

# 'Do you hear what these are saying?' (Mt 21:16): Children and their role within Matthew's narrative

**Author:**Dorothy J. Weaver<sup>1,2</sup> **Affiliations:**<sup>1</sup>Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Harrisonburg, VA, United States<sup>2</sup>Department of New Testament Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa**Project Research Registration:****Project Leader:** A.G. van Aarde **Project Number:** 2334682**Description:**

Prof. Dr Weaver is participating in the research project, 'Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics', directed by Prof. Dr Andries van Aarde, Post Retirement Professor and Senior Research Fellow in the Dean's Office, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

**Corresponding author:**Dorothy J. Weaver,  
weaverdj@emu.edu**Dates:**

Received: 24 Apr. 2019

Accepted: 25 June 2019

Published: 19 Nov. 2019

**How to cite this article:**

Weaver, D.J., 2019, "'Do you hear what these are saying?'" (Mt 21:16): Children and their role within Matthew's narrative', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75(4), a5513. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i4.5513>

**Copyright:**

© 2019. The Authors.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

**Read online:**

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

This article sketches the broad outlines of Matthew's ironic portrayal of children, examining first the 'lower level' of the narrative (i.e. the way things appear to be in the everyday world) and then the 'upper level' of the narrative (i.e. the way things truly are from the 'God's-eye' perspective). When viewed from the 'lower level' of Matthew's narrative, the everyday circumstances of children reflect the nurture of their parents as well as significant challenges: debilitating physical conditions, serious illnesses, military violence and premature childhood death. In addition, children occupy the lowest rung on the 1st-century Mediterranean social ladder, a status they share with slaves. But on the 'upper level' of his narrative, from the 'God's-eye' perspective, Matthew turns everyday reality for children on its head in ironic fashion. Emmanuel, the 'God who is with us', appears as a 'child' who has just 'been born' and who exhibits all the powerlessness and vulnerability of such a 'child'. In a violent showdown between 'King Herod' and the one 'who has been born king of the Jews', it is Herod, the powerful ruler, who dies, while the vulnerable 'child' ends up safely in Nazareth. Throughout his ministry, Jesus heals children along with adults. To the apparent chagrin of his disciples, Jesus lays hands on children in an act of blessing. He commends the messianic praises of children, in contrast to the outrage of the Jewish leadership. Moreover, Jesus proclaims that it is 'to such as these [children] that the kingdom of heaven belongs'.

**Keywords:** child; children; irony; ironic; vulnerable; vulnerability; social; societal; status; kingdom of heaven; power; powerful; powerless; lower level; upper level; narrative.

## Introduction

To examine the role of children within Matthew's<sup>1</sup> narrative is to engage a question regularly addressed on a text-by-text basis, but until recently seldom examined inclusively as a focal theme throughout Matthew's gospel (White 2008:353–374).<sup>2</sup> Reasons for this lack appear obvious.

Firstly, Matthew, like his canonical counterparts, focuses predominantly on the story of the adult Jesus (Mt 3:13–28:20) and his interactions with his adult disciples and other adults. Accordingly, children are less visible than adults within Matthew's narrative. So, they do not present themselves as obviously for thematic attention as do the major Matthean actors.

Further, the social status of children in the 1st-century Mediterranean world reflected within Matthew's gospel is at the bottom of the social ladder, whether within the Gentile and/or Pagan community or within the Hebrew or Jewish community. As Samjung Kang-Hamilton puts it, 'In the Greco-Roman world of the first century children were the least powerful people socially, politically, and economically. They were considered weak, ignorant, irrational, unformed, and unpredictable' (Kang-Hamilton 2018:29). Within Matthew's narrative, these widespread and negative perceptions of children are well known to Jesus (Mt 18:1–4) and present among Jesus' own disciples (Mt 19:13b). Accordingly, it is hardly surprising that children occupy little textual space within Matthew's narrative and are less frequently the focus of thematic attention.

What is surprising, however – precisely in light of Matthew's narrative focus on adults and his clear portrayal of 1st-century Mediterranean cultural biases against children – is the ironic and counter-cultural portrait that Matthew ultimately paints of children, even as they remain minor

1. In this article, I use traditional nomenclature for the author of the first gospel. All biblical citations reflect the New Revised Standard Version and all references refer to the gospel of Matthew, except where otherwise indicated.

2. This article does not focus on adult children within Matthew's narrative: 4:21–22; 8:20–22; 10:21, 35–37; 12:27; 13:54–58; 17:24–26; 20:20–28; 21:33–41; 22:1–14. Nor does this article focus on adjectival or metaphorical references to children (thus 'son/children of . . .'): 5:9, 45; 8:12; 9:15; 13:38; 23:15, 31.

**Note:** HTS 75th Anniversary Maake Masango Dedication.

characters within his narrative.<sup>3</sup> This article sketches the broad outlines of Matthew's ironic portrayal of children, examining first the 'lower level' of the narrative (i.e. the way things appear to be in the everyday world) and then the 'upper level' of the narrative (i.e. the way things truly are from the 'God's-eye' perspective).<sup>4</sup>

## 'If your child asks for bread' (Mt 7:9–10)

### Children in the everyday world of Matthew's narrative

Matthew's portrait of children in the everyday world of his 1st-century Mediterranean narrative spans a range of life experiences from mundane normalcy to profound trauma. These life experiences begin before birth and extend to untimely childhood death, with a variety of intervening childhood experiences. Matthew's narrative connects children prominently with their parents, both mothers and fathers, in the events of conception, gestation and birth. Women 'conceive' children<sup>5</sup> and 'have [children] in the womb'.<sup>6</sup> Women then 'bear' the children<sup>7</sup> and 'nurse' their infants.<sup>8</sup> Men, for their part, 'father' their children<sup>9</sup> and 'name' them after birth (cf. Brown 1979:139).<sup>10</sup> For Matthew's narrative, these events, whether associated with women or with men, are of signal importance. Within the 1st-century Jewish world of Matthew's story, 'raising up offspring' (22:24, DJW) to carry on the father's line and name is so crucial that levirate marriage, instituted hundreds of years before in the law of Moses (Dt 25:5–10), is still practised in the case of women whose husbands die childless (22:23–28). And the crucial significance of family line for Matthew's own narrative appears prominently in the 42-generation genealogy that opens the narrative and moves from Abraham (1:1, 2, 17), the 'father' of the Jewish people (3:9), to its genealogical climax in the birth of 'Jesus [who is called] Messiah' (1:1, 16; cf. 1:17), the protagonist of Matthew's story.

Following birth, the children of Matthew's narrative are frequently associated with their mothers,<sup>11</sup> whether that be in

3.The child Jesus (1:1, 16, 17, 18–25; 2:1–23) is the exception here.

4.This two-level approach is drawn from Muecke (1969:19–20), who defines irony as a 'double-layered or two-storey phenomenon' in which 'the lower level is the situation either as it appears to the victims of the irony . . . or as it is deceptively presented by the ironist' and 'the upper level is the situation as it appears to the observer or the ironist'.

5.Thus, *en gastri echousa*: 1:23.

6.Thus, *en gastri echousa*: 1:18; 24:19, DJW; cf. *ek koilias mētros* 'from the womb of the mother': 19:12, DJW.

7.Thus, *tiktō*: 1:21, 23, 25; *gennaō*: 2:1, 4; 19:12; 26:24). Or, passively phrased, children 'are born' to and by their mothers (2:1, 2, 4; 19:12; 26:24). Note as well the instances within Matthew's patrilineal genealogy (1:3, 5a, 5b, 6) where men 'father' [*egennēsen*] children through the agency of [ek] women.

8.Thus, *thēlazō*: 21:16; 24:19.

9.Thus, *gennaō*: 1:2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16; cf. 1:20, DJW.

10.Thus, *kaleō to onoma*: 1:23, 25. In the case of Joseph, however, the act of 'naming' the child is likewise an act of adoption, because the genealogical line is abruptly broken between Joseph and Jesus (1:16b; cf. 1:2–16a).

11.Thus, *meta . . . tēs mētros autou*: 2:11; cf. 2:13, 14, 20, 21; 14:21; 15:38; 18:25. See also 19:13, where the children 'being brought' to Jesus are probably brought there by their mothers.

'the house' (2:11; cf. 2:13, 14, 20, 21), outdoors in the midst of crowds (14:21; 15:38) or at indeterminate locations (18:25). Undesignated individuals, very likely mothers,<sup>12</sup> seek out special blessing for their children, as they bring them to Jesus 'in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray' (19:13a; cf. 19:15a). But fathers care for children as well. While the women of Matthew's narrative 'grind at the mill' (24:41) and 'mix' yeast and flour into bread dough (13:33), Jesus nevertheless portrays 'sons' as asking their 'fathers' for bread and fish (7:9, 10).<sup>13</sup> And, as Jesus notes, these fathers respond as requested, providing for their sons (7:11).

As children grow through childhood and into adolescence, they take individual initiatives or carry out the commands of their parents. On the one hand, children play together, often imitating the activities of adult life.

Jesus describes an imitative game where children enact pretend weddings and funerals. But if their playmates do not respond according to signal, the children then '[sit] in the marketplaces and [call] to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn"' (11:16b–17).<sup>14</sup> Matthew likewise depicts children in the temple calling out 'Hosanna to the Son of David' (21:15b) in response to Jesus' healing acts (21:14–15a) and in clear imitation of the messianic praises of the crowds who have just welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem (21:9 // Ps 118:26). For her part, the daughter of Herodias, Herod the tetrarch's consort (14:3–4), dances for Herod and his guests at a royal birthday banquet given in his honour (14:6).

But if children play, they also work, very likely from childhood onward<sup>15</sup> and frequently in apprenticeship to their parents. Fathers order sons to assist in vineyard labour (21:28). Sons join their fathers in the family fishing business (4:21; cf. 20:20; 26:37; 27:56). Within his 'hometown' (13:54), Jesus is identified by the carpentry work of his father (13:55a). And adolescent women work as 'servant-girls' within the homes of the elite and powerful.<sup>16</sup>

But even as Matthew portrays the parental nurture of children, he also depicts the profound vulnerability of children throughout their infancy and childhood. Infants within the womb and nursing babies experience potentially life-threatening dangers (cf. 24:19), when their mothers need to flee their homes – perhaps in winter, perhaps on the sabbath (24:20) – in times of social turmoil, persecution and unprecedented 'suffering' (24:9–11, 21). Children 2 years old and younger face life-threatening risks (2:13–15,

12.The identity of these individuals lies hidden behind the passive verb 'were being brought' (*prosēnechthēsan*: 19:13a).

13.Thus, *anthrōpos* and *huios*, in context 'father' and 'son': 7:9; cf. 7:10.

14.Carter (2000:254) speaks similarly about children's imitative play elsewhere in the Greco-Roman world.

15.The 'sons' whom Matthew's narrative associates with working roles, however, are clearly adult (4:21; 21:28; cf. 13:55a).

16.Thus, 26:69 and 26:71, where first one 'servant-girl' (*paidiskē*) and then 'another servant-girl' (*allē*) – both at the house of Caiaphas the high priest (cf. 26:57) and both clearly Caiaphas' 'servant-girls' – confront Peter verbally.

19–20; cf. 2:22) and brutal massacre (2:16–18) at the instigation of a jealous and conspiratorial king (2:7–8, 12, 13, 19–20) and at the hands of his military henchmen (cf. 2:16).<sup>17</sup> Children of indeterminate age – in this case presumably Gentile and not Jewish, because of Jewish prohibitions – are vulnerable to be sold into slavery for the debts of their fathers (18:25).<sup>18</sup> According to an indisputably ‘hard saying’ of Jesus, children are even vulnerable to the physical absence of their parents, when these parents ‘leave’ their families behind in order to ‘follow’ Jesus (19:29; cf. 19:27a).<sup>19</sup>

Nor are children immune to physical disabilities, seriously debilitating conditions and life-threatening illnesses. Jesus refers to eunuchs ‘who have been born thus from the womb of their mother’ (19:12, DJW).<sup>20</sup> Matthew depicts a girl who is ‘seriously demon-possessed’ (15:22, DJW)<sup>21</sup> and a boy who is ‘epileptic’ (17:15a)<sup>22</sup> and ‘suffers terribly’ (17:15b),<sup>23</sup> often falling into fire or water (17:15c/d). Children likewise experience illnesses that lead to premature childhood death (9:18; cf. 9:24).<sup>24</sup>

The role of parents within Matthew’s narrative, accordingly, reaches well beyond daily activities of infant or child care and the preparation and provision of food. Desperate parents, both fathers and mothers, seek healing or restored life for their children by bringing them to Jesus’ disciples (17:14–16) or to Jesus himself (17:17–20).

When necessary, these parents come to Jesus on their own to plead their child’s case (9:18–19, 23–26; 15:21–28). Joseph travels to a foreign country and then to a distant province of the homeland, together with ‘the child and his mother’, to protect the child from imminent and deadly political threat (2:13–15, 19–23). A socially prominent family<sup>25</sup> goes into full-scale mourning following the death of their daughter, engaging flute players to lead a crowd of professional mourners (9:23, 25).<sup>26</sup> The mothers of Bethlehem lament inconsolably over the deaths of their infants and toddlers in a politically motivated military massacre (2:16–18).

17.The oblique comment that Herod ‘sent and killed’ these children clearly implies a military action.

18.On 1st-century Mediterranean slavery practices, see Keener (2009:459) and Luz (2001:472).

19.On the obvious challenges of this ‘hard saying’, see Murphy (2013:119–120) and Sim (1994:380–383).

20.Thus, *hoitines ek koilias mētros egennēthēsan houtōs*.

21.Thus, *kakōs daimonizetai*.

22.Thus, *selēniazetai*.

23.Thus, *kakōs paschei*.

24.Thus, *teleutaō* (9:18), *apothnēskō* (9:24).

25.Matthew identifies the head of this family as a ‘leader’ (9:18: *archōn*, DJW), within this Jewish context a ‘leader of the synagogue’ (thus 9:18, NRSV; cf. Mk 5:22).

26.As Keener (2014:69) notes ‘Tradition preserved in the rabbis insisted on several professional women mourners for the funeral of even the poorest person; the funeral of a member of a prominent family like this one would have many mourners’.

But alongside other childhood challenges, Matthew likewise depicts childhood vulnerability to the evil influences of parents themselves (14:1–12), those whose parental task is precisely to protect their children from such ‘evil’.<sup>27</sup> For her part, the daughter of Herodias is first enticed into evil thoughts by the lavish promise of Herod to ‘grant her whatever she might ask’ (14:7) because she has ‘pleased’ him with her dancing (14:6).<sup>28</sup> Then she is ‘prompted’ into evil action by the conspiratorial encouragement of her mother, Herodias (14:8a).

The subsequent actions – the daughter’s demand for the head of John the Baptist (14:8b), the decapitation (14:9–10), the delivery of John’s head to the daughter on a platter (14:11a) and her delivery of John’s head to her mother (14:11b) – reflect the grotesque outcome of childhood vulnerability to the evil influences of parental figures, whether male or female, in a child’s life.<sup>29</sup>

Clearly, the children of Matthew’s narrative lead lives which reflect not only the presence of parental love and care but also vulnerability to all sorts of evils, whether of natural causes or of human instigation. Moreover, parents are widely depicted as those who provide nurture and daily support for their children in the everyday world and who take urgent and extraordinary actions for their children in times of health emergencies, death threats and death itself.<sup>30</sup>

But the collective societal status of children *as children* within the narrative world of Matthew’s gospel nevertheless remains at the bottom of the social ladder. When Jesus’ disciples ask him who is ‘the greatest in the kingdom of heaven’ (18:1), Jesus places a child in their midst and announces, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you turn and become like children,<sup>31</sup> you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’ (18:3, DJW). The implications of Jesus’ words are unmistakable. Firstly, Jesus’ call for the disciples to ‘turn’ establishes that Jesus’ disciples do not reflect the perspectives or life practices that Jesus is about to set forth. Secondly, Jesus’ call to ‘become like children’ suggests both that Jesus’ disciples do not identify with children and that children as a group reflect the direct opposite of the societal ‘greatness’ that Jesus’ disciples seek.<sup>32</sup>

27.See 6:9–13, where Jesus teaches his disciples to pray to their ‘Father in heaven’ (6:9), ‘Rescue us from evil/the evil one’ (6:13, DJW; *tou poneros* can be viewed either as neuter [‘evil’] or masculine [‘the evil one’]).

28.The concept of sexual ‘evil’, here the sexual abuse of an adolescent girl, likewise looms large in this situation. As Luz (2001:307) notes, ‘Of course, the readers will have their own ideas about the morals at Herod’s court when they hear that a princess plays a role in this men’s banquet that courtesans ordinarily played’. See Carter (2000:303) who refers to Corley (1993:24–79) in noting that ‘women who attended public meals, traditionally male events, were commonly understood to provide sex whether this was indeed the case or not’.

29.See 27:25, where ‘the people as a whole’ call out to Pilate, ‘His blood be on us and on our children [emphasis mine]’, thus implicating their children along with themselves in accountability for the death of Jesus. But see Carter (2000:528–529) for a sturdy repudiation of ‘textually unsustainable and morally and religiously repugnant’ anti-Jewish readings of this verse.

30.Herod and Herodias (14:1–12) are the exception here.

31.Thus, *ean mē straphēte kai genēthē hōs ta paidia*.

32.See 20:20–28, where Jesus rebukes his disciples’ search for the best positions within ‘[his] kingdom’ (20:21, 23) by associating ‘being great [*meγas*]/being first [*prōtos*]’ (20:26a, 27a) with ‘being servant [*diakonos*]/being slave [*doulos*]’ (20:26b, 27b).

Jesus then identifies ‘the greatest in the kingdom of heaven’ with those who ‘become humble’ like the child Jesus has set within their midst (18:4). Humility is not a desirable character trait within the ‘honour or shame’ culture that Jesus’ disciples inhabit. Accordingly, Jesus’ frontal assault on the ‘honour or shame’ instincts of his disciples is unmistakable.

But Jesus’ disciples are slow learners. As Jesus and his disciples continue their journey towards Jerusalem (cf. 16:21; 17:22–23; 20:17–19), unidentified people, very likely mothers, bring their children to Jesus ‘in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray’ (19:13a; cf. 19:15a). But Jesus’ disciples, far from demonstrating the ‘childlike’ character espoused by Jesus (18:4), instead ‘speak sternly’ to these people (19:13b)<sup>33</sup> in an obvious attempt to prevent them from interrupting the far more important work of Jesus. The message which their rebuke conveys is that children are not important in society and are accordingly not worthy of Jesus’ attention, his touch or his prayers.

Accordingly, when viewed from the ‘lower level’ of Matthew’s narrative, both the everyday circumstances and the societal status of children within the 1st-century Mediterranean world depicted by Matthew reflect significant challenges. Children are conceived, brought into the world, fed and nurtured by their parents. They are crucial to ongoing family line and genealogy. They play and work in the everyday world of their parents.

At the same time, they face profound threats. Children are the objects of political intrigue and military violence. They are vulnerable to the evil influences of powerful parents and likewise vulnerable to potential sexual abuse by powerful adults. They face the potential physical absence of their parents. They are susceptible to birth defects, debilitating physical conditions, serious illnesses and premature childhood death. And they occupy the lowest rung on the social ladder of the 1st-century Mediterranean world, a status that Jesus recognises but that Jesus’ disciples neither respect nor emulate. Such is Matthew’s ‘lower level’ portrait of the children within his narrative.

## ‘To such as these’ (19:14b)

### Children and the ‘God’s-eye’ perspective of Matthew’s narrative

But even as children represent one of the least important and least powerful social groups on the ‘lower level’ of Matthew’s 1st-century Mediterranean narrative,<sup>34</sup> Matthew the narrator and Jesus, Matthew’s protagonist, turn everyday reality for children on its head in deeply ironic fashion on the ‘upper level’ of the story. This ironic, ‘God’s-eye’ perspective on the true significance of children emerges at the outset of Matthew’s narrative (1:1–17, 18–25) and creates a bright line

33.Thus, *epetimēsan*.

34.They share this status with ‘servants’ and ‘slaves’. ‘See footnote 32 above’.

throughout the story all the way to the mountaintop in Galilee (28:16–20). And the ironies of Matthew’s and Jesus’ portrayals of children reach well beyond the circumstantial details of Matthew’s narrative to the profoundly theological message of the first gospel.

At its theological heart, the Gospel of Matthew confesses that in Jesus of Nazareth, God has come to be ‘with us’. This central theological motif stretches throughout Matthew’s text from the birth of Jesus ‘Emmanuel . . . God is with us’ (1:23) to Jesus’ final and climactic words to his disciples on the mountain in Galilee: ‘And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age’ (28:20b).<sup>35</sup> Kingsbury (1975:137) identifies the ‘God with us’ confession of 1:23 as ‘Matthew’s thumbnail definition of his Son-of-God christology’. Luz (2007:122) notes that this wide-spanning motif ‘[creates] an inclusion which marks a basic theme: the presence of the exalted Lord with his community shows him as Immanuel, God with us’.

But what is most crucial about this ‘God with us’ motif for the present article lies ‘hidden’ right on the surface of the text. The God who comes to be ‘with us’ in Matthew’s narrative – whose human origins from the body of Mary (1:18, 20, 21, 23, 25) are likewise divine origins ‘from the Holy Spirit’ (1:18, 20) – first appears not as a powerful or self-important adult but rather as a ‘child’<sup>36</sup> who has just ‘been born’<sup>37</sup> and who exhibits all the powerlessness and vulnerability conveyed by that status.<sup>38</sup>

This ‘child’ cannot speak for himself, cannot act on his own and cannot defend himself against physical threats, no matter how urgent or deadly. Instead, Jesus ‘the child’ is completely at the mercy of others, whether it be those who ‘seek to destroy’ him,<sup>39</sup> those who come from distant countries to ‘pay him homage’<sup>40</sup> or those who go into exile from homeland (2:13–15) and hometown (2:19–23) to protect him from life-threatening danger. Yet, ironically, it is this powerless, vulnerable ‘child’ who introduces Matthew’s reader(s) to the God who is ‘with’ God’s people (1:23).

With this introduction, Matthew serves notice that the image of children within the upcoming narrative will crucially and ironically transform normal 1st-century Mediterranean cultural expectations regarding children.

God has now come to be ‘with’ God’s people (1:23) in the person of a powerless, vulnerable ‘child’, one who represents the very least of society. Conversely, this same ‘child’,

35.Thus, *meth hēmōn*: 1:23; *meth hymōn*: 17:17; 26:29; 28:20; cf. *en mesō autōn*: 18:20. As Luz (2007:121) notes, ‘Allusions to God’s being-with-us permeate the whole Gospel (17:17; 18:20; 26:19)’.

36.Thus, *paidion*: 2:8, 9, 11, 13a, 13b, 14, 20a, 20b, 21.

37.Thus, *ho techtheis*: 2:2; cf. *tiktō*: 1:21, 23, 25; *gennaō*: 2:1, 4.

38.White (2008:358) cites Maas (2000:460) and Moltmann (2000:592) when he notes: ‘Both writers stress the fact that [in Matthew 2] we are not encountering simply incarnation (that is, God in human form) but the Creator or God-self in the Christ child’.

39.Thus, *zētein* . . . *tou apolesai*: 2:13; cf. *hoi zētountes tēn psychēn*: 2:20.

40.Thus, *proskynēsai*: 2:2; *prosekynēsan*: 2:11; cf. *proskynēsō*: 2:8.

powerless and vulnerable as he is, has taken on nothing less than the character, identity and mission of the divine, even as his birth to Mary is 'from the Holy Spirit' (1:18, 20) and even as he receives the name 'Jesus', identifying his divine calling to 'save his people from their sins' (1:21).<sup>41</sup> These two correlated God or child ironies at the outset of Matthew's narrative provide theological grounding for the persistently ironic portrait of children within Matthew's story as viewed from the 'God's-eye' perspective. Crucial facets of this ironic portrait emerge throughout Matthew's narrative.

### Power and powerlessness redefined: Children and the Roman empire

Arguably, central and strategic to the narrative rhetoric of Matthew's gospel is his persistent and ironic redefinition of power and its correlate, powerlessness (see Weaver 2017). This redefinition begins early in the narrative with Matthew's account of Herod and 'the child' (2:1–23) (Weaver 2017: 30–34). This account sets 'King Herod',<sup>42</sup> the client king ruling Judea on behalf of Rome, against one who has royal titles – 'king of the Jews',<sup>43</sup> 'messiah'<sup>44</sup> and 'ruler who is to shepherd my [= God's] people Israel'<sup>45</sup> – but who appears within this account predominantly as a powerless, vulnerable 'child',<sup>46</sup> whose life is endangered virtually from birth (2:1; cf. 2:13, 20). At first glance, things do not bode well for 'the child'.

Herod not only has the title of 'king' but also the real-world powers that accompany this title. Herod has political power, with access both to the highest echelons of the Jewish religious community, 'the chief priests and scribes of the people' (2:4),<sup>47</sup> and to their crucial scriptural knowledge (2:5–6). He also has access to Gentile 'astrologers from the east' (2:1; Dorothy Jean Weaver [DJW]) and to their specialised knowledge of the stars (2:1–2, 7, 16). Herod has power of influence. His personal moods infect 'all Jerusalem with him' (2:3a; cf. 2:3b). Herod is politically shrewd and instantly decisive. He recognises political threats immediately and takes expeditious actions to eliminate them.<sup>48</sup> Herod has power of command. When he 'calls' people, they come (2:4, 7)<sup>49</sup> and when he 'sends' people, they go (2:8–9, 16).<sup>50</sup> Herod has military power, with soldiers available to carry out his commands (2:16).<sup>51</sup> Most crucially, Herod has power of life and death over his subjects and can order their destruction at will (2:16–18).

41.Thus, *sōsei ton laon autou apo tōn harmartiōn autōn*. Cf. 9:2, 5, 6; 12:31; 26:28.

42.Thus, 2:1, 3; cf. 'Herod': 2:7, 12, 15, 16, 19, 22; 'the king': 2:9; 'those who were seeking the child's life': 2:20.

43.Thus, *basileus tōn loudaiōn*: 2:2; cf. 21:5; 25:34, 40; 27:11, 29, 37, 42.

44.Thus, *christos*: 2:4; cf. 1:1, 16, 17, 18.

45.Thus, *hēgoumenos hostis poimanei ton laon mou Israēl*: 2:6b//Mic 5:2.

46.Thus, *paidion*: 2:8, 9, 11, 13a, 13b, 14, 20a, 20b, 21.

47.See 16:21; 20:18; 21:15; 26:3.

48.Thus, 2:1–2 cf. 2:4–6; 2:4–6 cf. 2:7–8; 2:16a; cf. 2:16b.

49.Thus, *synagagōn* or 'call together': 2:4; *kalesas* or 'call for': 2:7.

50.Thus, *pempsas*: 2:8; *aposteilas*: 2:16.

51.Reference to 'soldiers' disappears within the elliptical phrase 'sent and killed' (*aposteilas kai aneilan*: 1:16). See 22:7, where Jesus speaks about the king who 'sent his troops' (*pempsas ta strateumata*) to execute a military operation.

This is the figure who wills the death of Jesus 'the child' (2:13, 20; cf. 2:8). On the 'lower level' of Matthew's story, catastrophe looms large. Not only does Herod appear to have all the power he needs to carry out his evil designs, but even the 'astrologers from the east' are drawn, temporarily and unknowingly, into Herod's deadly scheme to destroy his political rival, 'the child' (2:7–8; cf. 2:9). Surely, disaster is imminent for 'the child'.

But instead, it is Herod, the demonstrably powerful character, who ends up the victim of divine irony, as his evident power is ultimately proven powerless. This irony unfolds on an 'upper level' of the story of which Herod knows nothing. Each time he attempts to 'destroy the child' (2:13; cf. 2:20),<sup>52</sup> he discovers – or, even more ironically, does not discover – that forces he cannot imagine are blocking his way. The astrologers receive a 'dream' that 'warns' them not to travel back to Herod<sup>53</sup> and sends them home by another route (2:12). An angel of the Lord warns Joseph 'in a dream'<sup>54</sup> to 'take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt', away from Herod, his soldiers and the massacre in Bethlehem (2:13–14). While Herod lives, Joseph and his family remain safely in Egypt at the angel's command (2:15). But when Herod dies, this angel of the Lord appears once again to Joseph 'in a dream'<sup>55</sup> and calls him back to 'the land of Israel' together with his family (2:19–21). Here, Joseph has yet another 'dream' that 'warns' him of evident threat<sup>56</sup> and sends him to Nazareth in Galilee, beyond the grasp of Herod's son, Archelaus (2:22–23).

But of all these 'dreams' and angelic 'warnings', Herod knows nothing. All Herod knows is that he is 'frightened' by the word of a rival monarch (2:3)<sup>57</sup> and 'infuriated'<sup>58</sup> when he learns that the astrologers have 'tricked'<sup>59</sup> him (2:16a). As he instigates the massacre of the children in Bethlehem (2:16b), he clearly has no idea that he will fail once again to achieve his singular goal of 'destroying the child' (2:13; cf. 2:20).<sup>60</sup> In the end, it is Herod himself, the once powerful 'king', who lies dead (2:15, 19, 20),<sup>61</sup> while Jesus, the powerless, vulnerable 'child' is alive and well in Nazareth of Galilee (2:22–23). With this crucial reversal, Matthew redefines both power and powerlessness and establishes an ironic relationship between powerless children and the manifest powers of the Roman Empire.

52.Thus, *zētein . . . tou apolesai*: 2:13; cf. *hoi zētountes tēn psychēn*: 2:20.

53.Thus, *chrēmatisthentes kat'onar*: 2:12.

54.Thus, *kat'onar*: 2:13.

55.Thus, *kat'onar*: 2:19.

56.Thus, *chrēmatistheis . . . kat'onar*: 2:22.

57.Thus, *etarachthē*.

58.Thus, *ethymōthē lian*.

59.Thus, *enepaichthē*.

60.Thus, *zētein tou paidion tou apolesai auto*: 2:13; *hoi zētountes tēn psychēn tou paidiou*: 2:20.

61.Thus, *tēs teleutēs Hērōdou*: 2:15; *teleutēsantes . . . tou Hērōdou*: 2:19; *tethnēkasin . . . hoi zētountes tēn psychēn tou paidiou*: 2:20.

### Social expectations redefined: Children and the Jewish community.

Matthew's narrative likewise transforms expectations regarding social relationships between children and their adult counterparts within the Jewish community. Central here is the activity of Jesus within his public ministry. In a social context where children are indisputably least significant, Jesus engages children regularly within his everyday ministry among the people, both in Galilee and beyond.

For Matthew, healing is a crucial aspect of Jesus' public ministry, along with teaching and proclamation (4:23; 9:35; cf. 11:1). And within Matthew's narrative, Jesus heals children as well as adults. Along with the anonymous crowds whose healings Matthew recounts in summary fashion<sup>62</sup> and the numerous adults whose healings Matthew recounts individually,<sup>63</sup> there are also children whose healings Matthew highlights. Of the 14 individual healings that Matthew recounts, three concern children (9:18–19, 23–26; 15:21–28; 17:14–20). These stories parallel the adult healings in unmistakable fashion. As with the other healing accounts, these stories open with an individual – here the father or mother of the child – approaching Jesus,<sup>64</sup> kneeling before him<sup>65</sup> and speaking, pleading or shouting their desperate health concerns for their children.<sup>66</sup> The stories come to a climax when Jesus offers a healing touch<sup>67</sup> or a healing word,<sup>68</sup> sometimes naming the 'faith' of the supplicant.<sup>69</sup> They conclude with a depiction of the healing itself.<sup>70</sup>

What becomes clear from the patterning of these healing accounts is that, both for Matthew and for Matthew's Jesus, children belong without question within the scope of Jesus' ministry. For Matthew's narrative, it is normal for Jesus to heal children, just as he heals adults.<sup>71</sup> And in so doing, Jesus implicitly transforms the social status of the least significant within society and highlights the significance of children as persons of human worth.

But Jesus does not engage in implicit and silent worth-giving alone, as he heals children. Instead, Jesus accompanies the

62.Thus, *therapeuō*: 4:23–24; 8:16–17; 9:35; 12:15–16; 14:14; 15:30–31; 19:2; 21:14–15a; *diasōzō*: 14:35–36; *ekballō ta pneumata*: 8:16; cf. 12:24–28.

63.Thus, 8:1–4, 5–13, 14–15; 8:28–9:1; 9:2–8, 20–22, 27–31, 32–34; 12:9–14, 22–24; 20:29–34.

64.Thus, *erchomai*: 9:18; *exerchomai*: 15:22; *proserchomai*: 17:14. See 8:2, 5; 9:20. Similarly, Matthew notes that people 'bring' others to Jesus. Thus, *pherō*: 17:17. See 9:2, 32; 12:22a.

65.Thus, *proskyneō*: 9:18; *gonypeteō*: 17:14. Cf. 8:2.

66.Thus, 9:18; 15:22/25/27; 17:15. See 8:2, 5–6/8, 9:27; 20:30/31/33.

67.Thus, *krateō tēs cheiros autēs*: 9:25. Cf. *haptomai (tēs cheiros)*: 8:3, 14; 9:29; 20:34.

68.Thus, 15:28a; 17:18a. See 8:13; 9:2/6, 22, 29; 12:13.

69.Thus, *sou hē pistis*: 15:28. See *pistis/pisteuō*: 8:13; 9:22, 28.

70.Thus, 9:25; 15:28; 17:18. See 8:3, 13, 15, 32; 9:7, 22, 30, 33; 12:13, 22b; 20:34.

71.With the Canaanite girl, whom Jesus heals (15:28) in spite of his self-identified calling to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (15:24), the questions Jesus raises have to do not with the girl's status as a child, but rather with her status as a Canaanite or Gentile (15:22 cf. 15:24, 26).

healings with proclamations that give worth to children in verbal fashion, even as they counter ordinary societal or religious expectations and/or obvious physical realities.

With the synagogue leader's daughter (9:18–19, 23–26), Jesus counters the demonstrable physical reality known both to the father (9:18) and to the mourners (9:23, 24b). The girl 'has just died' (9:18b).<sup>72</sup> This undeniable reality has brought the synagogue leader to Jesus with his urgent plea (9:18). The mourners also know without question that the girl is dead. Their certainty elicits both their mourning rituals (9:23) and their 'ridicule' of Jesus (9:24b; cf. 9:24a). On the 'lower level' of this story, death is visible and irrefutable. But here Jesus redefines death itself and verbalises a truth that belies the 'lower level' reality known both to the father and to the mourners (9:24a): 'Go away, "for the girl is not dead but sleeping (emphasis mine)". Accordingly, Jesus then dismisses the jeering mourners (9:24a, 25a), enters the room (9:25b), grasps the daughter's hand, just as the father has requested (9:25c cf. 9:18b) and the girl 'is raised' to life (9:25d, DJW; cf. 9:18).<sup>73</sup>

With the epileptic boy (17:14–20), Jesus verbally challenges both the 'lower level' inability of his disciples to heal the child (17:17; cf. 17:16b) and the prevailing world view of the entire 'faithless and perverse generation' of which these disciples now demonstrate themselves to be a part (17:17).<sup>74</sup> Jesus' words proclaim, in effect, that just such a 'faithless and perverse generation', one that fails to acknowledge and access the divine power available on the 'upper level' of this story (cf. 10:1), will fail likewise to achieve the healing of the child.

With the Canaanite woman's daughter (15:21–28), Jesus goes beyond challenging demonstrable physical reality and the prevailing world views of others. Here, Jesus challenges his own deeply grounded sense of divine mission ('I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel ... It is not fair to take the children's [bread] and throw it to the dogs': 15:24, 26, DJW; cf. 10:5–6) as he heals the woman's daughter. In an extended interchange, Jesus refuses three times to respond to the woman's urgent pleas for her daughter (15:22; cf. 15:23a, 15:23b; cf. 15:24; 15:25; cf. 15:26). But when the woman comes back with a final, feisty retort to Jesus' words about 'children' and 'dogs' (15:27), Jesus concedes the argument in an unprecedented fashion,<sup>75</sup> proclaims the

72.Thus, *arti eteleutēsen*.

73.Thus, *kai ēgerthē to korasion*. See 16:21, 17:23, 20:19 and 28:7, where the same passive verb depicts the resurrection of Jesus.

74.Thus, *ō genea apistos kai diestrammenē*. Cf. Garland (1993:184); Keener (2009:441); Witherington III (2006:328). From a broader narrative perspective, Matthew clearly links these words of rebuke to the wider Jewish community, addressed regularly as 'generation' (*genea*: 11:16; 12:39, 41, 42, 45; 16:4; 23:36; 24:34). See Hare (1993:201) and Luz (2001:408). Within the immediate narrative context, however, Jesus' words appear to address the failure of the disciples to do that for which Jesus has equipped them (17:16 cf. 10:1). See Carter (2000:354) and Gibbs (2010:871–872).

75.Jesus' verbal concession to the Canaanite woman (see also Mk 7:24–30) is unique within the canonical gospels.

woman's 'great faith' (15:28a)<sup>76</sup> and grants her request (15:28b),<sup>77</sup> even as the daughter's 'healing' takes place 'from that hour' (15:28c).<sup>78</sup>

As Matthew's narrative demonstrates, Jesus grants human worth to children, not only as he heals them along with adults but also as he verbally challenges, on their behalf, demonstrable physical evidence, prevailing human 'faithlessness', and his own deeply grounded sense of divine 'mission' to the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel'. But the Matthean Jesus goes still further in his openness to children.

### Kingdom of heaven redefined: Children from the 'God's-eye' perspective

Arguably, among the most provocative and counter-cultural motifs within the Matthean ministry of Jesus is that which raises the status of children *vis-à-vis* adults even as it redefines deeply engrained Jewish expectations concerning the kingdom of heaven. Faulty notions of this 'kingdom', children completely aside, appear throughout Matthew's narrative (8:5–13; 19:16–26; 20:20–28; 21:33–45). But the status of children also comes into focus within such 'kingdom' discussions.

In response to a question from John the Baptist concerning Jesus' identity as 'the one who is to come' (11:2–6), Jesus offers a lengthy address to the crowds about John and the Son of Man (11:7–30). Prominent here are words of rebuke to 'this generation',<sup>79</sup> – the wider Jewish community, which has failed to respond appropriately either to John or to the Son of Man (11:16–19) – and 'woes' against Jewish cities that have failed to 'repent' in response to Jesus' 'deeds of power' performed in their midst (11:20–24). The outlook is bleak. But then, by way of explanation (Garland 1993:130), Jesus verbalises a mind-bending prayer:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent<sup>80</sup> and have revealed them to infants;<sup>81</sup> yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.<sup>82</sup> (11:25–26)

For Matthew's Jesus, God is at work in sovereign ways, both 'hiding' the truths of the kingdom of heaven from some<sup>83</sup> and 'revealing' them to others.<sup>84</sup> But God's sovereign work is likewise a divine irony. Those on the outside are now 'the wise and the intelligent', within this context clearly 'this

76.Thus, *megalē sou hē pistis*.

77.Thus, *genēthētō soi hōs theleis*.

78.Thus, *kai iathē hē thygatēr autēs apo tēs horas ekeinēs*.

79.Thus, *tēn genean tautēn*: 11:16. See footnote 74.

80.Thus, *ekrypsas tauta apo sophōn kai synetōn*: 11:25b.

81.Thus, *apekalypsas auta nēpiois*: 11:25c.

82.Thus, *eudokia . . . emprosthen sou*: 11:26.

83.See *kalyptō*: 10:26; *kryptō*: 13:35//Psalm 78:2.

84.See *apokalypō*: 10:26; 16:17. Wider discussion of the Matthean concept of divine 'hiding' and 'revealing' lies beyond the scope of this article.

generation' (11:16–19) and the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum (11:20–24); while those on the inside are 'infants', a poetic variant on 'children'.<sup>85</sup> Nor is this a divine mistake. Instead, it is the 'gracious will' of God (11:26), that same 'gracious will' reflected in God's 'good pleasure' with Jesus, God's son, both at Jesus' baptism (3:17) and at his transfiguration (17:5).<sup>86</sup> Thus, children, the least significant within society, play a crucial role, along with Jesus himself, within God's 'gracious will' for enacting the kingdom of heaven.

This divinely ordained reversal of status for metaphorical 'infants' *vis-à-vis* their societal superiors finds its narrative confirmation in a temple scene unique to Matthew's narrative (21:14–16). Jesus has overturned the commercial enterprise within the temple (21:12) and castigated the entrepreneurs for transforming God's 'house of prayer' into a 'den of robbers' (21:13).<sup>87</sup> Jesus now demonstrates the true purpose of God's 'house of prayer' by healing the blind and the lame who come to him in the temple courtyard (21:14).<sup>88</sup> Jesus' antagonists, the chief priests and scribes, witness these 'amazing things' (21:15a) and the 'children's' response, 'Hosanna to the Son of David' (21:15b; cf. 21:9). And they explode in an 'angry' outburst to Jesus, 'Do you hear what these [worthless children!] are saying?' (21:15c–16a).

Jesus' response is immediate and pointed. Yes, Jesus has heard the children (21:16b). But he is not outraged by their praise. Instead, Jesus counters with his own question: 'Have you never read, "Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies<sup>89</sup> you have prepared praise for yourself?"' (21:16b//Ps 8:3, LXX).<sup>90</sup> The chief priests and the scribes make no response. The proprietors of the temple and the powerful elite within Jerusalem have lost their debate with Jesus, while socially powerless children have been publicly vindicated.<sup>91</sup>

The theological implications are clear, both for Jesus and for Matthew. Just as God 'reveals' the truths of the kingdom of heaven to metaphorical 'infants' (11:25), so God likewise 'prepares praise' for Jesus to come from the lips of metaphorical 'infants and nursing babies' (21:16b//Ps 8:3, LXX), to the utter chagrin of the powerful within society. And in the unrelenting irony of Matthew's narrative rhetoric, those who are 'powerful' find themselves both threatened

85.Thus, *nēpiois*: 11:25; cf. *nēpiōn kai thēlazontōn*: 21:16.

86.Thus, *eudokia*: 11:26; cf. *eudokēsa*: 3:17; 17:5.

87.For divergent readings on the theological significance of this prophetic act, see Garland (1993:211–213) and Hare (1993:240–243).

88.See Hare's comment (1993:241): 'The Messiah's activity in the temple is positive as well as negative; after publicly objecting to the misuse of the sacred space, he demonstrates God's concern for his people by healing the blind and the lame'.

89.Thus, *nēpiōn kai thēlazontōn*.

90.See 12:3, 5; 19:4; 21:42; 22:31.

91.See 22:46, where Jesus' antagonists are definitively silenced.

and effectively silenced by children, the most ‘powerless’ within society (21:14–16; cf. 2:1–23).

Jesus’ most straightforward and striking words about ‘children’ and ‘the kingdom of heaven’, however, emerge not from debates with his antagonists but rather from in-house discussion with his disciples. When Jesus’ disciples come to him asking, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ (18:1), Jesus sets a child in their midst (18:2)<sup>92</sup> and frames his response entirely around children: (1) Jesus’ disciples will never enter the kingdom of heaven unless they ‘turn and become like children’ (18:3, DJW);<sup>93</sup> (2) the title of ‘greatest in the kingdom of heaven’ goes to the one who ‘becomes humble like this child’ (18:4)<sup>94</sup> and (3) whoever ‘welcomes one such child’ in Jesus’ name welcomes Jesus himself (18:5).<sup>95</sup> While Jesus’ disciples surely anticipate that kingdom ‘greatness’ will involve ‘good deeds’ (cf. 19:16–20), ‘riches’ (cf. 19:21–25) or public honour (cf. 20:20–21), Jesus’ response offers steep downward mobility instead, radical ‘conversion’ to the ‘humility’ of the least powerful and least significant within society.

For Jesus, ‘greatness’ within the kingdom of heaven stands all human instinct and all ‘honour or shame’ cultural codes upside down. And, for Jesus, the reason is obvious. When his disciples attempt to dismiss those who bring their children<sup>96</sup> to Jesus for a hands-on blessing (19:13), Jesus responds: ‘Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs’ (19:14, DJW, emphasis mine). Here is Jesus’ bottom line *vis-à-vis* children. With this word, Jesus redefines realities both earthly (i.e. the status of children within human society) and heavenly (i.e. the character of the kingdom of heaven itself). For Jesus, children have profound worth within earthly society, precisely because they and those who share their earthly humility are already inheritors of the kingdom of heaven. Such is the ‘God’s-eye perspective’ of children within Matthew’s narrative.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exist.

.....  
92.Thus, *paidion*.

93.Thus, *straphēte kai genēsthe hōs ta paidia*.

94.Thus, *tapeinōsei heauton hōs to paidion touto*.

95.Thus, *hos ean dexētai hen paidion toiouto*.

96.Thus, *paidia*.

## Author(s) contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

## References

- Brown, R.E., 1979, *The birth of the Messiah: A commentary on the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke*, Image, Garden City, NY.
- Carter, W., 2000, *Matthew and the margins: A sociopolitical and religious reading*, Orbis, Maryknoll, NY.
- Corley, K., 1993, *Private women, public meals: Social conflicts in the synoptic tradition*, Hendrickson, Peabody, MA.
- Garland, D.E., 1993, *Reading Matthew: A literary and theological commentary on the first gospel*, Crossroad, New York, NY.
- Gibbs, J.A., 2010, *Matthew 11:2–20:34*, Concordia, St. Louis, MO.
- Hare, D.R.A., 1993, *Matthew*, John Knox, Louisville, KY.
- Kang-Hamilton, S., 2018, ‘Welcoming children and receiving Jesus: Reflections on the synoptic gospels’, *Restoration Quarterly* 60(1), 29.
- Keener, C.S., 2009, *The gospel of Matthew: A socio-rhetorical commentary*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Keener, C.S., 2014, *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament*, 2nd edn., IVP Academic, Downers Grove, IL.
- Kingsbury, J.D., 1975, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, kingdom*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Luz, U., 2001, *Matthew 8–20: A commentary*, in H. Koester (ed.), transl. J.E. Crouch, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, MN.
- Luz, U., 2007, *Matthew 1–7: A commentary*, in H. Koester (ed.), transl. J.E. Crouch, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, MN.
- Maas, R., 2000, ‘Christ as the logos of childhood: Reflections on the meaning and mission of the child’, *Theology Today* 56(4), 456–468. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004057360005600402>
- Moltmann, J., 2000, ‘Child and childhood as metaphors of hope’, *Theology Today* 56(4), 592–603. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004057360005600412>
- Muecke, D.C., 1969, *The compass of irony*, Methuen, London.
- Murphy, A.J., 2013, *Kids and kingdom: The precarious presence of children in the synoptic gospels*, Pickwick Publications, Eugene, OR.
- Sim, D.S., 1994, ‘What about the wives and children of the disciples? The cost of discipleship from another perspective’, *Heythrop Journal* 35, 380–383. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2265.1994.tb00966.x>
- Weaver, D.J., 2017, *The irony of power: The politics of God within Matthew’s narrative*, Pickwick, Eugene, OR.
- White, K.J., 2008, ‘“He placed a little child in the midst”: Jesus, the kingdom, and children’, in M.J. Bunge, T.E. Fretheim & B.T.R. Gaventa (eds.), *The child in the Bible*, pp. 353–374, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Witherington III, B., 2006, *Matthew*, Smyth & Helwys, Macon, GA.