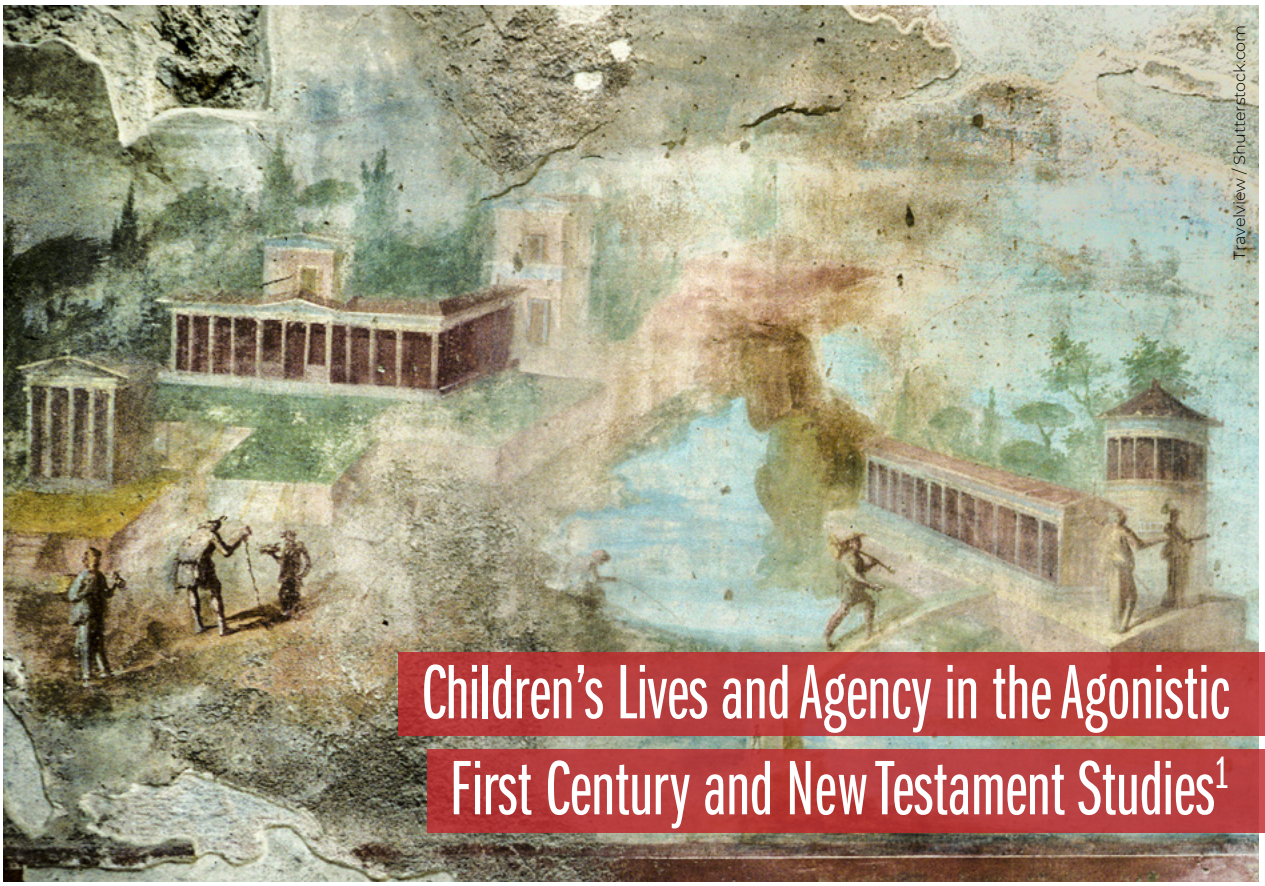

Children's Lives and Agency in the Agonistic First Century and New Testament Studies[1]

By Jeremy Punt

Abstract

While theoretical approaches attempt to map ancient childhood, the material and incidental nature of children's lives in all their varieties and differences, are crucial for understanding ancient childhood. Recent investigations into children in their living environments have shown attention to their clothing, childhood care, social relations, leisure and play, health and disability, upbringing and schooling, and their experiences of death. Children's lives and activities were framed also by the agonistic nature of first-century society, making them susceptible to structural violence in various ways. The purpose of the paper is to track and trace children's experience and in particular their agency in the ancient Roman world that were often hostile to little lives and bodies, and to consider the value of such studies for the interpretation of the New Testament.

Introduction: Agency of Children in Ancient Agonistic Society

Ancient childhood, and particularly children's bodily realities, in all their varieties and differences, are crucial but difficult to trace. Children's living environments including elements such as their clothing, childhood care, social relations, leisure and play, health and disability, upbringing and schooling, and their experiences of death, can give us an inkling of ancient childhood experiences. All of these were framed by the agonistic nature of first-century society, with children being even more susceptible to violence than others, and to structural violence in particular. Since agency was (and is) key

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when it comes to dealing with violence, and since children's agency was yet more constrained than those of other marginalised groups such as women and slaves,[2] coming to terms with their agency is crucial for understanding the links between violence and children in the time of the NT. Even the lives of children of the elite were not spared if political interests came in the way, as the lives and experiences of Cleopatra's children show (McGrath 2022). Such considerations urge more input from a history-from-below angle, and skilful manoeuvring between sentimentalising, distanced, and cold-hard-facts and other approaches.

Of late more studies have appeared on children in the Roman family and beyond (Krause 2011), sometimes with a specific focus such as on up to one-year-old infants (Carroll 2018), or even calling for a new method such as Childist Criticism.[3] Particularly helpful have been attempts to explore children's lives beyond adults' perceptions. *Children and Everyday Life in Roman and Late Antique World* (Laes & Vuolanto 2017b) is exemplary in tracing pre-modern children's experience and agency, by incorporating a wide range of scholarship ranging from archaeologists, classicists, ancient historians, theologians to scholars of Judaism and early Christianity.[4] In a concluding essay, Aasgaard (2017: 318-31) proposes an interpretive grid for studies of children in their living environments. He notes the need for a new approach that centres on children's lives rather than new methodologies (see also Garroway & Martens 2020), promoting interdisciplinarity and intersectionality.[5] His six-fold grid for understanding children's lives incorporates physical, social, and ideological environments, and their actions, bodies and minds. Seven criteria serve as tools to fill in this grid: children as originators; attestation by adults; embarrassing to adults; non-elite material; reflections of children's everyday worlds; reflections of children's interests; and attitudes that are critical or negative in relation to adults. Allowing for porous borders and conceding the subtleties and hybridities that taxonomies cannot always express adequately, such frameworks can deepen engagement with ancient children's lives. Emulating Aasgaard's fine balance between problematizing and identifying the potential in pursuing joint interests in the study of ancient childhood, my paper considers children's agency in context and in relation to violence, and reflect on the possible value of such studies for New Testament (hereafter NT) interpretation.

Children in Ancient, Agonistic Society

In the Roman Empire, children were outsiders within (Laes 2011). Amidst doubts that childhood was seen as a stage distinct from adulthood in ancient times (Rousselle 1988:47-62; see Kraemer 1993:106), the growing consensus is that childhood was taken to be part of the human life cycle – even if more in philosophical and social terms than according to modern, psychological models (Frilingos 2014:45).[6] Actual age was less important than appearance and physical development in ancient society (Laes 2011:282). Whether in social convention and practice the category of childhood carried as much weight for the ancients as for people today, remains a point of dispute.[7] Children

2 See also the section in a volume on marginalised persons in the Roman world (Peachin 2011: 589-733), and other scholars on the voices of Roman children, in relation to the voices of women and slaves (Dixon 2005).

3 Garroway and Martens, who devote much attention to the term and discuss Parker's invention of a six-stage grid in this regard, admit that some scholars may be more at ease with child-centred or childhood studies (Garroway & Martens 2020:11), which would entail one or more of the following four components: "assigning voice to the (silent) child, asserting agency and filling in the gaps in a child's narrative, pointing to the adult-centric nature or interpretation of the text and or artifact, and finally, noting the interplay between the value and vulnerability that children experience". For the origins of the term childist beyond biblical scholars' use of it, see Garroway and Martens (Garroway & Martens 2020:7, n21).

4 This book differs from other perspectives such as Wiedemann who, on the other hand, deliberately tried to track the changes among adults attitudes towards children in the first four centuries of the common era (Wiedemann 1989); some scholars' focus is even more specific, such as attention focussed on the "cultivated male perspective" on children in the late Roman Republic and Empire (Laes 2011:10).

5 Cautiously optimistic about projects that want to understand better ("come closer"), Aasgaard (2017:324-26) reminds us of the tensions between positivism and plausibility; idealised and real positions; emic and etic studies; and, postulating children's experiences and recovering (empathically relating to) their real experiences.

6 In *Creation of the World*, Philo of Alexandria described not unlike other ancient sources, children's development in cycles of 7 years. Dasen puts the context well: "Roman childhood was seen as a separate stage in the life cycle, composed of several steps, each with physical and intellectual qualities and defects, as was the case for the other ages of life" (Dasen 2021:117).

7 Laes is at pains to explain how age, while not insignificant to ancient society, was less well-defined and very loosely applied notwithstanding Roman jurists' careful use of 14 or 15 years as the threshold age. A social rather than a psychological category, the marginal importance of age for ancient children was reflected e.g. in their early introduction into work, age's secondary importance in matters of education or sexuality (Laes 2011:280-85)

found themselves in households in which they not only had to find their way but within which they also actively participated and worked from a very young age (Oakes 2020:3-30).[8] "In a high-mortality society, Romans had to acknowledge some tough demographic conditions. The early stages of life were tenuous and not all children were equally valued" (Lindsay 2021:531). Such incorporation in the household made them vulnerable in various ways but at the same time bestowed on children in antiquity agency that does not really exist in the modern romanticised notion of children viewed from the perspective of unspoilt youth.[9]

In a broader sense, children's lives were framed by violence which was part of everyday life and which children had to negotiate in the first-century, agonistic Mediterranean world, aspects of which emerges also from an analysis of NT texts. Violence and brutality were everyday experiences for children, who as incomplete adults, were associated with marginalised groups such as slaves, and were caught between *pater familias'* pietas-based treatment and *auctoritas*-based punishment of slaves (Laes 2011:282-85). While the vocabulary for violence was used for different purposes, from physical human violence, to the cosmic struggle between good and evil, and metaphorically to the Christian's life of service to God (a spiritual battle), it is evident that military terms dominate (Desjardins 1997:63-64; see also Punt 2016). The military focus may have been indicative of an imperialist context, yet violence in general was ingrained in the first-century world. Violence was naturalised as was common in agonistic societies where the exercise of power – as the ability to exercise control over the behaviour of others – was a highly rated means value, which facilitated the achievement of core and secondary values (Pilch 1993:139-42).[10] The prevailing hierarchical-patriarchal (Bakke, 2005:81-83 epub) and educational systems saw children exposed to slave-educators and accompanying harsh realities (Bakke 2005:85-88; Laes 2011:282-83). Evidence suggests that violence was common in ancient households and that even children and spousal abuse occurred in Roman households, even if frequency and whether violence was part of children's daily experience is difficult to determine (Dolansky 2021:255).[11] At the same time, literature from the time suggests that violence was not always the default option, as the remark of Publilius Syrus demonstrates: "Youth ought to be curbed by reason, not violence" (Publilius Syrus Max. 108; see Bakke 2005:82 epub).

Agency and Experience as Slippery and Fluid

In tracing children's agency and experience in ancient times even the terms are contested. Infants and very small children's agency were tangential and depended on the circumstances of parents, family, and community. As much as most people today see "late abortion and infanticide as roughly morally equivalent, and both as morally forbidden", before Christian traditions started to weigh in in Roman society neither late abortion nor infanticide were unacceptable even if preferably avoided since they caused pain (Crisp 2010).[12] Looking at children in terms of their everyday lives is about more than sketching out the objects, instruments, spaces and so on, that they encountered. Children's everyday lives return some of the lost voices of children (Frilingos 2014:45) and also assist in understanding how (and, at times, why) they were considered in terms of their relationships to their parents, other adults, animals, and gods, and the reasons for volitional constraints in their little lives (cf e.g. Vout 2015:603).

8 In the words of Osgood (2011:74), "Children were, without a doubt, put to work as soon as they were able to do anything of use and contribute to the family's survival".

9 Slave children may also have been present in the household but not necessarily seen as children of the household but simply as young slaves (see e.g. Kartzow 2018). For the blurring boundaries, see in the NT e.g. Gal 4:7 (οὐκέτι … δοῦλος ἀλλὰ υἱός no longer a slave but a son); in the same event in Lk 7, ὁ παῖς μου (7:7) becomes τὸν δοῦλον in 7:12; and in Lk 12:45, τοὺς παῖδας (used alongside τὰς παιδίσκας or slave girls) can be understood as boys, or male slaves.

10 In addition to children suffering violence, antiquity has various reports of children engaging in violence, often confirming their outsider status such as when they take up the role of executioners within a specific community. So e g was Cassian of Imola, a third-century Christian school teacher handed over to his pupils who executed him with their styluses, Prudentius, 'Passion of Saint Cassian of Forum Cornelii', *Peristephanon 9* (see Wiedemann 1989:179).

11 Adult-child sexual activity was common at the time, with pederasty (not to be simply rolled into modern-day understandings of paedophilia) deriving from Greek practices however frowned upon by Romans (see Frilingos 2014).

12 Frilingos (2014:45) also notes that adults' calculations of children's lives and values did not always work in the latter's favour; second-century physician Soranus (Gynecology 2.79) determined criteria for whether to keep or expose a child.

Vuolanto (2017:15-16) suggests that the understanding of experience gains from differentiating whether it is seen as knowledge gained or awareness gathered more generally; the experience itself or meaning given to it; and, individual or shared experience. Experience is linked closely with agency: "to have agency means that an individual has a sense of having the means to influence the course of one's own life (and thus the world) within the opportunities and constraints provided by history and social circumstances" (Vuolanto 2017:18). Laes and Vuolanto's (2017b) recently extended agency beyond a strong sensory approach regarding touch and movement in particular, to include also real-life experience in terms of children's physicality and height and their impact on children's movements in places like Pompeii in general, and with regard to household spatiality and religious activities, specifically (see Laurence 2017:27-42). Children's agency and experience can be plotted otherwise, too, such as primarily in distinction from that of adults, with their agency emulating from, for example ,the differences in children's clothing and what such differences signified about adults' attention to and care for (their) children (see Harlow 2017:43-59); or in children as subjects of breastfeeding, touching and kissing (see Laes 2017:61-79).

Agency, then, can be framed as the ability of children to act on their own in the general sense of the word, or volition can be made determinative, such as that "agency is not what children do as such, but also what they *choose (not) to do*" (Cojocaru 2017:258). Agency can also be seen in a more inherent way, such as Mackey's (2017:181-97) focus on inherent core or ('primitive') physiological capacities that enable cognitive agency;[13] or, more prominently, agency as resistance, not only in the negative sense of countering and rejecting social norms and even direct adult instructions but also in creatively moving beyond traditional understandings of social norms (Toner 2017:99-115). Such tendencies are apparent later, also in early Christianity where amid an increasingly porous set of boundaries between childhood and adulthood, children exercised religious or ascetic choices and made life-changing decisions in the extension of conventional expressions (Caseau 2017:217-31).[14]

Children's Agency and Experience as History from Below

Even more difficult than describing slippery terms like children's experience and agency, is to find first-hand examples given temporal, spatial, socio-cultural and a host of other factors complicating such investigation – not least of which has been the adult-focused nature of the contemporary world. It is not only the scarcity of resources but also the nature of the meagre sources that pose a challenge in establishing ancient children's agency. Studies of children's lives in ancient times suffer from a deficit of material available directly from children and often rely on evidence from adults, usually elite men. Using the available evidence, one has to hypothesise, construct and construe, and make connections to make a useful contribution to the study of ancient childhood. Notwithstanding self-imposed caveats, delimitations, and remaining questions, the focus should remain on children and their perceptions, voices and lives. Still, written evidence of the time may indicate childhood's challenges, such as a Roman funerary law that allowed adults and children over six to be mourned for a year, but a child below six for a month only.[15] While according to the shortest mourning time for infants signals their low status (Barton 2011:582), children's agency and experience remain buried.

Trying to identify children's agency and experience, therefore, benefits from so-called history from below, and with the focus on "tiny people", "below" becomes thicker in meaning. Looking away from history with its all too often focus on the adult, elite, "great men" as shapers of history and world events, people's history shifts the perspective to the non-elite and their significance for and in history

13 "Roman children's capacities for social cognition – not only *understanding* but also sharing in the intentionality of others – potentiated their agency in religious imitation, ritual participation, and choral hymn learning" (Mackey 2017:193). Mackey's focussed on three elements, children imitation of others; religious participation; and, religious instruction.

14 As Caseau (2017:218) argues, "Resistance to the rules of holy deportment is one of the areas where we can see children acting for themselves" and lists as examples children's play during formal religious gatherings, disobeying parental instructions and their food rules.

15 Gender and kinship produced further differentiation: "A husband can be mourned for ten months, close blood relations for eight months. Whoever acts contrary to these restrictions is placed in public disgrace'" (Barton 2011:582) citing Konstan (Konstan 2007).

(Sharpe 1991:26).[16] The focus of studies increasingly is to understand children in the light of their own experiences and reactions to such experiences. Such a history "from below" has to contend and deal with all aspects of life, having to employ interdisciplinary approaches for its research. Beyond the dearth of evidence and sources, a people's history of children remains problematic given the variety in children's age, gender, parents' status, and social location generally, especially when determining experience and agency.[17] In valuing difference, common to such historiographic strategies is, however, concern with ordinary experience and people, and their impact on the course of events in history. At times children, amidst hugely asymmetric power relationships, pushed back against social norms and conventions often embodied by their parents or guardians.

Children's Agency, Experience, and Power

The Roman Empire, even in its waning form towards late Antiquity, and various constellations of power framed the context of experience and agency of first-century children. Studying children's leisure which also served a socialisation purpose or for training children in styles of social interaction, Toner (2017:99-115) explicitly accounts for the imperial context and how children at play were located also between the push and pull of Empire. "Leisure [...] can be seen as providing Roman children with the same kind of relatively free space in which to challenge authority that, if we only look at their formal education, can otherwise seem to have been constantly smothering them" (Toner 2017:113).[18] Amidst children's agency conceived as resistance, conformation to some degree or another never fully abated. Children simply playing was not necessarily unaffected action, as "parents and other members of the household undoubtedly encouraged a variety of activities, including types of play, as a way to suggest appropriate roles in life" (Osgood 2011:79). Toner recounts the example of Ausonius who advised his grandchild to work at developing hard-faced self-control so as to disallow a menacing teacher to obtain power through the child's fear; a strategy at once resisting, but through socialisation, also conforming.

It would eventually be early Christianity, following in the footsteps of Augustus, that used family and children images to express the depth of bonds between people, especially between those at the extremities of the social spectrum. This does not exclude the possibility that such sentiments may also have been in the interest of a "well-ordered, interconnected and contented society" as much as for the sake of "a more encompassing form of authority and more penetrating form of government" (Toner 2017:109). Often, resistance or push-back was directed closer to home, to adults and parents in particular, even if both artifacts and representations of play are products of adult imaginations and even ideals (Dolansky 2017:117). In fact, the dynamic idea of socialisation is less of a recent development (dating back to the 1970s) compared to the notion of children as social actors, and shows how Roman children's play was an opportunity for expressing creativity and shaping identity. Dolansky reaffirms her earlier conclusions (2012:256-92) that with dolls' adornments, capacity for movement, and resemblance to imperial figures, monolithic notions about them as simply preparing girls for married life and motherhood are surpassed, and the ambiguity of gendered play and gender, also in Antiquity, is confirmed.[19]

16 As part of the new approach to history and historiography, history from below in the sense of the experiences of ordinary people rather than history from above or the great (male) figures of history, joins a few other characteristics of a new historical perspective. The other elements are: history as concerned with more than politics, including every human activity; rather than seeing history as a narrative of events, new history is more interested in the analysis of structures; going beyond a chronicles approach favouring documents, other evidence attesting to human activities are also considered; allowing for a wider range of historians' questions, new history looks at collective movements and individual actions, trends and events; accepting the ideal of neutral, unbiased historiography is impossible, cultural relativism is acknowledged; and, taking history beyond the realms of professional historians, new history has also become inter-disciplinary (Burke 1991:2-6).

17 The explicit goal of some recent scholars and the at least implicit attempts throughout some recent publications are to move away from the earlier tendency among scholars to postulate childhood in both rather abstract and monolithic ways (e.g. Laes & Vuolanto 2017a, 2-4; Vuolanto 2017:11-13).

18 "Play was never simply about passive socialisation into predetermined forms of culture. Leisure continued to offer all children, Christian or pagan, an element of freedom and provided them with the opportunity to push back the boundaries of their own confinement" (Toner 2017:113).

19 The archaeological finding of dolls in burial sites rather than in settlements does not clarify their use, but to restrict it to educational role-play in the service of adult virtues, distance them from their primary users namely children and children's agency (Huntley 2017:138-39). As Osgood argued, "Toys help children to internalize a picture of the world their families might wish them to have" (Osgood 2011:79; see also Madenholm 2021).

The converging and diverging lines of imperial push and pull among children are well-observed in formal education structures. Children's voices were often and explicitly structured, modified and even curtailed in Roman-era schools, where schooling was synonymous with punishment (see Horster 2011:84-100). With educationists like Quintillian extolling the virtues of education in exaggerated forms amid the theoretical justification for and implicit systematicity of accompanying punishment, "the fundamental experience of school was the nexus of fear, resistance, and fantastical revenge and imagined coming to power" (Bloomer 2017:174; also Horster 2011:78). And when it came to children's eating, notwithstanding a fair amount of parental control, evidence abounds of children's resisting agency over their diets, which, at times could also turn into reversed hegemony, such as Symeon's sixth-century extreme fasting practices as a way of exercising control over others (Caseau 2017:227-28).

As much as children's agency was probably most impeded in the choice of a future (see Caseau 2017:225), one of the clearest, recognisable instances of children's agency is emerging from the study of graffiti. Huntley (2017:137-54), making use of developmental psychology to identify instances of graffiti drawn by children in the Vesuvian archaeological sites, sees children's agency in their drawings that were focused on interpretation rather than reproduction.[20] The placement of the graffiti in and around domestic and other urban sites further attests to their agency, understanding of social conventions, and the activities they engaged in, as much as the content of the graffiti suggests their exposure to urban life, particularly the different kinds of animals they encountered.[21]

Children's Agency and Experience: Difficulties and Concerns

Does a focus on their agency and experience help us to hear Antiquity's tiny voices? Some interpretive patterns are reconfirmed, such as the lasting importance of the family in the broader sense of households, or even its surrogates, in accounting for children's lives in Antiquity. A deliberate focus on the perspective of children and their lives, sees this interaction become more poignant and mutually beneficial. "When we allow children and their experience to be the focus of the family we can observe many more influences on family structure, bonds and the values and obligations attached to them" (Pudsey & Vuolanto 2017:88). As much as recent scholarship reaffirms the importance of certain well-established patterns of social life in ancient times, neglected areas of investigation also receive attention. For example, making sense of the involvement of uncles and aunts with legal and economic matters like adults' guardianship-roles or children's apprenticeships while teasing out care for and affection shown to children, shows the lasting importance of sibling bonds in their transgenerational effect[22] (Pudsey & Vuolanto 2017:79-95).

Scarcity of information, especially literary forms such as letters written by children, but also other material objects like clothing, toys and so forth, remain problematic and lead to an interesting array of interpretations of the same texts and artefacts for different purposes.[23] A particular challenge arises from the very nature of the "objects of study" themselves, namely that children often were seemingly uninterested in discussing or reflecting on their experiences: they lived in homes, they got dressed, they played, they hurt themselves, and so on, but mostly without reflecting upon these events. As much as "children do not really lament, express their feelings and pains, or display their own actions after the injury" (Graumann 2017:278), as much is true of other experiences in their lives.

Dealing with literary texts and teasing out particular socio-historical contexts, with material culture

20 Children are also mentioned in inscriptions; although it does not have a dedicated chapter in this regard, a recent publication contains numerous references to children included in inscriptions (Bruun & Edmondson 2015).

21 Wiedemann explains also how children in the time of the NT were important intermediaries when it came to the religious, and for that matter, also household matters such as the food-stores which had to remain untainted – children were marginal figures and such useful go-betweens for adults in everyday life (Wiedemann 1989:179-82). See also children as religious agents in the early Christian church (Mackey 2017:181-97).

22 "They [uncles and aunts] were not merely practical assistants, but brokered their nephews' and nieces' experiences in the transition to adulthood, acting as important social and cultural agents in children's lives, but salso [sic, also] added significant emotional dimensions to children's lives" (Pudsey & Vuolanto 2017:90).

23 E.g. P Oxy I 119 [Theon's letter to his father on the Alexandria trip] is used by Vuolanto (2017:19-20) for demonstrating direct agency exercised by the boy; see Laes (2017:66) for its references to embrace and touching.

at hand, enticing comparison and consolidation of evidence for settings postulated, remains in the shadow of the text and reality-tension – of particular concern to trained ancient historians (see Graumann 2017:268). Acknowledging the importance of the genre and the thrust of texts (see Caseau 2017:217 on hagiographical texts), pairing textual work with other interdisciplinary labours renders richer results. Since history narrated is not history that occurred but rather history remembered by people for reasons contemporary to a remembering community, how does this impact literary evidence, considered in tandem with material "texts" or artifacts? To what extent does conventional iconography (Graumann 2017:268) present children's real-life experiences when societal expectations determine portrayals, or real-life agency of children when adult agency is the medium to express the former? Bloomer's (2017:68) comments stretch further than communicating the value of education: "Adult commemoration need not be taken as a transparent index of social practice, but it does communicate norms and expectations"; so too his comments that scenes portraying children playing are social protocols not scenes of reality (Bloomer 2017:172).

Such general difficulties point to further challenges.[24] With scholars acknowledging that childhood cannot and should not be universalised over time and contexts, restricted attention to gender distinctions becomes apparent.[25] Harlow (2017:43-59) refers to Huskinson's study on age and stereotyping depicted at least in the clothing imagery of children, with boys' loose tunics encouraging play and comfort outside the home, and girls' longer garments suggesting a more sedate and interior orientation.[26] Toner (2017:101-2) flags the gender differentiation exemplified in games children played, with boys' games reflecting the importance of social hierarchy, the emphasis on training in other areas of life, and the need to participate enthusiastically. Girls' games prepared them for lives as wives and mothers, almost amounting to functional training but allowed some leeway in terms of creativity which resisted traditional female passivity.[27] Playing and games developed social skills, taught the value of niche expertise, stressed social status and urged mobility, how such status was won in a local sphere requiring self-confidence and at times underhanded strategies, and even developed an appreciation for risk-assessment and decision-making under pressure. However, gender patterns can all too readily be assumed without the required discernment. Gendered leisure among children entailed conventional patterns and ambiguities which emerged through differences in styles of play: girls being quieter and cooperative as opposed to the boisterous and competitive play of boys (Dolansky 2017:116-36). Such patterns, however, are largely unrelated to most of the toys made available by archaeology, with dolls and equestrian figures as gendered toys with status connotations being the exceptions. Both these types of toys, if for different reasons (dolls' malleability and associations with imperial hierarchies; and women's associations, even if restricted, to equestrian matters) demonstrate the inappropriateness of fixed gender categories in Antiquity.

Conclusion: Implications of Tiny Bodies and Voices for NT Studies

At least four implications seem to flow from the above. Firstly, ancient childhood's ambiguity is reflected in the ambivalence of portrayals of

24 The focus here is on gender differentiation as a neglected element in studying children's lives in antiquity. However, at least two other aspects requiring further work can be noted, as well: one, perspectives and foci of the different studies of children's flesh-and-blood lives impact one another, such as did children's lives in monasteries allow for leisure or play of some form, require more attention. Two, a central aspect of human and therefore children's lives in terms of everyday experience and agency, is children's eating and drinking patterns, and particularly the possible differences in rural and urban contexts.

25 Generally, the tendency to romanticise children and their lives are avoided. The comments that "Although children were mainly seen as imperfect adults in Antiquity, in the Christian faith, children were better than adults in the eyes of God because they were imagined innocent and free from passions … Their humility and simplicity were praised", should be balanced with "the Augustinian theology of the original sin condemned unbaptized children to remain at the door of Paradise, even if they had had no time to sin before dying" (Caseau 2017:222, 230; see also Berner et al. 2012:95-96). Also, the extent to which changed mental attitudes towards children had a tangible impact on their daily lives, is less clear (see e.g. Laes 2011;287)

26 However, except for some scholars' fleeting attention to e.g. pointing out that girls early on needed to learn "appropriate body language" (Harlow, 2017:49), further development of such notions awaits.

27 The significance of restraint required from girls in their play and gaming, in contrast to the wider berth of boys' play for their social location or identity, signals both differentiation and perhaps some ambiguity.

children and their accoutrements in the NT. The relative insignificance of age for childhood in Antiquity should already give us pause in monolithic appropriations of the Bible's children as exemplary models to which modern life should be measured.[28] The, at times, pride of place accorded to children in the NT texts aligns with the ancient context, with its texts equally sharing in the ambiguity of ancient childhood. Ancient folks believed children needed more divine protection, that they "were both nearer to the gods, and dearer to them" because of children's low social status which in turn resulted from their weakness and liability to succumb to danger (Wiedemann 1989:184-85).[29] In the NT too, children feature in different ways, with Jesus first profiled as a child but later receiving, welcoming, blessing, and healing children as well as using child-related terms and metaphors (Berner et al. 2012:86).[30] In the Synoptic gospels, children are used as examples but, in different ways, to point towards dedication, humility, and receptivity. In the Pauline epistles, however, children disappear at the bottom end of the social hierarchy, amidst emphasis on the crucified Christ's lordship (1 Cor 2:5) rather than in the Gospels, where baby Jesus became the Son of God and children are named the inheritors of the Kingdom.[31] And children's agency seems to be entirely lost in 2 Peter and Hebrews that celebrate the Aqedah with no explicit concern for Isaac's life or even well-being.[32] Secondly, the agonistic context provides the overarching framework for the NT texts, too. Amidst the elite-people divide in antiquity, perhaps childhood was somewhat of a leveller, in the sense that all children were equally vulnerable to natural (disease and death) as well as socio-structural (agonistic power tensions) exigencies.[33] However, "children of wealthy families with private teachers were prepared for quite another social life than were those who had only a public schooling" (Horster 2011:98). The high child mortality rate saw children excluded from civic life while, in contrast, Second Temple Jews and early Jesus followers accorded children of all ages and even unborn children the same place as adults within the religious community (Wiedemann 1989:204). Still, children were largely written out of the NT narrative, except for the nostalgia around baby Jesus and the odd child or two in the crowd favoured by Jesus, albeit generally without them having any agency.

Three, our understandings of ancient childhood agency live in the tension of broader and more theoretical approaches, and attempts to uncover the real-life experiences of children's lives in all their varieties – to allow tiny voices to be heard. The agency of children is largely absent in the NT texts as it is mostly in contemporary literary documents, with children often on the margins. The frictions and pressure between, on the one hand, broader, theoretically focused approaches and, on the other hand, allowing for the wide and diverse spectrum of everyday contextual and concrete dimensions of children's lives and voices to emerge are framing current conversations about children in the Bible. Trying to unravel what children's agency would have looked like in those days is crucial for understanding their exposure to and experience of violence directed at them.

Four, and connected to three above, the NT also seems to provide evidence of adults using children for their own ideological and rhetorical purposes. The worlds of adults and children simply were not as far apart as they often are today.[34] What Laes identified as a *leitmotif* for his book, the tension between children as outsiders yet also as sources of hope and expectation (Laes 2011:283), equally applies to the portrayals and positions of children in the NT texts. Children's portrayals in the NT raise the suspicion that in the narrative,

28 This holds too for the impact of Christianity on children's lives, which was also characterised by ambiguity e g the relationship between Augustine's original sin theology and farming out punishment beyond slaves to also women and children (e.g. Osgood 2011:80).

29 "...classical society saw children as especially associated with the divine world because they were unimportant, not because they were the same as adults" (Wiedemann 1989:185).

30 For children in the early Jesus follower-communities, see also the extensive study of Bakke (2005).

31 For Wheeler-Reed (2017:67) such attitude stems from Paul's general lack of concern with procreation: "Children appear to be an afterthought with Paul, putting him at odds with the larger Greco-Roman world and its belief that women and men marry in order to procreate".

32 What does the child-symbolism including imagery relating to childhood (e.g. milk, etc.) say about the social fabric in general and our texts' rhetoric in particular?

33 Further on slave children agency, see Kartzow (2018:111-26).

34 By late Antiquity, the puer senex or the child represented as a serious adult became a popular ideal (Laes 2011:285).

children were brought to Jesus by their parents, not on their own terms, but rather to offset the wayward adults. Framing children as open and receptive and humble all too often ends up leaving children vulnerable to adults' religious and other fantasies while compromising children's agencies, autonomy and aspirations (Berner et al. 2012:95).

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