

Matthew 19:13-15 Examination and Analysis

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The text of Matthew 19:13-15 must be examined from many different perspectives in order to understand the meaning of the scripture. Literary elements such as historical and sociological backgrounds shed light on the passage. In addition, taking the text apart and seeing themes and concepts throughout strengthen a reader's understanding. Analyzing literary elements and historical background information is essential to unveil Matthew 19:13-15.

Historical and sociological backgrounds in the Gospel of Matthew are necessary for an in-depth study on the passage. The place of composition for the Gospel of Matthew remains unknown, but the time at which it is written likely falls somewhere between A.D. 75 and 85.[1] The audience of the book is often considered to be the church at Antioch in Syria. Jewish Christians and Gentiles seem to be the community of people the book targets predominately. Additionally, the Gospel of Matthew remains the account filled with the most Jewish allusions. For example, the Gospel pays great attention to the Law and Judaism. Placement of the book as the first of the New Testament, even though historically written after Mark, acts as a bridge between the Old and New.[2] Connection between the Old Testament prophecies and promises now are fulfilled through Jesus and his ministry in the New Testament. Exploring the background of Matthew makes way for the discussion of a particular passage in the Gospel according to Matthew.

In order to better understand the event of Jesus and the children in Matthew 19:13-15, the scene must be presented. Matthew 19 starts with the end of Jesus' ministry in Galilee and comes to the beginning of his final days on earth before crucifixion, burial, and resurrection in A.D. 30.[3] While Jesus journeys to Jerusalem with his disciples, he takes the route which leads him to an area "beyond the Jordan" that is under the administration of Herod Antipas.[4] According to Wilkins, likely the area of Jesus' ministry in Matthew 19 occurs either in the southern region of Perea or in the region of Judea. Along the way to his destination of Jerusalem, Jesus faces much criticism from religious leaders who try to trap him into incriminating himself on the basis of misinterpretation of the Law. For example, one such circumstance includes the discussion of divorce and marriage. Jesus reaches back to the Old Testament to Moses' words on the sanctity of marriage and divorce to affirm familial issues within the community. Topics of marriage and divorce seem perfectly fitting to be preceding the passage about children and Jesus. Hager describes the placement of Matthew 19:13-15 as "an extension of the discussion of familial matters." [5] The setting of the scene in Matthew 19 is imperative to the discussion of Jesus and the children.

On a sociological level, in the Greco-Roman world, children have a relatively low status and are not considered kingdom of heaven material. Children, in society, are seen to be vulnerable and without status.[6] Because of the time period and the lack of modern medicine and doctors, from the beginning of a child's life they have to fight to stay alive. Children would often die young because of medical conditions, and children in that culture were denied existence until they had been named.[7] Peasant parents would avoid attachment to infants due to the high mortality rate among children.[8] Between 30 and 35 percent of infants would not make it past the first month of life, while 50 percent of children died before the age of 10.[9] Furthermore, especially young children have nothing tangible to contribute to their families or to society. In a way, children really are seen socially more for the continuation of a family line rather than inheritors of the kingdom of heaven.

To better grasp why Jesus lays his hands on the children in Matthew 19:15, it helps to discuss the historical background of blessing the children. To begin, because the Book of Matthew contains more Jewish references and allusions than any of the other Gospels, the historical Jewish custom of blessing children needs to be given attention. In the Old Testament, children would be brought forth to elders on the Day of Atonement, so they could receive a blessing.[10] In addition, the blessing would involve parents' praying for their children to have God's love, mercy, and guidance for the days to come.[11] These prayers take root in Genesis 48 when Jacob blesses the two sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh. As a matter of fact, the blessing that is spoken over male children on the Day of Atonement actually points to their being like Ephraim and Manasseh, while the blessing spoken over female children refers to being like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah. [12] In the Bible, when people ask Jesus to lay his hands on children, they are not simply seeking a touch by a holy person, but what they have in mind is invoking the blessings of the Old Testament spoken over children.

The most important line that resonates throughout the text in Matthew 19:13-15 includes Jesus' words. The words of invitation to the children break the bonds of cultural norms[13]. As commented on earlier, children maintain a lowly status in the Greco-Roman world, and Jesus' disciples affirm that truth of low status. However, Jesus breaks chains of status when he invites the children to him. Jesus' response in verse 14 probably even surprises the disciples with his giving permission for the children to come to him.[14] Hagner clarifies that there is significance in the fact that Jesus stops and takes time for the children. At this point, he is on a journey that will eventually lead to the cross, but Jesus proves that he is not too busy to "bless the little ones" and invite them to him. Also, Jesus wants people to understand who is included in salvation. Meier explains that coming to Jesus is the equivalent to entering the kingdom and the invitation is for everyone, even the children who have no rights or status in the ancient Greco-Roman world.[15] Jesus' words in verse 14 echo throughout the text.

Jesus' actions preach to the disciples. Hagner divides Jesus' actions in the passage into four sections. The sections Hagner divides the passage into are presentation of the little children for blessing, the disciples' objection, Jesus' affirmation of the children, and the blessing of the children and Jesus' departure.[16] None of these actions stray from the central point Jesus is aiming for the people to see. Even though the disciples protest, Jesus not only receives and blesses the children, but in addition he makes the fact known that the kingdom of heaven belongs to these little ones.[17] The action of presenting the children for blessing seems strange to the disciples because they think Jesus has more important matters to attend to rather than attend to lowly children. Moreover, an interesting concept about the children is that the age of them is not known. The Greek word *paidion*, which means "children," is not clear on a specific age.[18] Even so, an assumption that they are fairly young can be made, considering they are not capable of handling themselves and they have to be brought forward to Jesus rather than going to him themselves.[19] Similarly, the text does not specify who brings these children to Jesus. Perhaps, an assumption can be made that the parents bring their children to Jesus, continuing a cultural practice of parents' bringing their children to see elders in the temple for them to be blessed.[20]

Following the presentation of the children is the disciples' objection. The objection to Jesus' blessing the children likely results from the high importance Jesus holds in their eyes. Again, the status of children is the main factor. The disciples view Jesus as a figure who does not have much time to spare, so spending time on low-status individuals such as children seems senseless to them. However, this attention spills into the next section: Jesus' affirmation of the children. Affirming the children takes place in verse 14. Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me," and with these words Jesus rebukes his disciples. In order to see the degree to which Jesus affirms the children, one must understand that the reign of the kingdom comes through Jesus. Hagner attests, "[T]he nature of the kingdom is such that even little children find their place in it." [21] Jesus' reaching out to the children stands as a message; the actions Jesus exhibits strongly suggest the importance of everyone to the kingdom of heaven. Reaching out to the children proves conclusively how Christ values everyone in all stages of life as he makes his way to the cross, where everyone has opportunity for salvation[22]. How fitting his actions seem, since his departure from this scene leads the way to the cross, where no special status is afforded anyone. The gospel of Jesus is for everyone, even for those with the lowliest of status, which is the message Jesus' actions preach to the disciples.

Jesus exhibits anger when the disciples reject the children. The scene is one of very few cases in the New Testament where Jesus displays anger. The passion Jesus has for these children is expressed when he says two things: "Let the little children come to me" and "do not hinder them." [23] Here, Jesus forcefully overrides the disciples' intervention of turning the children away.[24] Not only does Jesus tell the disciples to let the children come to him, but also he goes one step further and demands his disciples to not hinder these children or prevent his plan for them. The use of a double command to his disciples proves that he is passionate about his belief that children belong to the kingdom of heaven. He wants his disciples to obey his commands. Rejecting children enrages Jesus.

Jesus uses the literary device of repetition to prove to the disciples how highly he values children in the kingdom of heaven. Earlier in Matthew, when the disciples ask Jesus who is highly valued in the kingdom of heaven, he tells them that a child who is lowly in position is great.[25] When Jesus speaks of a child in this manner, he refers more to the attitude a child possesses, rather than an actual child. Jesus accentuates the importance of humility. When repetition occurs in literature there is supposed to be a reason for the reoccurrence. In this scenario, Jesus speaks repeatedly about the kingdom of heaven. However, Matthew 18 is different from Matthew 19. As a matter of fact, Matthew 18:1-5 is more about Jesus' desiring the disciples to have humble attitudes. In Matthew 19:13-15, however, he sharpens his earlier words, and the disciples actually have an encounter with children where they can practice Jesus' commands.[26] The disciples fail to carry out his earlier-stated commands: to "welcome one such child." [27] This neglect demonstrates that the disciples need repetition to learn about the value of children in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus' laying his hands on the children is significant. In the New Testament, and more specifically the Gospels, the laying of hands on a person represents healing.[28] For example, when the daughter of a synagogue leader passes away, the cleric asks for Jesus to lay hands on her. Jesus comes to her, and she is made well again.[29] On the contrary, Hagner describes laying hands on someone as being for the reception of the Holy Spirit and ordination, in addition to healing.[30] Laying hands on someone and the person's being filled with the Holy Spirit does not happen until Acts, when Peter and John lay hands on people in Samaria.[31] Furthermore, ordination also does not occur until Acts. Moreover, it would be unheard of for a child to be ordained.[32] Additionally, France references different times that people are healed by the touch of Jesus, but he elaborates that Jesus' action of laying his hands on the children is not about physical healing, but about the identification and acceptance of the children. Jesus identifies these children as members of the kingdom of heaven, and he accepts them into his kingdom.

In addition, Jesus' laying his hands on the children forms an endearing, affectionate gesture. Jesus is seen even as a parent in the circumstance because parents bless children if they are apart of their home.[33] Verheyden even states that children are blessed when they are named because it is a part of their belonging to a household. These children have been accepted into the family. Furthermore, when Jesus completes his mission of laying his hands on and blessing the children, he continues on in his journey to Jerusalem. Something can be said about his decision to continue on with his journey after the event with the children. He must be satisfied with blessing the children in order for him to move on.[34] Jesus does not name these children specifically, as a parent would name a child. He names them as members of the kingdom of heaven, so this act of laying his hands on these children emphatically proves his love for them. Laying his hands on the children shows significance in the text of the types of people Jesus honors.

Through different perspectives, Matthew 19:13-15 comes alive and is better understood. Background historical information and literary elements aid with the discovering of the meaning of the passage. Moreover, dissecting the text and recognizing themes and concepts builds up the reader's understanding of the text. Focusing on literary elements and the backgrounds in Matthew 19:13-15 help shed light on what the passage is about.

[1] Wigoder, Geoffrey, Shalom M. Paul, Benedic Viviano, and Ephraim Stern. *Illustrated Dictionary & Concordance of the Bible*. New York: Macmillan, 1986. 666.

[2] Wilkins, Michael J. *Matthew: From Biblical Text—to Contemporary Life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004. 29.

[3] *Ibid.*, 644.

[4] Matthew 19:1

[5] Hagner, D. A., *Matthew*. 2 Vols. Dallas: Word, 1993, 1995. 551.

[6] Senior, Donald. *Matthew*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998. 217.

[7] Fantin, Joseph D. 2015. "Children in the Roman Empire: outsiders within." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 172, no. 688: 492-495. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed April 9, 2016).

[8] Keener, Craig S. *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 1999. 472.

[9] Laes, Christian. 2011. *Children In the Roman Empire: Outsiders Within*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 26.

[10] France, R. T. *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*. 1989. 283.

[11] Elkins, Dov Peretz. 2005. *Yom Kippur Readings: Inspiration, Information, Contemplation*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub. 21.

[12] Derrett, J Duncan M. 1983. "Why Jesus blessed the children (Mk 10:13-16 par)." *Novum Testamentum* 56, no. 1: 1-18. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed April 9, 2016).

[13] Matthew 19:14

[14] Hagner, D. A., *Matthew*. 2 Vols. Dallas: Word, 1993, 1995. 553.

[15] Meier, J. P., *Matthew*. Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1980. 217.

[16] Hagner, D. A. *Matthew*. 2 Vols. Dallas: Word, 1993, 1995. 552.

[17] Senior, Donald. *Matthew*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998. 217.

[18] France, R. T. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007. 727.

[19] *Ibid.*, 727.

[20] France, R. T. *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*. 1989. 283.

[21] Hagner, D. A., *Matthew*. 2 Vols. Dallas: Word, 1993, 1995. 553.

[22] Meier, J. P., *Matthew*. Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1980. 217.

[23] Matthew 19:14

[24] Gundry-Volf, Judith M. 2000. "To Such as These Belongs the Reign of God': Jesus and the Children." *Theology Today* 56, no. 4: 469-480. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed April 9, 2016).

[25] Matthew 18:1-4

[26] France, R. T. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007. 727.

[27] Matthew 18:5

[28] France, R. T. *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*. 1989. 284.

[29] Matthew 9:18

[30] Hagner, D. A. *Matthew*. 2 Vols. Dallas: Word, 1993, 1995. 552.

[31] Acts 8:14-17

[32] Acts 6:6

[33] Verheyden, Joseph. (2011). A son in heaven, but no father on earth: A note in the margin of a "Tale of Two Sciencelogs." *Sciencelogs*, 67(1), 00. Retrieved April 11, 2016, from http://www.sciencelogs.org.za/sciencelogs.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=50259-94222011000100010&lng=en&lng=en.

[34] Hagner, D. A. *Matthew*. 2 Vols. Dallas: Word, 1993, 1995. 553.