

“Ikwekwe yinja¹ (a Boy is a Dog)”: Re-humanizing Children and Childhoods in Matthew 2:1-3 & 16-18 in Light of the Boy-child Debate in South Africa

Jordan Whitt / Unsplash.com



By Zukile Ngqeza²

Abstract

In contemporary society, the status of children as fully human is often contested and/or not accepted. The idea that children are not fully human has resulted in a plethora of abuses, including the denial of children's rights, voices, and agency both in biblical texts and in contemporary society. Notwithstanding, scholars like Marcia Bunge acknowledge that in the Judeo-Christian bible “infants and children are also whole and complete human beings made in the image of God” (2012:65). Many times, the ways in which children are treated in biblical texts (in so far as adults make decisions

without their (children) approval, e.g., Abraham's decision to sacrifice Isaac, Jephthah's decision to kill her daughter in honour of his agreement with Yahweh, the killing of the boy children during the time of Pharaoh and King Herod exhibit the idea that children are not fully human. Since Christians rely on the Bible for inspiration and conduct in both private and public life, it is necessary to study the ways in which children were treated in biblical times. Until recently, biblical scholars did not have much of a deliberate focus on studying children and how they are treated in the Bible. In

1 The phrase “*ikwekwe yinja* (a boy is a dog)” is used in IsiXhosa communities, where it is commonly believed that a boy is not yet a human being until he goes through the traditional initiation school, which makes him a man and/or fully human being (cf. Ntombana, 2011). I use this term to demonstrate the ways in which both in contemporary (South) African communities and in antiquity children are not considered fully human beings. A similar situation about girls in (South) African communities takes place whereby girls are not considered women and/or fully human beings until they attend a girls' initiation school called “intonjana”. These beliefs about children, whether directly or indirectly, exacerbate the abuse and homicide of children and childhoods in (South) Africa.

2 This study is related to Zukile Ngqeza's unpublished PhD thesis entitled “Women, Infant Mortality and Poverty: A Feminist-Childist-Trauma Reading of Maternal Cannibalism in 2 Kings 6:24-31 and Lamentations 2:20 & 4:10 in a South African Context” (2021). Ngqeza can be reached at Zukile.Ngqeza@nwu.ac.za.

this study, I intend to read the story of the killing of boy children in Matthew 2 from a Gender-Childist Biblical Approach. Since Childhood Studies is an interdisciplinary field of research, I will make use of the work of childhood studies/childism scholars such as John Wall (2012), Sandra Smidt (2013), and Spyros Spyrou (2018) to read these New Testament (NT) texts. This study is a contribution to Biblical Studies spurred by calls by the movement against Gender-Based Violence (GBV) to focus on the boy child, if we are to end patriarchy and GBV.

Keywords: The Child, Childism, Childist Approach, Intersectionality, Biblical Studies, New Testament, Adult-Centred, Re-Humanization, Boy-Child, Gender-Perspective

Introducing the Boy-Child Debate in South Africa

As part of reading Matthew 2 in light of the boy-child debate in South Africa, it is necessary to demonstrate the situation of the boy child. Law asks “What about a boy-child?” (2017:1), due to patriarchy and GBV mostly committed by men. There has been a focus on girl-child initiatives in South Africa while neglecting the boy-child. This resulted in calls for “an equal focus on the boy-child” (Law, 2017:1). Neglecting the boy child has serious consequences which include boy children not knowing “what is expected of them as they grow up into men” (Law, 2017:1). As a result, they (boy-children) embrace toxic forms of masculinities. Hence, Law calls for programmes that are designed to empower the boy child (Law, 2017:3). A childist reading of Matthew 2 shows that children’s abuse and homicide, as well as the denial of their (children) voices and agency, are as old as biblical times. A childist approach further allows us to see the boy-children in biblical texts in the light of the boy children who are neglected and abused in South Africa. A childist alternative to reading Matthew 2 is one of the initiatives of giving a much-needed focus on children (especially the boy-child) in the Bible and contemporary South Africa.

Interest in Studying Children in Biblical Studies

For many years biblical scholars did not have a deliberate focus on studying children and the ways in which they are treated in the Bible. Even in the 1990s, there was no deliberate focus given

“

Neglecting the boy child
has serious consequences
which include boy children
not knowing “what is
expected of them as they
grow up into men”
(Law, 2017:1)

”

to children and childhoods (Flynn, 2018:1). I use the word “childhoods” rather than “childhood” in order to demonstrate the diversity of children and childhoods in the world and in (South) Africa. For example, the experiences of white children are not the same as the experiences of black children, and vice versa. Even among children of the same race, there are different experiences due to issues such as class, gender, and sexuality. The deliberate focus on the intersections of childhood studies and biblical studies is a new development. Flynn realized that there was a view within the field of biblical studies that the place and the role of children in the Bible did not have much to do with the biblical passage, its meaning, or the intention of the author (2018:1). As a result, prior to the 1990s scholarly work on children of the Bible was very rare and only found in a few publications (Flynn, 2018:1). However, in recent years biblical scholars noticed that children in the Bible were vital characters. As a result, in recent years there have been a number of publications on the topic (Flynn, 2018:2). A number of biblical scholars like Parker came to the realization that children are essential and fundamental to the Bible and its immediate world (2013:1). Thus there is a need for a kind of Biblical studies that takes children seriously (Parker, 2013:1). Flynn further notes that the interest of scholarly work on the subject of children in the Old Testament (OT) commenced by means of interrogating long-held suppositions in Biblical studies that the Bible does not attach a great deal of importance to children (2018:1). Thus, there was a need to question such views. However, Parker mourns the fact that while childhood

studies has developed in a great way throughout the years “with new academic departments and journals emerging”, on the contrary, the field of Biblical studies has not yet engaged childhood studies (which is interdisciplinary) in the manner that other disciplines have done (2013:1-2). Where biblical research on children has been conducted, there is still a need for engaging children in the Bible from the perspective of the boy-child debate in South Africa.

The Value of Children in the Bible and in African Contexts

The call to study children and childhoods in the Bible cannot avoid dealing with the question, “What was the value of the child in the Bible”? In other words, did all children have the same value? For instance, in the OT there is evidence of children who are abused and/or killed through the assistance of their fathers. Jephthah’s daughter, Isaac, Ishmael, etc. are examples of such abuses.³ Yet such abuses do not mean that children were not valued in the Bible. For instance, Turner observes that children were valued in great ways in the OT to the extent that in Ancient Israel’s community the more children the person had, the more they were respected (1994:8). Even in the wedding setting, the guests would express their wish that the couple conceives as many children as possible from Yahweh (Turner, 1994:8). This is similar to the way in which children are valued in African culture/s. Baloyi and Manala observe that having children in African cultures is viewed as “the crowning glory” of a marriage (2019:1). Thus, the more children the couple has, the more praise and affirmation they get from the community (Baloyi & Manala, 2019:1). Africans consider childbearing as the primary reason for getting married (Baloyi & Manala, 2019:1). In order to demonstrate the significance of children in an African family, women who cannot bear children are regarded as a disgrace and are often rejected (Baloyi & Manala, 2019:1). As a consequence, the husband of the barren wife would resort to polygamy (Baloyi & Manala, 2018:1). While divorce is not encouraged in the Ashanti culture (even as a result of adultery), barrenness was an acceptable reason for divorce (Sarfo, 2017:552).

The Ashanti tribe is part of the Akan cultural group which includes “Ashanti, Akyem, Akuapem, and Fante tribes” – mainly in Ghana (West Africa) (Sarfo, 2017:548). Even though the Ashanti culture is in Ghana, there are similarities between it and the African cultures in South Africa in as far as women who do not have children are treated. In the South African Nguni cultures, if the firstborn conceived by the wife is a female, this is an adequate reason for a husband to get a second wife (Baloyi & Manala, 2019:6). Sarfo further notes that in the Ashanti culture, to have a child is a sign of a marriage that is blessed and consequently a marriage that does not have children is viewed as cursed (2017:552). Sarfo further notes that in the Ashanti culture, a female married person who bears children receives a prestige honour with the name *abaatan* while a woman who cannot have children (*abaabonin*) would want to remove her “social shame” into being an *abaatam* (good woman) (2017:557). This is similar to other African communities. For instance, in the IsiZulu community, a barren woman is called “*idlolo*”. There is an honour and shame category when it comes to having or not having children in African communities. This demonstrates the value of children in these African communities, just like in ancient Israel.

In the OT context, the covenant Yahweh made with Abraham in Gen 12:1- 3 includes the promise to have many children. Isaac was the son of the promise (cf. Gen 17:15-27). This demonstrates the value of children in the biblical account (cf. Turner, 1994:8). There are many verses in the Bible that refer to children “as gifts of God” or indicators of the blessings of Yahweh, and highlight the idea that children bring joy to their homes and societies (e.g. Gen 33:9; Gen 48:9; Ps 127:3). The first wife of Jacob, Leah, refers to her sixth son as a present or wedding gift received from Yahweh (Gen 30:20) (Bunge, 2012:62). In the OT, many parents who conceive children are said to have been remembered by Yahweh (e.g. Gen 30:22; 1 Sam 1:11, 19) and gained a great favour (Gen 30:11) (Bunge, 2012:62). Dorff argues that even though children are a blessing and joy to their parents (in that Yahweh’s promise of blessings to the OT patriarchs and matriarchs was associated with the promise of having many

³ In Genesis 22 Yahweh asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, as a way of testing his (Abraham) loyalty. Abraham agreed to sacrifice Isaac. What is questionable is how children are used by adults to prove their loyalty to God. A similar thing happened to Jephthah’s daughter.

children), some of the OT children brought misery and pain to their parents, e.g. the relationship between David and Absalom (2012:23). Even in contemporary society, some children bring pain to their parent(s).

While this study acknowledges the significant value of children in ancient Israel and in antiquity, as well as in contemporary society, a childist perspective would ask for whom or for whose interests are children in the Bible important? Are children valued in the Bible for themselves or for enhancing the status of the mother and/or couple (as is the case in the Ashanti culture)? For instance, in ancient Israel's society, a man who had no children could not be appointed to serve as a judge because he was not able to comprehend the worth of life (since he had no children) (Dorff, 2012:23). This could demonstrate that having children in ancient Israel was advantageous for adults, but not necessarily for children themselves, since it offers adults the possibility to be respected in the community and to be appointed to positions of authority and honour. This could be the reason fathers like Jephthah and Abraham were willing to give their children over as sacrifices to Yahweh.

Gender Perspective of the Value and the Plight of Children in the Bible and Contemporary South Africa

Since Matthew 2 mentions that it is boy-children who were killed and not girl-children, it is necessary that I discuss the situation of boy-children in the Bible and in contemporary South Africa. As a result, I ask whether or not all children are viewed as equal in the Bible and in contemporary (South) Africa? Were boy-children more important than girl-children, or vice versa? In response to this concern, Turner observes that in antiquity, the firstborn boy-child was highly treasured (1994:4). There was an understanding that the male firstborn child would take care of his parents when they age and that he would take care of the entire family as well. Furthermore, the male firstborn child was considered "the first fruit' of the womb, and his

birth was understood to be an indication of fertility (Turner, 1994:5).

Regarding the status of the girl-children in ancient Israel, girls were not viewed as important as boys, but ancient Israelites held a belief that all children were a gift from Yahweh. As a result they loved and appreciated their daughters (Turner, 1994:7). However, some biblical pericopes grant a low degree of importance to daughters. For example, the idea that the daughter's status came after the status of the guest (cf. Gen 19:1-8; Judg 19:16-26) (Turner, 1994:7). The household guest was perceived to be more important than the girl-child. However, firstborn girl-children were given special treatment compared to other girl-children (Gen 19:31-38, 29:26) (Turner, 1994:7).⁴

In contemporary South African communities, while both male and female children are important in African cultures, the boy-child is granted a high value of importance.⁵ This has some very detrimental consequences in that it contributes to androcentrism and patriarchy. As a result, Baloyi and Manala call for affirmation of both the boy- and the girl-child (Baloyi & Manala, 2019:1). Baloyi and Manala further observe that while families regard the boy-child as important to the family, the girl-children are regarded as "other people's property" (2019:2). This is because they will one day get married to another family. As a result, a woman who does not yet have a boy-child (even if she has many girl-children) would continue to have more children hoping that she would conceive a boy-child in the future (Baloyi & Manala, 2019:2). Having a baby boy will enhance the women's status to her husband. The husband will value her more. Baloyi and Manala problematize the superiority of male children since it cements patriarchy and androcentrism (2019:3).

In South Africa, the concern about patriarchy which is perpetuated in households by prioritizing the interests of the boy-child led to the establishment of girl-child empowerment interventions by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and also

⁴ Turner admits that daughters were under the legal dominion of their fathers until they got married, then they were under the dominion of their husbands. However, there were some daughters who displayed independence, for example, Rebecca, Mirriam, Deborah, Jael, and Abigail. Yet there is clear demonstration that the majority of girls submitted to a man.

⁵ For instance, Baloyi and Manala note that there is a saying in the Tsonga culture that says "*Vanhwana i tihuku to khomela wayeni* (girls are chickens for visitors)" (2019:2). This saying implies that there is no need to focus on the girl-child even when it comes to giving them education because, just like serving visitors with chickens, the girl-child will one day join another family through marriage. Yet, the boy-child will carry the name and the lineage of the family to the next generation (Baloyi & Manala, 2019:2).

by the government (e.g., Sonke Gender Justice, Love Life and Not in My Name movement). These programmes focus on teaching girl-children their intrinsic value, as well as strategies for resisting toxic masculinity and patriarchy. However, this is often done without necessarily mentoring the boys to relearn the ways in which they can undo the patriarchy that they see and are taught in their homes. Thus in South Africa today, there is a concern about the neglect of the boy-child (Law, 2017:1).

Childist Biblical Hermeneutics

Since Christians rely on the Bible for inspiration and guidance in life, there is a similarity between the plight of children in the Bible and those in contemporary (South African) society. There is, therefore, a need for a childist biblical approach. Flynn refers to childist biblical hermeneutics as a “small field” of study. Hence, there are few biblical scholars who write from a childist approach (2018:2). Childist hermeneutics has similar goals to other liberation theologies and/or methodologies such as feminist and postcolonial lenses. This is a point Flynn also makes when he argues that childist or child-centered approaches are similar to feminist approaches in that they seek to liberate those who are marginalized in biblical texts, the scholarly world, and in society (2018:2). For example, since some of the OT passages present children’s characters in a negative way, a childist approach seeks to save “the voiceless child from the Hebrew Bible’s more negative treatment of children” (Flynn, 2018:2). Furthermore, the childist approach acknowledges that the “voiceless child is only communicated through the lenses of adults” (Flynn, 2018:2). In many biblical passages, we seldom hear the viewpoint of the child. It is adults and not children who write about children

in both the biblical passages and in commentaries. The childist approach inspires scholars to read the Bible in ways that seek to undo the common trend of ignoring the characters of children by paying attention to them (Parker, 2013:199). Childist biblical interpretation intends to restore the humanity and voices of children in the scriptures and the commentaries. It is about the re-humanization of de-humanized children by the Bible writers and commentators. In the following section, I will use childist hermeneutics in reading Matt 2:1-3 & 16-18.

A Childist Reading of Mathew 2:1-3 & 16-18

In reading Matt 2:16-18 from a childist perspective, I will make use of three points that John Wall offers in order to contribute to what he considers a “more fully childist alternative” (2012:154). Wall proposes that in order to do justice in childist research and ethics, we need to go beyond the three categories⁶ of how children have been viewed in Christian history into a “more fully childist alternative” (2012:145). I will also make use of the work of childhood studies/childism scholars, Sandra Smidt (2013) and Spyros Spyrou (2018) to read these NT texts. Thus in this section, I will start by briefly discussing three views that supersede the aforementioned three standard approaches of a “more fully childist alternative” and utilize them in interpreting Matt 2:16-18 from a childist perspective.

A More Fully Childist Alternative

Wall presents his structure as “a more fully childist alternative” (2012:145-151). He then offers three responses to the questions that childist ethics often raise. The first response deals with the question of ontology (being) in terms of what it means to be a moral human being from the childhood perspective. Second, he deals with teleological objectives and goals of human communities.

6 The three categories to understanding children as understood in early Christianity are, firstly, the bottom-up approach – this is a view that children demonstrate “humanity’s original gift for goodness, purity, and innocence” that must be treasured by adults and the community at large (Wall, 2012:144). This view is derived from the New Testament teaching that those who follow Jesus Christ have become “children of God” and that only those who “act like children” can enter the kingdom of God. In this “bottom-up” approach children are seen as “models of human goodness”. Wall then problematizes this approach since it has the potential to “dehumanize children” by hiding their complex problems, difficulties, and diversity (2012:144). Thus if children are this “good”, then society does not owe them much. Second, the “top-down approach” views children as inherently sinful, selfish, unruly, and in need of being disciplined. This approach is derived from the Pauline corpus where Christians are summoned to put away childish doings. Wall problematizes this “top-down” approach by arguing that while it is good in fostering education, ethics, and discipline in children, it has the potential to dehumanize children by means of ignoring their “gifts, agency and voices” (2012:144). Third, there is the “developmental approach” which is more neutral than the previous approaches (bottom-up and top-down) in that it maintains that children are inherently “neither good nor evil”. They are “in a state of pre-rationality or underdeveloped potential” (Wall, 2012:144). They must first grow before they become “active moral citizens”. According to Wall, this “developmental approach” further dehumanizes children in that it is based on the premise that “children are not yet, developed adults”. Thus it seeks to suggest that children are not yet fully human. They still need to become human. Wall argues that from this viewpoint, it is impossible to consider “children as full citizens with moral agency and rights” (Wall, 2012:145).

“
 In South Africa, the concern
 about patriarchy which is
 perpetuated in households
 by prioritizing the interests
 of the boy-child led to the
 establishment of girl-child
 empowerment interventions
 by non-governmental
 organisations (NGOs).”

”

The teleological vision refers to the telos (goals, objectives, or what ought be rather than what is). Third, is a question of deontology (duties and obligations). It deals with the ways in which childism understands the obligations of human beings to each other. I make use of these three responses from Wall (2012:141-151) to read Matt 2:1-3 & 16-18 in a “more fully childist” way.

An Ontological View

Wall begins with the ontological question with regard to children as fully human beings with moral agency (2012:145). Wall further acknowledges that Christianity has, by and large, restricted its understanding of the question of right or wrong (in terms of top-down category) to the life of adults (2012:145). According to Wall “the root cause of children’s dehumanization throughout Christianity has been the tendency to reduce children’s ontological natures to simple goodness or fallenness (perhaps even more than women’s), or instead to blank pre-morality” (2012:145).

Wall offers a childist approach to Gen 1:26-27. He argues that both children and adults share “*imitatio dei*” status. (2012:146) Thus human beings have the ability to create a new world for themselves and the whole of creation. Wall further argues that we

need to go beyond a literal interpretation of “be fruitful and multiply” since it excludes children and perhaps adolescents. This is due to children’s inability to produce and conceive children. I use the biblical phrase “be fruitful and multiply” symbolically. Thus from a childist perspective, the phrase refers to the ontological ability of children to contribute to social and moral agency in society, thereby revealing children’s roles in making the world a better place for both children and adults. The symbolic interpretation of “be fruitful and multiply” calls for every human being (including children) “to reproduce itself in ever new ways in its relational, cultural, and historical worlds”. Thus from a childist perspective, the call of Gen 1:26-27 is more sociological instead of being a biophysiological construction - it confirms that all people are creative and inventive image-bearers of the inventive Creator of the universe.

In Matthew 2, the narrator is an adult (Matthew) and the main characters in the narrative are adults (King Herod (v. 1), the wise men (v. 1), priests and teachers of religion (v. 4), and Joseph (v. 13)). The child Jesus seems to disturb the adult-centred world of the Roman empire that is managed and maintained by King Herod. The king is specifically disturbed by the fact that “the wise men from the eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the new born king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him’ (Matt 21:2, NLT). After the king sent the wise men to look for the newly born Jesus and they failed to return to him, King Herod decided to send soldiers to kill all the boy children from the age of two and below in the city of Bethlehem and its surroundings (vv. 16-18).

It appears that in this text, the order to kill the boy children is linked to King Herod’s disturbance when he heard that the wise men recognized the new born baby as a king (of the Jews). The king does not order the soldiers to kill the parents, but the boy-children.

From the perspective of the ontological question as discussed by Wall in Matthew 2, King Herod refuses to recognize and honour the newly born baby as a “fully human being with moral agency” (Wall, 2012:147). For King Herod, the baby cannot be the king since he is not an adult and does not have the moral and aged ability to lead justly. King Herod’s problem is not only that he killed the boys,

but that he dehumanized the new born baby and the boys by not recognizing their “being” and agency. Furthermore, from an ontological (being) perspective, King Herod refuses to acknowledge that the newly born Jesus and the boy-children of Bethlehem “share the ‘imitatio dei (image of God)’ status with adults in Matthew 2 (King Herod, wise men, priests, teachers of religion and Joseph) (Wall, 2012:146). Thus, to send the wise men to look for the baby Jesus and also to order the soldiers to kill the boy children is a result of denying, as well as refusing to acknowledge, that children are also made in the image of God, like adults.

A Teleological View

Wall deals with the teleological goals and objectives of human communities (2012:147). This concerns the kind of world that humanity seeks to build for all creation. Wall argues that the Sabbath, as it is mentioned in the creation narrative in Genesis 2, provides both children and adults an opportunity to form a replica of Sabbath (rest) that leads to peace and justice in relation to each other (2012:147). The way children relate to parents and teachers, as well as to their friends, should translate into how they relate to visitors and neighbours. Adults are also expected to relate to children in a similar way than they do to fellow adults. Therefore, the teleological vision of human societies, at least from the childist perspective, is to see children and adults as equal partners in creating a new Sabbath-like world of peace, justice, and inclusion (Wall, 2012:147).

When we read Matt 2:16-18 from a teleological view, we recognise that King Herod does not see children having the ability to partner with adults in creating a telos for their communities. King Herod’s actions deny children’s ability to have a societal goal (telos) for the good of all creation. For King Herod, a baby cannot be king (of the Jews) since kings lead their people to the future (telos). King Herod does not accept that children (just like the baby Jesus who was announced as king) have the potential to play a role in creating a “Sabbath-like world” for their communities. Therefore, the killing of the boys in Matt 2:16-18 is a result of Herod (as an adult) refusing to honour the teleological competence of children.

A Deontological View

What do the deontological duties of human beings from a childist perspective look like? Wall

argues that from the childist perspective, children are beseeched to love other people and they also need to be loved by others. But this kind of love does not require self-sacrifice. Children are not required to sacrifice their being for other people (especially adults). Furthermore, children also do not require adults to sacrifice themselves since they (children) still need to grow up to be adults. The real challenge is for human beings to have compassion and love each other in ways that destabilize the power relations between children and adults. In this context, love demands “an elliptical responsibility” whereby both the young and the old work towards a world where difference and diversity are appreciated (Wall, 2012:147). This is a situation whereby both children and adults have a duty to co-create an inclusive society. Wall further argues that just like Yahweh created the world by speaking in the creation story, both children and adults need to “retell their stories over and over again in more creative response to the stories of others” (2012:147). This is where the diverse stories of humanity form a communal new story. This is what Katangole calls a “new we” (2017:177).

Reading Matthew 2 from a deontological perspective makes one ask whether children have deontological (duties, obligations) responsibilities or not. Childism considers children as having the ability to take deontological responsibilities for the betterment of others (whether children or adults). This is the reason Christianity started through the life of the baby Jesus with a duty (deontological vision) to save people from their sins (Matt 1:21). However, in Matthew 2, Herod is disturbed when he hears that the wise men worshiped the baby and honoured him as the king of the Jews. Herod, therefore, does not see the baby as eligible to have a deontological responsibility (since the child is the king) for his people (who are also adults). As a result, Herod calls for the killing of this new born baby and other boy children. It is not that the baby cannot be a king because of the position (ontology) but also because of the child’s inability to do the duties (deontology) of that role (at least from the perspective of Herod). However, from a childist perspective, both children and adults have deontological responsibilities to create a new story and a new world. Thus, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus sojourning to Egypt (Matt 2:14, 19-21) could be an example of this deontological responsibility that both children and adults have.

Children as Active Citizens and Social Players

The state of childhood is strictly controlled and measured in that it is adults who mostly make decisions about children's lives (Smidt, 2013:13). However, in recent years children have been increasingly considered as "social beings and players in their own life stories" (Smidt, 2013:13). Children are not just followers of adults, they are capable of telling their own stories and they should be treated as "social actors" (Smidt, 2013:13). Children have the ability and competence of actors and players in the struggle for social justice (Smidt, 2013:13). For instance, Fricker⁷ notes how children from South Africa were part of the delegates who attended COP 27 (2022). These are children who are involved in climate change protests and are playing their part in actions that contribute to climate justice in South Africa (Fricker, 2022). As a consequence, children have started to question their parents, teachers, and those who hold positions of power about issues of equality, equity, impartiality, and justice (Smidt, 2013:13). Children are no longer seen as invisible dependents, but they emerge as responsible citizens and agents of change.

The idea of agency is vital in the field of childhood studies (Spyrou, 2018:117). Thus children's agency is a new focus of childhood studies. It is based on the idea that it is not only adults who have the ability to be active citizens and social actors who work for social transformation - also children have such abilities and competencies (Spyrou, 2018:118). This presents a new way of seeing the position of children in the world today. The idea that "children are beings and not mere becomings (in that they will grow to be adults)" has serious effects on the way we study children and childhoods in the Bible and in the contemporary world (Spyrou, 2018:118). Seeing children as active citizens and social agents challenges the old and long-lasting adult-centred methods of writing scholarly works about children and childhoods (Spyrou, 2018:118). It further challenges the way children have been presented by adult narrators in the Bible and also by authors of biblical commentaries.

In Matt 2:1-3, King Herod is surprised and disturbed by a version of the new born baby as an active citizen and social role player (king of the Jews). It seems that King Herod is angered by a baby who is a social player instead of being an invisible dependent on adults. However, this baby from his first day on earth engages in a national role as a king of the Jews. The adult-centred King does not expect this from a child and as a result, embarks on a mission to find him (the child). From a childist perspective, the killing of the boys is an attempt to prevent the newly born baby and the "child body" he embodies from active social role-playing.

Muting the Voices of Children

The voices of children are important in childhood studies. In many writings and interpretations of texts and narratives, the voices of children are silent or silenced. As a result, Spyrou argues that scholars of childhood studies should resist the boundaries that inhibit the voices of children from being heard in literature. Childhood studies seek to investigate and explore the unstated voices of children and childhoods in order to bring new meanings and representations of children to textual narratives (2018:86). The practice of putting the voices of children in the centre of our scholarly work presents us with an "opportunity to [not] decenter the child as a subject" (Spyrou, 2018:86). Therefore, childhood studies as an interdisciplinary field of study has been built on the idea of the voices of children (Spyrou, 2018:87). Through examining the silenced voices of children by means of making their voices heard by the readers, scholars begin to understand children and childhoods in new ways⁸ (Spyrou, 2018:87).

In Matthew 2, children do not speak, cry or resist King Herod and the soldiers' attempts to kill them. In these biblical texts, it is only adults who speak and not children. For instance, in Matthew 2, adults speak in the following verses: 2:2 "the wise men asked, where is the new born king of the Jews?"; 2:4 He [Herod] asked, "where is the Messiah supposed to be born?"; 2:5 "In Bethlehem in Judea, "they said [priests and teachers of religion]"; 2:8

⁷ Toby Fricker is the Chief Communication Officer at UNICEF South Africa. He was interviewed on SABC news in November 2022 regarding the role that children played in COP 27.

⁸ Spyrou cautions us from thinking that the voice of children is "individual, fixed straightforward, linear or clear" (2018:87). Furthermore, Spyrou argues that in our pursuit of placing the voices of children at the centre of our scholarship, we must be aware of "epistemologies and power relations in data generation" whereby the adults who write on behalf of children consider their views about children as "authentic" (2018:88).

“then he [Herod] told them “Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child”; 2:13 “the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph “ Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother, the angel said”. Furthermore, the narrator does not demonstrate the voices of the boy children who are killed. The boy children are silent in this chapter. They do not cry or even resist. Matthew shuts the voices of children down and only allows us to hear the voices of adults (cf. Matt 2:18). Masenya would consider Matthew’s decision to mute the voices of children as “narrative violence” (2017).

Concluding Remarks

The childist approach to biblical texts helps biblical scholars to read texts in solidarity with children. Childism grants us theories that aid us in restoring the voice and agency of children in the biblical texts and in contemporary South Africa. This study primarily used John Wall’s three questions of the ontological-teleological-deontological values of children, as well as the work of Sandra Smidt (2013) and Spyros Spyrou (2018) to re-humanize the children of Matthew 2. Such an approach enables us to recognize their (the children’s) agency, voice, and competence which the male narrator (Matthew) ignored. Furthermore, this study has established that childist biblical interpretation helps us to see children in the text and in contemporary society as equal partners with adults in creating a better world for all (children and adults). This study further contributes to attempts by Biblical Studies to engage with scholars of other disciplines in order to rediscover the place of the child in research and in society.

References

- Antonsson, E.H. 2017. *The Vulnerable Boy-Child: A Qualitative Study of the Situation for the Rural Boys in Kenya*. Unpublished MA Thesis. Jonkoping: Jonkoping University.
- Baloyi, M.E. & Manala, M.J. 2019. Reflecting on Challenges of Preferring the Male Child in an African Marriage: Practical Theological Observation. *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 1-9.
- Browning, D.S. & Witte, J. 2012. ‘Christianity’s Mixed Contributions to Children’s Rights Traditional Teachings, Modern Times’, in M. Bunge (ed), *Christian, Adults, and Shared Responsibilities: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 272-291.
- Bunge, M. 2012. ‘Christian Understandings of Children: Central Biblical Themes and Resources’, in M. Bunge (ed), *Christian, Adults, and Shared Responsibilities: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 59-78.
- Claassens, L.T. 2017. An Abigail Optic: Agency, Resistance, and Discernment in 1 Samuel 25. In L.J. Claassens & C.J. Sharp (Eds), *Feminist Frameworks and the Bible: Power, Ambiguity, and Intersectionality*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 21-38.
- Cockburn, T. 2010. ‘Children, the Feminist Ethic of Care and Childhood Studies: Is this the Way to the Good Life?’, in S. Andresen, I. Diehm, U. Ziegler et al (eds) *Children and the Good Life: New Challenges for Research on Children*. Berlin. Springer.
- Dorff, D. 2012. ‘The Concept of The Child Embedded in Jewish Law’, in M. Bunge (ed), *Christian, Adults, and Shared Responsibilities: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 19-38.
- Flynn, S.W. 2018. Children in the Hebrew Bible: A New Field, *Religion Campus*, Vol 12, Issue 8, 1-12.
- Friker, T. 2022. COP 27: Inclusion of Children in Finding Solutions to Deal with Climate Change: Toby Friker [Video], November 08. Available from: [COP 27 | Inclusion of children in finding solutions to deal with climate change: Toby Friker | United Nations in South Africa](#) (Accessed: 18 August 2023).
- Hsiao, C., Fry, D., Ward, C.L., Ganz, G., Casey, T., & Zheng, X. 2017. Violence against Children in South Africa: The Cost of Inaction to Society and the Economy. *BJM Glob Health*, 1-8.
- Katangole, E. 2017. *The Journey of Reconciliation: Groaning for a New Creation in Africa*. New York: Orbit Books.
- Law, L. 2017. ‘What about the Boy Child?’, *Southern African Catholic Bishop’s Conference Parliamentary Liaison Office Briefing Paper 334*, November, 1-5. Available from: [BP-443-What-about-the-Boy-Child-November-2017.pdf](#) (cplo.org.za) (Accessed: 16 March 2023).
- Masenya, M. 2017. ‘Limping Yet Made to Climb a Mountain!': Re-Reading the Vashti Character in the HIV and AIDS South African Context’, in Y. Sherwood, A. Fisk (eds), *The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 534-547.
- Ngqeza, Z. 2021. *Women, Infant Mortality and Poverty: A Feminist-Childist-Trauma Reading of 2 Kings 6:24-31 and Lamentations 2:20 & 4:10 in a South African Context* (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis). Johannesburg: University of Johannesburg. Available from: https://ujcontent.uj.ac.za/esploro/outputs/doctoral/Women-infant-mortality-and-poverty/9915306907691?institution=27UOJ_INST (Accessed: 12 October 2022).
- Ntombana, L. 2011. *An Investigation into the Role of the Xhosa Male Initiation in Moral Regeneration* (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis). Port Elizabeth: Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. Available from: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/145051396.pdf> (Accessed: 12 October 2022).
- Parker, J. F. 2013. *Valuable and Vulnerable: Children in the Hebrew Bible, especially the Elisha*. Providence: Brown University Press.
- Rosen, R. 2020. ‘Childhood Studies’, in D.T. Cook (ed), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood Studies*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications. 2-8.

- Sarfo, J.E.D. 2017. 'The Reproductive Rite: (In)Fertility in the Ashanti and Ancient Hebrew Context', in Y. Sherwood, A. Fisk (eds), *The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 548-568.
- Smidt, S. 2013. *The Developing Child in the 21st Century: A Global Perspective on Child Development*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Spyrou, S. 2018. *Disclosing Childhoods: Research and Knowledge Production for a Critical Childhood Studies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Turner, G.E. 1994. Children in the Hebrew Bible. *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa* 18.2, 2-14.
- Wall, J. 2012. 'Reimagining Childism: How Childhood should Transform Religious Ethics?', in M. Bunge (ed), *Christian, Adults, and Shared Responsibilities: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 135-151.