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## Jesus and the Child as a Model of Spirituality

Robert N. Brown

A study of the biblical writings shows that the child is used widely as a model of spirituality but essentially in the father-child relationship. This is already in the OT understood as involving on the part of God the most tender feelings of affection, expressed in his gracious choice of Israel as his child, in his exercise of the fatherly and parental function of nurture and training, in his merciful forgiveness of sins, and in his especial care for the fatherless and the poor. We "should not try, as has sometimes been done, to dim the illuminative power of the OT tidings of the father by intensifying the splendour of its Christian counterpart". /1 Already, too, in the OT, the father-child relationship is seen as involving on the part of man attitudes of trust and dependence, obedience and gratitude to God, as well as mutual obligations to all God's people. Jesus richly developed this imagery, to speak both of his own experience of God and of the relationship to God to which he called men. His use of the term "Abba" is of especial significance, being a term "that contains all the nearness, affection and love in which we do not 'designate' a person as father but in which the child addresses its 'father'". /2 This term "Abba", as Jeremias states, "is an ipsissima vox of Jesus and contains in nuce his message and his claim to have been sent from the Father." /3 Jesus stressed here the nearness of God, appealing to man's experience of earthly fatherhood as a faint shadow of God's parental disposition, and developing the theme of the father's forgiveness of the sinner. His call to sonship reaffirms the need for total obedience to the will of God; his delineation of the character of God gave the disciples the confidence to put their complete trust in God, and to seek to reflect in their lives as children of God something of the same character. This background of teaching on the father-child relationship in the OT and in the message of Jesus, is the context in which the texts concerning Jesus and the children are best understood.

Here we are concerned with those texts in which Jesus is engaged with actual children, particularly the

accounts of the controversy on true greatness (Mark 9.33-37; cf. Matthew 18.1-5/Luke 9.46-48), and the blessing of the children (Mark 10.13-16; cf. Matthew 19.13-15/Luke 18.15-17).

The controversy about greatness

(Mark 9.33-37; cf. Matthew 18.1-5 par)

The context of the pericope about greatness in Mark's Gospel is that of a passage designed to illustrate the blindness of the disciples to the messianic concept of Jesus and to emphasize the distinctive nature of the discipleship involved in obedience to such a Messiah. The contrast between traditional concepts and the outlook of Jesus is illustrated here in the controversy among the disciples over "greatness" and the reaction of Jesus. "This story", states C.F.D. Moule "is a measure of the disciples' failure to understand. They are still estimating 'greatness' by grandness. Jesus says 'real greatness means caring about people - not people who are regarded as 'important' but simply people, such as this child here.'" /4

The response of Jesus to the embarrassed silence of the disciples when questioned about their dispute is twofold.

The first is the aphorism in v35 that "if anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." The general import of the teaching is clear and it is that greatness means not the right to be served most, but to serve most.

The second part of the response of Jesus to his disciples dispute about greatness consists of the action of taking a child, standing him in the midst of the disciples and identifying himself with the child by putting his arm around him, interpreting the meaning of this in the statement that "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me." (v37). The line of thought seems to be that "Jesus having declared that true greatness is a matter of humble service (v35), goes on to give an example of such humble service, underlining its real greatness by the explanation that such service rendered to such a little child will be accepted as done to Jesus, and service done to Jesus will be accepted by God as rendered to God." /5

In this context the child is a symbol of the needy. W. Barclay states simply that "the child is typical of the

person who needs things". /6

As well as presenting the child as a symbol of the needy and in some way specially related to Jesus, Mark preserves for us "a tender affectionate aspect of Jesus' character which the Church especially cherished." /7

Matthew places the pericope about the controversy on greatness (Matthew 18.1-5) in the context of a collection of sayings of Jesus designed to show how disciples are to treat one another. Matthew freely edits at this point the material he has received from Mark, omitting the account of the dispute about greatness among the disciples to concentrate on the question of rank in the kingdom of heaven. Verses 3 and 4 are given here in this form by Matthew alone, though he has reached over to Mark 10.15 for verse 3. Matthew's version of this saying emphasizes the fact that the disciples must "turn and become like children" (cf. Mark 10.15 where the disciples must "receive the kingdom of God like a child"). This saying is better suited to the question about greatness than is the saying about welcoming children (Mark 9/37/Matthew 18.5). Schweizer comments that "Matthew's purpose is undoubtedly to emphasize repentance in the sense of return to childlike thought, will and action." /8

Does Matthew mean to imply here a reference to repentance as "metanoia", as conversion? The Greek word used strephein has been taken by some scholars to imply this, though the linguistic evidence for such a translation is slight. /9 The question cannot be resolved on the limited usage of the term in the NT but must be considered in relation to the appropriateness of the NT conception of repentance to the text in question. Here we note that repentance in the Bible has two basic meanings. It can refer either to a turning to God or to a regretting of a wrong done. These two motifs are combined in the NT concept though the former predominates. "Jesus....regarded sin in essence as alienation from God and the misery of the lack of trust in God's goodness and power. Therefore repentance was a putting away of doubt in God and the anxiety of lostness which follows from it; and a return to God in the confidence and joy of a trusting son." /10 In his teaching "the attitude of mind that most frequently militates against

repentance is self-righteousness and presumption", so that "genuine repentance, the repentance that opens to itself the Kingdom of God, is only possible when a man knows he is small and slight as a child before God." /11 Such an understanding of repentance relates harmoniously to the general thought of the passage and therefore we cannot reject the possibility that in this instance strephein should be thought of as referring to repentance and conversion.

If Matthew stresses repentance in v3, the following verse makes it clear that the clue to this process is "humility". "Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (v4)

Humility in the NT is both a "personal virtue" and a "social virtue". As a personal virtue, it emphasizes both a sense of dependence upon God and a spirit of contrition in his presence. Humility and contrition are closely linked, as for example in Isaiah 57.15 where God comes "to revive the spirit of the humble and to revive the heart of the contrite." It means simply "the willingness to let God be God; that is, to acknowledge one's dependence upon his creative powers; to rejoice in gratitude for his blessings; to adopt the ways of the Lord's as one's own; to accept in contrition the judgment of God when one falls short; to trust his power and willingness to forgive and redeem." /12 As a social virtue it stresses that the model of relationships in the Christian community is a life of humble service to the needy, patterned on the self-emptying of Christ and on his distinctive style of life.

This understanding of humility supports the argument for the appropriateness of the concepts of repentance and conversion at v3. Matthew has made it clear that the child is a model for spirituality because to become like a child involves repentance and humility. The link between the personal and social aspects of humility outlined above makes particularly apposite the use of the child both as a model of humility and the service of whom is a mark of humility. Thus Matthew 18.5 repeats Mark 9.37a /13

The blessing of the children (Mark 10.13-16; cf Matthew 19.13-15/Luke 18.15-17)

The form of the pericope on the blessing of the children in Mark's Gospel is that of a "pronouncement story". In the immediate context (Mark 10.1-31) the pronouncement story on children is linked with a pronouncement story on divorce (v3-9) with related sayings (v10-12) and is followed by three stories about Jesus with the common theme of attitudes to earthly possessions and the renunciation of wealth (v17-31). The topical arrangement of material about the domestic issues of marriage, children and possessions is determined "by the Evangelist's interest in the Kingdom of God and in teaching about sacrifice and renunciation." /14

It has been suggested that Mark has "two transparently clear motives in recounting the narrative." On the one hand is "his desire to illustrate the attitude of Jesus to children", and so implicitly that which his followers ought to adopt concerning the religious life of the child. But he also wants to stress "the lesson that children have to teach adults in their approach to God." /15

We have already noted how the passage on the controversy about greatness (Mark 9.33-37) shows Jesus' love of children; and we can see here again an authentic memory of that same love. The paidia who are referred to here are probably young children up to about the age of seven. They are brought to Jesus; the term used need not imply that they were carried in arms, though it does not exclude this possibility. The purpose for which they are brought is to receive his blessing for their future life, but the disciples objected. We are not told on what grounds they objected but the indignant reaction of Jesus shows that an important matter of principle was at issue for him. It is of interest that in the Gospels this is the sole occasion where such "indignation" is ascribed to Jesus while Matthew and Luke omit the term. "The object of a man's indignation is always revealing", comments Taylor, and "here it is the disciples' rebuff to children." /16 In his impatient repudiation of the disciples' attitude Jesus declares that children are not to be prevented from coming to him but on the contrary are to be encouraged, "for to such belongs the kingdom of God." (v14) The term "such" here can mean either "these and other (literal) children" or "these and others who, though not literally

children, share the characteristics of children."

At this point Mark inserts a saying of Jesus to the effect that the person who does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it. (v15) Matthew, as we have seen, places this saying in the context of the discussion on greatness (18.3). The important thing to grasp is that for Mark, verse 15 explains the statement in verse 14 that children are heirs of the Kingdom. What we have here is a development of the thoughts on the nature of discipleship outlined in the pericope on the controversy about greatness. (9.33-37) There the teaching was that service to the weak was service to Jesus and that such service was the test of priority in the Kingdom of God. "The argument is carried further now but still centring round children. Not only is it meritorious to serve them so as to advance in the Kingdom, but one must become like them in spirit to qualify for entry." (v17)

Jesus' final action in taking the children into his arms and blessing them is reminiscent of the scene in which Simeon took up the infant Jesus in his arms (Luke 2.28), and of the father's welcome for the returning prodigal son. Plummer notes that "the compound verb and imperfect tense indicate that he blessed them fervently again and again. He granted the request of the parents, and a great deal more." (v18)

The Matthaean parallel to Mark 10.13-16 comes at Matthew 19.13-15, in the fifth section of Matthew's Gospel, which is substantially shaped by the Marcan outline. Matthew, having already made use of Mark 10.15 and having shown children as examples of the humility to be followed by all who would enter the kingdom (18.3), treats here for its own sake the issue of the children's place in the kingdom. He omits then at this point Mark 10.15, i.e., the statement about the indignation of Jesus and that of embracing the children, but he does interpret the "touch" of Mark 10.13 as "lay his hands on them and pray." (v13) "Matthew thus understands blessing as intercession based on authority."  
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In Luke 18.15-17, Luke takes over from Mark with little alteration the story of the blessing of the children. By placing the pericope at this point in his Gospel

immediately following the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18.9-14), he intends a deliberate contrast of the child with the self-righteous Pharisee, teaching that the Kingdom must be received as a completely unmerited gift rather than earned by work. Mark had already in mind this type of contrast by placing immediately after the story of the blessing of the children, the story of the rich man and eternal life (Mark 10.17-22) which Luke retains at this point (Luke 18.18-23).

Can we identify the basis of Jesus' statements about the children and the Kingdom? B.S. Easton warned against any attempt at analyzing too minutely the quality of childlikeness involved in case we injure the thought. "If we attempt to paraphrase it in terms of formal theology we shall certainly ruin it altogether. For the quality of childlikeness is nothing more and nothing less than the quality of childlikeness and it needs no explanation; everyone knows what it is provided he does not think too much about it." /20 The warning is apposite and yet analysis cannot be evaded. Various interpretations have been offered and some of the main possibilities examined.

(a) F.A. Schilling has argued that traditional interpretations of the passage arose from the "harmonizing mind" which "subordinated the surprising remark of Jesus in Mark 10.15 to the more ordinary meaning of Matthew 18.3 and made the two mean the same thing", thus depriving Mark 10.15 of its originality. He reads paidion as an accusative with the meaning "whoever does not receive the Kingdom as one receives a little child". Thus it is the nature of the Kingdom which is likened to that of a child. /21 On this understanding the disciples are to welcome the kingdom as Jesus welcomes the child, an interpretation which, it is claimed, "accords well with the fact that, in this section of the Gospel, Mark's theme is the close identity of the way and conduct of the Son of Man with the way and conduct of the disciple." /22

This interpretation is grammatically possible but, in view of the parallel saying in Matthew 18.3, unlikely. Pursuing the same general line of thought, H. Anderson offers the comment that "the Kingdom of God in its nature as a child in Jesus' teaching may describe it as neither



forced men nor forced by them, but as God's gracious gift even as the child is his gift. It is the realm of spontaneity which is simply to be participated in with joy, where the assuming of role is forever ended, the the realm of play." This interpretation is rather forced and, in the absence of any parallel teaching by Jesus, or elsewhere in the NT, on the nature of the Kingdom as a child, highly speculative.

(b) It has been suggested that the most natural explanation of Mark 10.13-16 is that these verses present us with a picture of children coming to Jesus "or even more naturally of them running to Him and clinging to Him, so affording a picture of the ideal human response to the Lord's call in the Gospel." On this interpretation the Kingdom belongs to the children or will be given to them, in virtue of their coming to Jesus (Mark 10.14) and receiving the word of the Kingdom (Mark 10.15). This is the view proposed by Beasley-Murray who further comments that "there is nothing strange in the idea of children listening to Jesus, receiving in simplicity his 'call' (= invitation) to the Kingdom and of loving Him with all their hearts"; and argues that this is "what Jesus in the narrative before us wished to encourage." /23

This interpretation seems to founder on the basis that there is no reference in the text to any response on the part of the children. "The children are 'brought' to Jesus; they are too young to come to him; they have not yet become 'sons of the law' and are not responsible." /24 The words of Jesus in rebuking the disciples "defend the children who are passive and not the adults who are bringing the children." /25

(c) Many commentators look to some subjective quality in children in order to interpret the sayings. Rawlinson holds that "the point of comparison is not so much the innocence and humility of children (for children are not invariably either innocent or humble); it is rather the fact that children are unselfconscious, receptive and content to be dependent upon others' care and bounty; it is in such a spirit that the Kingdom must be received - it is a gift of God and not an achievement on the part of man; it must be simply accepted, inasmuch as it can never be

deserved." /24 From his own very distinctive approach to the Gospel of Mark, J. Bowman comes to a similar conclusion. For the Pharisees the important thing was to keep the law. But little children could not fulfil this duty. Jesus is therefore rejecting the idea of the Kingdom of God as a "torah state" and arguing that "one has to put away pride of learning - have the humility, receptiveness and meekness and trust of a little child."

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This interpretation certainly represents one of Jesus' oft repeated criticisms of the religion of his contemporaries. "It was too often, He felt, associated with pride and a sense of self-righteousness.....He condemned all thought of a claim on God whether of race or one's righteousness."

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(d) Some scholars emphasize the "objective humbleness" of children rather than any subjective quality possessed by them, in order to stress the thought that the key theme here is "the startling character of the grace of God who wills to give the Kingdom to those who have no claim upon it." /29 C.E.B. Cranfield argues that the reference here is "not to the receptiveness or humility or imaginativeness or trustfulness or unselfconsciousness of children, but to their objective littleness and helplessness. To receive the kingdom as a little child is to allow oneself to be given to it, because one knows one cannot claim it as one's right or attempt to earn it. (To think of any subjective qualities of children here is to turn faith into a work)." H. Anderson argues along the same lines that the child here is a symbol for those who "quite objectively, are obscure, trivial, unimportant, weak"; and that to receive the Kingdom as a child is to receive it "as something given to them in their helplessness or defencelessness, without any claim on their part that they have deserved or earned it."

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This interpretation overstates the valid point that Jesus' teaching here speaks of the gratuitous gift of the Kingdom. It is impossible to maintain a rigid distinction between a situation of "objective humbleness" and the existence in those in such a situation of certain subjective dispositions. The element of response to the Gospel cannot be eliminated simply because a wrong emphasis on this would

make it a work of merit.

(e) Should this attitude of childhood be identified with "faith"? Légasse argues that the condition of becoming a disciple can indeed be summed up in the one word "faith" and that this gives us the correct key to the interpretation of Mark 10.13-16. /31 The emphasis which we have seen in Matthew's version of Mark 10.15 (Matthew 18.3) would tend to support such a solution, for the insistence on faith is very closely connected with the call to repentance. The message of Jesus is summarized at Mark 1.15 in the words, "the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel."

But faith is itself a complex concept even in the synoptic tradition of the teaching of Jesus. Légasse puts his main emphasis on the aspect of faith as trust, holding that this best accords with the use of the child imagery in Mark 10.13-16. Now it is without question that trust is a basic constituent of faith in the teaching of Jesus. Granted that the attitude of trust in the relationship of a child with its parents may be symbolic of this aspect of faith, and that the concept of faith is properly related to the child as a model, it is however doubtful, in view of the complex nature of the concept of faith, if we can find here the single interpretative factor.

The positive factors that we have noted in these various proposed interpretations can possibly be held together by returning to a suggestion made by T.W. Manson that a clue to "the better understanding of those sayings of Jesus about the necessity of becoming like children if we are to enter the Kingdom of God" might be found in the distinctive and characteristic use by Jesus of the term Abba for "God" and his teaching of the disciples to use the same term." /32 In later lectures on the Lord's prayer, Manson developed this idea and commented that "when Jesus tells his hearers that it is necessary to humble oneself and become like a child in order to enter the Kingdom of God, he is not suggesting that the child is the possessor of virtues which his elders have lost, and that adults should take lessons in morality from their children. He is pointing to the plain fact that the child

is dependent on his father and that in any decent family the relation between parent and child is that of care and protection on the one side and dependence and trust on the other. This means that the primary condition of entry into the Kingdom of God is total trust in God springing from a sense of total dependence upon him. The total love of God which is required in the first and greatest commandment springs naturally from this trust and dependence." /33

Jeremias also sees this as the key thought. "Children can say 'Abba'. Only he who through Jesus lets himself be given the childlike trust which resides in the word abba finds his way into the Kingdom of God." This is indeed the heart of the call to repentance in Matthew 18.3: "repentance means learning to say Abba again, putting one's whole trust in the Heavenly Father, returning to the Father's house and the Father's arms. Luke 15.11-32 provides evidence that this understanding might not be completely wrong. The repentance of the lost son consists in his finding his way home to his Father. In the last resort repentance is simply trusting in the grace of God." /34

This interpretation has the advantage of relating Jesus' use of the child as a model of spirituality with his general teaching on the father-child relationship that is the basic model. It has the advantage also of taking full account of the teaching of Jesus on the Fatherhood of God, which is, in the last resort, the fundamental basis for his call to repentance and faith, to discipleship on the model of his own sonship. It allows emphasis to be put on the gracious goodness of the Heavenly Father in giving the Kingdom as a gift to those in need, but without calling into question the need for response, even if the response that is stressed at this point is that of receptivity.

In the interpretation, then, of the texts concerning Jesus and the children it is not necessary either to search for some subjective quality inherent in the nature of the child or to postulate a somewhat impersonal condition of objective humbleness; the positive values in both these approaches being more naturally expressed in terms of the general stance of Jesus in regard to the child in the child-father relationship. The themes of humility and faith are blended together in the call to a relationship of a childlike trust in God as abba, Jesus displaying both in his words and actions that compelling love for children

which he taught was God's fundamental disposition to men. The reflection of the early Christians on the uniqueness of the person of Jesus and on their experience of being led through his life and work into a new relationship with God which could be expressed in the conviction that God is our abba, led to a natural attempt to find ways of adequately describing the unique sonship of Christ and the derived sonship of Christians.

This is the context in which the later concepts of adoption and rebirth are developed, allowing particular emphasis in the use of the father-child imagery to be placed on the gracious choice of God the Father and the relationship of this with the Christ event, but preserving the central emphasis of Jesus' own teaching. The concept of adoption also opened up new ways of expressing the significance of sonship in terms of status and heritage, while the connection of rebirth imagery with baptism opened up the possibility of recognizing not only the importance of birth and childhood but also of the need for growth. The need for growth in the Christian life was expressed indeed in such imagery both by Paul and other NT writers, but reference to the child at this point is pejorative in nature, the child being a symbol of what must be left behind on the road to maturity. Here indeed it may be proper to look for certain subjective attitudes in children or to define their objective status of immaturity. There is tension at this point in the biblical writings between the use of the child and the mature person as a model of spirituality, a tension that was capable of being developed creatively to hold together complementary aspects of faith, but which could lead to such an emphasis on the need for progress and growth that the free grace and love of God calling for a response of simple, childlike trust might be obscured.

In the early centuries of the Christian Church, when the ascetic concept of gospel holiness became the idea of spirituality, with the Christian life seen essentially in terms of "ascent", and emphasis put on obedience to a new law rather than on the primary feature of redeeming grace, there is indeed a real loss of the teaching of Jesus on the child as a model. It is not surprising that the great reformer of Christian piety in this regard should have been Augustine, for it is with him that the sovereign

grace of God is once again given its central place in Christian thought.

Notes

1. A. Deissler, "The Spirit of the Lord's Prayer in the Faith and Worship of the OT", in J.J. Petuchowski and M. Broche, eds., The Lord's Prayer and Jewish Liturgy, London 1978
2. G. Ebeling, The Lord's Prayer in Today's World, London, 1966, p54
3. J. Jeremias, The Lord's Prayer, Philadelphia 1964, p20.
4. C.F.D. Moule, Mark, Cambridge 1965, p74
5. C.E.B. Cranfield, Mark, Cambridge 1972, p308
6. W. Barclay, Mark, Edinburgh 1956, p231. It is not easy to determine the precise meaning of the phrase "in my name" in v37. "Behind this formula", states Weber, "lies a Semitic expression which, in the Gospels, is often better rendered with 'for my sake' or 'for my name's sake'. (cf. Mark 8.35/10.29/13.9). It points to a relationship. The children are to be hospitably received because of Jesus' special relationship with them, because they are his special representatives." The nature of this relationship is not here further defined: H.B. Weber, Jesus and the Children, Geneva, 1979, p50
7. B.H. Branscomb, Mark, London 1937, p169
8. E. Schweizer, Matthew, London 1976, p362
9. See e.g., F. Laubach, in NIDNTT Vol 1, Exeter 1975-78, p355.
10. J. Haroutinia in M. Halverson and A. Cohen, Eds., A Handbook of Christian Theology, London 1960, p324f
11. R. Schnackenburg, The Moral Teaching of the NT, London 1965, p29f
12. E. La B. Cherbonnier in Dictionary of the Bible (J. Hastings ed., revised by F.C. Grant and H.H. Rowley) Edinburgh 1963, p406f

13. The Lucan parallel to Mark 9.33-37 comes at Luke 9.46-48 and in the same context as in Mark. The child is here not only a symbol of the weak and needy, service of whom in Christ's name is service to Christ and God, but it is at the same time a model of that humility which is the condition of true greatness in the Kingdom of God. It is this latter idea that, as we have seen, Matthew brings out clearly and makes primary, and thus Luke "occupies an intermediate position between the Marcan and the Matthaean versions of our Lord's treatment of the disciples' idea on this occasion". (H. Balmforth, Luke, Oxford 1930, p195)
14. V. Taylor, Mark, London 1966, p425
15. G.R. Beasley-Murray, Baptism in the NT, Exeter 1972, p324. For a review of arguments for and against a baptismal context for the interpretation of these verses see E. Best, "Mark 10.13-16: The child as model recipient," in R. McKay and J.F. Miller, eds., Biblical Studies: Essays in honour of W. Barclay, London, 1976, p324.
16. Taylor, op.cit., p423
17. J. Bowman, Mark, Leiden 1965, p211
18. A. Plummer, Mark, Cambridge 1915, p121f
19. E. Schweizer, Matthew, London 1946, p384
20. B.S. Easton, Christ in the Gospels, New York 1930, p152
21. F.A. Schilling, "What means the saying about receiving the Kingdom of God as a Little Child?" in C.L. Mitton, ed., Expository Times 1965-66, Vol 77/2 p56-58, Edinburgh
22. H. Anderson, Mark, London 1976, p246
23. Beasley-Murray, op.cit., pp326, 328
24. E. Best, op.cit., p132
25. E. Schweizer, Mark, London 1971, p206
26. Rawlinson, op.cit., p136f. See also C.F. Moule op.cit., p79 who states that "perhaps the point is that God's reign can only be received by those who know that they are utterly dependent on God, as small children are

on their parents; they cannot earn it or deserve it or make it, but only accept it gratefully as God's gift".

27. Bowman, op.cit., p212
28. Branscomb, op.cit., p180
29. W.L. Lane, Mark, London 1974, p360
30. Cranfield, op.cit., p324; Anderson, op.cit., p246
31. Légasse, Jésus et l'enfant, Paris 1969, p139f
32. T.W. Manson, The Teaching of Jesus, Cambridge 1963, p331
33. T.W. Manson, "The Lord's Prayer II" in BJRL, Vol 38, 1955-56, p437f
34. J. Jeremias, The Lord's Prayer, London 1971; The Theology of the NT, Vol 1, London 1971, p156

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