard seed) – and those who do not receive children cannot enter the kingdom”, p. 105).

³⁴ McDONALD, *Receiving and Entering*, p. 329; AMBROZIC, *Hidden Kingdom*, p. 137, n. 6 (on the basis of John 3,3,5); BEST, *Disciples and Discipleship*, p. 95: “... the child was not the model of the Kingdom. ... [I]n the ancient world children were not esteemed and their reception would not be indicative of the honour and respect with which we would expect the Kingdom to be received”; CHILTON, *Pure Kingdom*, p. 84; GUNDRY; LÉGASSE, *Jésus*

Matthew 18,3 and John 3,3.5 do not see how a child could be the metaphor for the kingdom. Being or becoming a child is the condition to enter or to receive the kingdom. In the gospel of Mark it sounds strange as well because of v. 14 where the kingdom is not compared to a child but where the kingdom belongs to children³⁵.

b. Ambrozic thinks v. 15 is “substantially a genuine saying of Jesus”³⁶ and, consistently, he first discusses the meaning of the verse in the teaching of Jesus and then the meaning for the evangelist. To reconstruct the original words of Jesus he supposes that the verb δέχεται originally was followed by something like *ta mustèria tès basileias* and that the evangelist changed it into τὴν βασιλείαν to characterize the disciples as more ignorant and the kingdom as a real gift. According to Ambrozic the comparison ὡς παιδίον should be situated in a context of wisdom teaching in which the primordial condition for good teaching is the recognition by the disciples that they do not understand anything of the kingdom: being open for mystery is the beginning of wisdom. He refers to several rabbinic texts from Strack-Billerbeck³⁷. Jesus speaks like the divine Wisdom³⁸. On the redactional level, three elements in the text should be emphasized. (1) Because of the context (8,21—10,52; especially the redactional text 9,33-37 and 10,35-45), δέχομαι does not only mean “the thought of receiving something as a gratuitous divine gift” (cf. 4,11) but also “the idea of service and subjection to someone who is to be welcomed as being sent by God himself”. (2) ὡς παιδίον means the last of all, someone who is at the service of all. (3) For those who follow Jesus, εἰσερχομαι εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν means “to enter an as yet hidden kingdom”³⁹. In summary, the interpretation of v. 15 is⁴⁰:

Whoever does not joyfully subject himself to the hidden kingdom offered by a hidden Messiah, by accepting it as a free gift of God, will not be allowed to share in its present and future blessings.

According to Best there is an ambiguity in this way of reasoning: becoming a disciple is going as far as serving children, but at the same time the disciples are compared to children⁴¹. But is this really an ambiguity? We will continue this discussion in 3. *Interpreting Mark 10,13-16 in the Context of the Gospel*.

Chilton too makes a distinction between the original and the redactional meaning of v. 15 after the insertion of the verse⁴². Originally, the logion expresses the eagerness and the radicalism of a child that only focuses on the desire to play with a certain object. Chilton points at the non-romantic way children are mentioned in the Logia-source Q (Matthew 11,16-19 // Luke 7,31-35). That explains his translation of δέχεται by “to take” and not by “to receive, to accept”. The logion is not about the simple

et l'enfant, p. 188-189; ID., *Marc*, p. 605; ELTROP, *Denn solchen gehört das Himmelreich*, p. 189, n. 541: “Die matthäische Version verdeutlicht m.E. den Sinngehalt der Markusversion, die ebenfalls davon spricht, daß Kinder die *basileia* annehmen”.

³⁵ See DUPONT, *Les Béatitudes*, II, p. 176.

³⁶ *Hidden Kingdom*, p. 139. V. 14 as well contains “basically authentic tradition” (p. 154).

³⁷ AMBROZIC, *Hidden Kingdom*, p. 149, n. 64.

³⁸ AMBROZIC, *Hidden Kingdom*, p. 151-152. Also the idea of “receiving” the kingdom has parallel texts in the Old Testament. There the verb is used for accepting wisdom: “a willing and understanding acceptance of wisdom in its various manifestations” (p. 144). Reference is made to Lohmeyer, who in his commentary on Mark refers to Prov 8,4-36 as a background for Mark 10,14.

³⁹ In a premarkan stage the opposition was between the actual acceptance of and the future entrance in the kingdom; at a Markan level it is an opposition between the actual acceptance of and entrance in the *hidden* kingdom on the one hand and the future entrance in the completely transparent kingdom on the other.

⁴⁰ See AMBROZIC, *Hidden Kingdom*, p. 154-158, quotation on p. 158.

⁴¹ *Disciples and Discipleship*, p. 95-96.

⁴² CHILTON, *Pure Kingdom*, p. 83-85.

meaning that we should be gentle as children (a “polite passivity”) but about “unruly activity”: “Making the kingdom one’s sole object of interest, the way a child fixes on a toy or on a forbidden object, makes one pure enough to enter the kingdom”⁴³. Only later synoptic redaction changed the meaning of the logion into a baptismal context (Matthew) or into a context of leadership (Mark and Luke). The Gospel of Thomas 22 (within the context of Thomas 21) contains a combination of both the discussion about leadership and baptism.

Légasse as well sees a shift in meaning according to the stage in the evolution of the text⁴⁴. He does not say a lot about the tradition, but on the redactional level accepting the kingdom is parallel to accepting the word of God that is proclaimed (1 Thess 1,6; 2,13; Luke 8,13; Acts 8,14; 11,1; 17,11; James 1,21), especially since Mark is using the same verb for accepting the missionaries and their message (6,11). Becoming a child simply means “to have faith and trust”⁴⁵.

In his article on the so-called *Einlaßsprüche*, F.W. Horn focuses on the *Sitz im Leben Jesu*. He is convinced that the idea of “entering into the kingdom of God” was created by Jesus himself in the polemical context of criticizing the Pharisees (Matthew 23,13 // Luke 11,52)⁴⁶. More specifically, Jesus reacts against their certainty that only living according to the commandments and the rules of the Torah leads to the kingdom. This would exclude particular groups in Israel: sinners, tax collectors, the poor, and children. Jesus has a special preference for them⁴⁷ and they have access to the kingdom (see Luke 6,20-21; Matthew 5,4 and Mark 10,15). Children are those who do not yet know the Torah: “Schließlich wird auch der Einlaßspruch Mk 10,15, der vom Empfangen der βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ ὡς παιδίον spricht, sich auf das zeitgenössische Urteil, daß die gesetzesunkundigen Kinder noch keine Verdienste in der Thora haben, beziehen”⁴⁸.

This survey on tradition and redaction (part 1 and part 2) shows something we all know, namely that the interpretation depends on the method, the context and the perspective one chooses⁴⁹, and on the stratum of the text one focuses on (historical Jesus, tradition, redaction). The examples of interpretation we mentioned until now are mostly using source criticism and redaction criticism. A strange paradox is underlying this approach at the basis of which the artificial distinction between tradition and redaction is created. Scholars first point at tensions in the text that should necessarily lead to the reconstruction of an original verse (however, very often even without mentioning the *Sitz im Leben* of v. 15), and then, they still find a meaningful interpretation at the final

⁴³ *Pure Kingdom*, p. 84. Compare p. 85: “Children are the image of the confusing, grabby, unruly way in which the kingdom is to be greeted”.

⁴⁴ See above, n. xx. Also in *Jésus et l’enfant*, 1969, p. 188.

⁴⁵ Légasse is aware that his exegesis does not intend to give a revolutionary interpretation: “Cette interprétation est du reste suffisamment répandue pour qu’on n’ait pas la prétention de renouveler ici l’exégèse du verset [15]” (*Jésus et l’enfant*, p. 191).

⁴⁶ HORN, *Einlaßsprüche*, p. 193-197. The issue whether Mark 10,15 goes back to the historical Jesus was answered in different ways. Some scholars consider it a reworking while Matthew 18,3 would contain the more original form (Jeremias; J.M. Robinson; Reploh; Gnllka; Horn: “möglicherweise”). A second group of scholars defends the thesis that it is a saying by Jesus (McDonald, p. 332; Lindemann: “vermutlich”; Lührmann). A third one thinks it is a traditional logion that has been inserted in the context of Mark 10,13-16 (Lindemann: again “vermutlich”; et multi alii, see *supra*). Cf. as well *infra*, n. xx.

⁴⁷ Tax collectors and sinners: Mark 2,15-16.17; Matthew 10,3; 11,9 par.; 15,1; the poor: Luke 6,20 par.; 7,22 par.; children: Mark 5,39; 10,15.

⁴⁸ HORN, *Einlaßsprüche*, p. 202.

⁴⁹ The series of contexts could be multiplied. VIA, *Ethics*, p. 129-133, proposes to read Mark as an implicit appeal to adults to conversion (to become as children); he reads the text from an analytical psychological Jungian perspective: “One must move from fixedness back to a restored potentiality which looks anew into the future. The description of this double movement in Mark interprets and is interpreted by the child image” (p. 131). Another archetypological reading is found in BEST, *Jesus and the Ethics*, p. 87-89.

level of the text. But if there is a coherent meaning at the redactional level of the text, why is this quest for an original logion or stratum needed? More than 30 years later we could repeat the conclusion of Gerhard Ringshausen (1986): “Der Überblick über die Forschung ergibt kaum gesicherte Ergebnisse. ... Weltanschauliche Vorgaben überlagern und bestimmen Ergebnisse und Methoden”⁵⁰.

c. We think that ὡς παιδίον is a nominative and that παιδίον should be interpreted in the same way as παιδία in vv. 13-14. In these verses it is not the psychological explanation about children (spontaneous, uncritical, demanding, ...) that is on the agenda because this would mean that the emphasis on the comparison ὡς lays on the psychological mentality of “receiving”. The comparison does not concern the kingdom nor the act of receiving. It is about the way an adult person is looking at himself or herself. He or she has to accept the kingdom of God “as if s/he was a child”⁵¹. A similar use of this function of ὡς can be found in Hebr 13,3; Luke 23,14; 1 Cor 4,7; Wisdom 2,6; Rom 13,13⁵². If one looks at ὡς παιδίον from the perspective of v. 14, it means “as if one would not exist”, “as if one did not have any value”, “as if one was the least”. This is about an objective form of marginalization. This may include aspects like openness or receptiveness, not as a spiritual attitude but as a vital element of a survival: “Rejeté par l’establishment parmi les marginaux de la société religieuse, l’enfant est à la limite plus qu’un mineur: un paria, un méprisé”⁵³.

This interpretation could not be possible without recent insights into the role of children in Antiquity. The gospel of Mark gives particular attention to children⁵⁴ and, as we have seen, psychology is not the right criterion to judge Jesus’ action and words⁵⁵. One should rather consider the place of children in the social and religious judeo-roman-hellenistic context⁵⁶. Ebner has shown that the simple use of the word *paidion* (and not *teknon*) indicates Mark’s interest in the place of children in society⁵⁷, and “[a]s many Christian scholars writing on the family in the New Testament have already noted, the New Testament partly shares the basic patriarchal and androcentric framework of its wider cultural

⁵⁰ *Die Kinder der Weisheit*, p. 41-42. Eltrop as well relativizes firm source critical or redaction critical conclusions, because it is impossible to prove them and because they are not necessary for a socio-cultural approach (*Denn solchen gehört das Himmelreich*, p. 205).

⁵¹ Cf. BUSEMANN, *Die Jüngergemeinde*, p. 121 (following Blinzler). The logion is not about the acceptance of the kingdom as a child would do it. It is about accepting the kingdom as if they were children themselves.

⁵² See BLINZLER, *Kind und Königreich Gottes*, p. 49 en n. 1. In this regard, the following phrase from Blinzler’s article is often quoted: “Gelegentlich wird ὡς aber auch zur Einführung einer objektiv unwirklichen, bloss vorgestellten oder eingebildeten Eigenschaft verwendet...” (49). – A brief remark from Gundry-Volf is interesting as well: “It should be noted that no contrast between Jesus’ teaching and Judaism is implied; rather, Jesus identifies *children within Judaism*, rather than the adult, as the one who exemplifies how to enter the reign of God” (“*To such as these*”, p. 474).

⁵³ SCHLOSSER, *Le règne*, p. 491.

⁵⁴ Zie WOLFF, *Verkündigung*, p. 39, n. 32 (Mc 5,39-41; 7,30; 9,24; 9,36-37); – I will not treat all the passages in Mark about children, but see GUNDRY, *Children in the Gospel of Mark*, p. 146-148.

⁵⁵ According to SCHLOSSER, *Le règne*, psychological interpretations are too much influenced by modern insights.

⁵⁶ SCHLOSSER, *Le règne*, p. 485. See the note above on Murphy, Bailey and Myers. For detailed analysis and more references to studies on children in Antiquity, see e.g., GUNDRY-VOLF, *The Least and the Greatest*, p. 31-36; GUNDRY, *Children in the Gospel of Mark*, p. 162-163; ELTROP, *Kinder im Neuen Testament. Eine sozialgeschichtliche Nachtrage*; MERCER, *Whoever Welcomes One Such Child*, p. 46-49; MURPHY, *Kids and Kingdom*, p. 45-83; FRANCIS, *Adults as Children*, p. 25-60 (The image of the child in the Graeco-Roman world), 61-96 (The image of the child in Judaism). Because of the different sometimes contradictory angles to look at children (religion, society, ethics, family, teaching, spirituality) it is almost impossible to summarize how children were looked upon in Antiquity.

⁵⁷ EBNER, “*Kinderevangelium*” oder markinische Sozialkritik?, p. 317: “Markus hat also im ‘Kinder-evangelium’ ganz bewusst die ‘strukturellen’ Kinder im Blick: die Kinder hinsichtlich ihrer Stellung in der Gesellschaft”.

setting”⁵⁸. Judith Gundry-Volf mentions the positive appreciation of children in the OT⁵⁹ and in first-century Judaism⁶⁰. They are a blessing of God⁶¹ and they receive the sign of the covenant (circumcision)⁶². Of course, children have also their weaknesses and the ‘ideal’ image must be nuanced by a denigrating attitude of adults because of children’s lack of understanding and need of discipline⁶³. In general, she speaks about the “oscillation between positive and negative perspectives on children in both Old Testament-Jewish tradition and the Greco-Roman world”⁶⁴. Although the perspectives on children may indeed vary, it cannot be denied that children are socially inferior to (especially male) adults.

In any case, a comparison of ancient texts leads to the conclusion that Mark 10,13-16 (and by extension Jesus’ attitude in general towards children) is a rather exceptional case⁶⁵. The reaction of the disciples is an indication that the background of the scene presupposes a negative appreciation of children⁶⁶. It is therefore appropriate to presuppose a disparaging vision upon children in the first century *Umwelt*. Children occupied a place in the margins of society. It is not surprising to find a comparison between Mark 10,14-15 and the beatitudes in Matthew and especially in Luke⁶⁷.

3. Interpreting Mark 10,13-16 in the Context of the Gospel

Starting point is that every part of the gospel should be understood against the background of the central message of the gospel⁶⁸. It is not easy to describe in a few sentences what the gospel of Mark is about, since the narrator has written a story that is open for many interpretations. Nevertheless, when reading the prologue of the gospel (1,1-13) and the opening summary (1,14-15), I do not think I am completely wrong when I say that the “message” of the story is the announcement of good news

⁵⁸ GUNDRY-VOLF, *The Least and the Greatest*, p. 31, n. 3.

⁵⁹ GUNDRY-VOLF, “*To such as these belongs the Reign of God*”, 469-480; *The Least and the Greatest*, 31-36.

⁶⁰ GUNDRY, *Children in the Gospel of Mark*, p. 162.

⁶¹ Gen 1,27-28; Ps 127,3-5; 128,3-6; Gen 48,16; 2 Sam 18,18.

⁶² Gen 17,10-14.

⁶³ GUNDRY, *Children in the Gospel of Mark*, p. 162.

⁶⁴ GUNDRY, *Children in the Gospel of Mark*, p. 163; see *The Least and the Greatest*, p. 36: “Children were both appreciated in various aspects and viewed negatively in others”.

⁶⁵ SCHLOSSER, *Le règne*, p. 489: “en regard des autres textes néo-testamentaires et d’abord des témoignages juifs, ils [Mark 9,36-37 par.; 10,13-16 par.] constituent à n’en pas douter des exceptions remarquables”.

⁶⁶ Differently GUNDRY, *Children in the Gospel*, p. 164-168. She proposes “to explain the disciples’ rebuke in terms of development of Mark’s narrative, against the background of Jewish expectations regarding the future eschatological reign of God, Jewish debates about rank in the coming kingdom, and widespread views on seniority in antiquity” (p. 165). I agree with that (but I would stress more the *actual presence* of the kingdom), although I do think that this narrative framework of the disciples’ rebuke is only possible because of the social and religious inferiority of the children. There is no opposition between them. And it is certainly correct to say that Jesus’ “blessing of the children against the wishes of the disciples shows the countercultural power of his teaching that the kingdom of God belongs to little children” (p. 168).

⁶⁷ BLINZLER, *Kind*, p. 51-52; GNILKA, *Markus II*, p. 81; PESCH, *Markusevangelium*, II, p. 132; GRUNDMANN, *Markus*, p. 207; WOLFF, *Verkündigung*, p. 39; BEST, *Jesus and the Ethics*, p. 85; GUNDRY-VOLF, “*To such as these*”, p. 472 (the author refers Crossan’s interpretation of children as “nobodies”); GUNDRY, *Children in the Gospel of Mark*, p. 151-152: Luke as a better parallel to Mark 10,14 “for Luke’s ‘poor,’ Mark’s ‘little children, are simply objectively dependent on God, as suggested by the fact that they do not even come to Jesus but are brought by others (Mark 10:13). The kingdom of God belongs to them without respect to their subjective attitude or activity”. Gundry emphasizes the “need” of children as the most important reason why the kingdom belongs to them.

⁶⁸ See GUNDRY, *Children in the Gospel of Mark*, p. 143: “how does Mark’s material on Jesus and children relate to the purpose of his Gospel?”.

from and about Jesus (the double meaning of the genitive “gospel of Jesus Christ” in 1,1). This good news has to do with Jesus’ announcement of the nearness of the kingdom of God. Although the gospel is “Christological” (i.e., thinking about the relationship Jesus-God), this Christology should always have its basis in what Jesus has said and has done (of course, interpreted through the eyes of different narrators). Jesus announces the βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ as a gift that needs response from the human person. Four months ago, I had the opportunity to present a paper about the role of God in Mark’s gospel⁶⁹. I tried to explain that the Kingdom offered by God through Jesus is not automatically given to the people, but that it is through a positive acceptance of the conditions implied in the gift of the kingdom that people are able to experience the kingdom on earth. The kingdom of God is not a reality outside this world. It is revealed *in* the reality of this world. This co-operation and co-responsibility of human persons is a necessary condition to understand and to live the “mystery of the kingdom” (Mark 4,11). It is expressed in many different ways throughout Mark’s story. It is illustrated by the “belief” of the minor characters; it is announced in Jesus’ parables (4,10-12); it is made clear to the readers through the incomprehension of the disciples; it is openly demanded by Jesus in his teaching of the paradoxes (8,35; 9,35; 10,43-44); it is expressed in the challenge of the open ending; it becomes manifest in the absence of direct interventions in the story by the transcendent God. There are enough indications in Mark 10,13-16 to interpret the passage within this larger context of the coming of the kingdom as a gift of God in combination with the conditions people have to fulfill in order to experience the kingdom. Here are two important ones. (1) It is the only time in the gospel where the expression βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ occurs in two successive verses (v. 14 and v. 15), and (2), the children are blessed by Jesus (v. 16) but the lesson of the story is for the disciples (v. 15).

The least one can say is that there is a relationship between children and the kingdom of God. But how does this relationship look like? The background of this question is the discussion about the kingdom of God, more specifically whether the kingdom is to be seen as a present and ethical reality or as an eschatological promise. I would like to emphasize the real presence of the kingdom on earth, offered by God himself through the words and deeds of Jesus. The kingdom is already given now for those who want to hear and see. The most renewing aspect of Jesus’ message is exactly that: for those who are willing to see the kingdom, it is there. We are very much influenced by the idea that the kingdom is a kind of paradise for “later”, a place (or other reality) where there is no more suffering and pain. The eschatological aspect of the kingdom of God is mostly considered as a kind of second, more complete form of the kingdom that will follow chronologically (but when and where?) upon the imperfect form of the kingdom here on earth. But this is not what Jesus intends to say when he announces the presence of the kingdom. According to him, God’s kingdom is here and now within the earthly reality of every day⁷⁰. This means that it is not free from pain, suffering and death. This perspective on the actual presence of the kingdom implies that we have a responsibility in the realization of this kingdom. Those who see, those who hear, those who understand, those who follow, those who accept the conditions of the kingdom, they already live in the kingdom of God as it is meant by God.

⁶⁹ G. VAN OYEN, *From Messianic Secret to Divine Mystery. How Narratology Makes Sense*, Presidential Address at the *Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense* July 26-28, 2017 (“Reading the Gospel of Mark in the 21st Century. Method and Meaning”).

⁷⁰ See, e.g., Suzanne WATTS HENDERSON, *The “Good News” of God’s Coming Reign: Occupation at a Crossroads*, in *Interpretation* 70 (2016) 145-158, p. 149: “the Gospel’s depiction of God’s coming reign blurs distinction of time and place”, and p. 151: “Mark injects nuanced complexity into any sequential view of God’s coming rule.”; Gerhard LOHFINK, *Jesus von Nazaret – Was er wollte, wer er war*, Freiburg – Basel – Vienna: Herder, 2011, p. 44-65.

The theme of the kingdom is elaborated in the whole of the gospel and especially in the section 8,27—10,52 where it is combined with another theme of the gospel: discipleship. These chapters are structured around the threefold announcement of the passion and the resurrection, each time followed by incomprehension of the disciples, and by teaching of Jesus. Mark 10,13-16 has to be interpreted within this structure. The incomprehension of the disciples is used to emphasize and to develop the theme of serving. The pericope 10,13-16 is placed between the second and the third prediction. The second prediction (9,31) and the incomprehension of the disciples (9,32-34) is followed by an explanation about serving and ruling by means of a little child (9,35-37) and about the radical characteristics of serving (9,41-49). Then follows a pericope about divorce (10,1-12) and about the conditions to enter the kingdom (10,13-16.17-31: being as a child / distancing from richness). The unity of the section is even made stronger since 10,13-16.17-31 contains many echoes of 9,35-49. Here are some of them: “the first and the last” (9,35 and 10,31), *amen* (9,41 and 10,15.29), kingdom (9,47 and 10.14.15.23.24.25), children (9,35-37; 10,13-16). There is a clear evolution in the sequence of the two pericopes Mark 9,35-37 and 10,13-16. Mk 10,13-16 is not simply a repetition of 9,36-37. In 9,36-37 it is said that one has to become a servant and a child is called to illustrate what it means. Mark 10,13-16 contains two messages: it is said that the kingdom belongs to children and that it is not enough for adults (disciples) to receive children (i.e. serving) but that one has to identify oneself with them if one wants to enter the kingdom. It is through the recognition and acceptance that through Jesus’ words and deeds God gives his kingdom to those who are of no value in the “kingdoms” of this world (10,41-44) that one enters the kingdom of God. Because children are a group of marginal persons in society, they are one step ahead on the road to the kingdom. This is not their own merit. They owe it to the one who rules the kingdom.

Jesus’ words and his act by which he announces and brings the kingdom of God to children who do not have any meaningful function in society has enormous implications for the adults who pretend to be candidate disciples. This is more than a symbolic sign. V. 15 explains to the disciples in two simple words - ὡς παιδίον – how they should be themselves when they accept the kingdom. It is not the pious or naïve attitude of children that is demanded, but the solidarity with those in the margin of society. This attitude of the adult disciples is necessary in order to bring the kingdom to the real children. In two simple words the whole theme of power and authority is turned upside down. Martin Ebner has shown in a convincing way that the section 9,31-10,31 (with 9,36-37 and 10,13-16) is about the *social* consequences of following Jesus to the cross⁷¹. I would go so far as to say that the gift of the kingdom to the children becomes only real if the adult disciples are able to live according to the countercultural rules of the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God announced by Jesus, religion is only true when it is lived in practice. In this sense, v. 15 is not at all a misplaced insertion, but forms a close unity with v. 14. V. 14 says that the kingdom of God belongs to children (people without power and authority) and in v. 15 it is said that those who are not able to abandon their powerful positions (wealth 10,17-31; abuse of power 10,41-45) will not receive the kingdom⁷². Those who do not leave behind their worldly power and authority become an obstacle to those who need the kingdom of God (v. 13: οἱ δὲ μαθηταὶ ἐπετίμησαν αὐτοῖς). They have, on the contrary, to embrace them and to bless them like Jesus does⁷³.

⁷¹ EBNER, “*Kinderevangelium*”, p. 320-330.

⁷² ELTROP, *Denn solchen gehört das Himmelreich*, p. 188, n. 536. See also KERTELGE, *Markusevangelium* (Neue Echter Bibel), p. 99: “Kinder werden von Jesus nicht nur gern gesehen und angenommen, sie werden sogar zu einem vorbildlichen Maßstab für die Bewerber zum Gottesreich. Beide Gesichtspunkte verdrängen einander nicht in dieser kurzen Erzählung”.

⁷³ Many authors refer to Derrett to explain the meaning of the blessing within against the Jewish background: DERRETT, *Why Jesus Blessed the Children (Mk 10:13-16 par.)*, in *NT 25* (1983) 1-18; = *Id.*, *Studies in*

We have reached the most fundamental question of Mark's gospel. Why would one "believe" the double message of Mark 10,13-16? In fact, there is no mathematically proven answer to that question. It is a matter of "believe in the gospel" and of "conversion" (Mark 1,14-15). The proof of the pudding is in the eating. In the conclusion of his article on *markinische Sozialkritik*, Martin Ebner says that Mark 10,13-16 challenges the readers with one pertinent "question of conscience": "How is it possible... that the social question and the question of the 'limits of status' in early Christian communities (and in the communities nowadays) never have been put in the spotlight?"⁷⁴. We began this paper by asking if Mark 10,13-16 has any relevance for the question of gender in Mark. We discovered that in the perspective of Jesus, respect for any human being – child, woman, man – is only possible if one radically changes one's own perspective on power and authority in the sense of service and respect for the children and those who are as them⁷⁵. πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς καὶ ἤγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ (Mark 1,15).

the New Testament IV, Leiden, 1986, 111-128. See also MEIER – LEHMEIER, *Kinder*, in CRÜSEMANN et al. (eds), *Sozialgeschichtliches Wörterbuch zur Bibel*, Gütersloh, 2009, 293-294, p. 293: "Die 'Kindersegnung' (Mk 10,13-15 par) is nicht als besondere Würdigung der Kindheit zu lesen, sondern als Hervorhebung von Rechtlosigkeit und Abhängigkeit (Ebner 319)." Reference to EBNER, "*Kinderevangelium*" oder *markinische Sozialkritik*?

⁷⁴ EBNER, "*Kinderevangelium*", p. 336: "Wie konnte es geschehen... ohne dass die soziale Frage und die Problematik der Statusgrenzen in der Praxis der urchristlichen Gemeinden (wie der Gemeinden unserer Tage) deutlich in den Blick kam?"

⁷⁵ The responsibility of those who say they are following Jesus today is to look in their place where they can find the "children" and "those such as them". What Rogerson says about the OT, is true as well for the NT. Anyone "who wishes to use what is said about the family in the Old Testament in order to draw lessons for today's society cannot do this at the level of the letter"; John ROGERSON, *The Family and Structures of Grace in the Old Testament*, in BARTON (ed.), *The Family in Theological Perspective*, 1996, 25-42, p. 41. I end this paper with a long quotation from Bailey's article (from 1996!) in which he is actualizing the meaning of Mark 10,13-16: "In light of these patterns and the plight of many children today in our society and around the world, Jesus' speech and action in Mark 10:13-16 are especially challenging. Jesus invites his followers to rid themselves of a naive notion of childhood by entering the space of the 'vulnerable child' (the one often exploited by adults). What does it mean to be in solidarity with the most vulnerable (thus Mark) and to take on the characteristic of the vulnerable (thus Matthew and Luke)? Since Jesus' kingdom saying does not promote human passivity, Christians must risk entering the sphere of the vulnerable child. In doing this, will we not sense our own vulnerability and discover the kingdom as an experience of God's graciousness for the weak and vulnerable? Mark 10:13-16 concludes by describing Jesus' embrace the little children and his blessing touch. Does not this Markan text invite us Christians to become incarnations of Jesus' embrace and blessing for today's vulnerable children? And in so doing, will we not also experience Jesus' warm embrace and blessing on us and our communities of compassion?" (*Experiencing the Kingdom as a Little Child*, p. 66-67).

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