

Louise Heldgaard Bylund / René Falkenberg / Marianne Bjelland Kartzow / Kasper Bro Larsen (eds.)

# Nordic Interpretations of the New Testament

Challenging Texts and Perspectives



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Volume 5

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Marianne Bjelland Kartzow / Kasper Bro Larsen  
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Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, and Kasper Bro Larsen

## What Makes New Testament Texts and Interpretations So Challenging?

### 1. Towards a Nordic Answer

This volume brings together 15 contributions from the ongoing conversation among and between New Testament scholars from the Nordic Countries, namely Denmark, Iceland, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. We challenge New Testament texts and interpretations but are also challenged by these texts and by their interpretations; how to read, interpret and contextualize the impact of these texts, and how to conceptualize the power and authority attributed to them.

As neighbors in the European periphery, partly sharing language and history, scholars of our region also aim at participating in the broader international discourse. Our common academic language is English, and many of the present essays could have been written anywhere else, since they do not explicitly reflect on contextual issues. Or perhaps not?

What characterizes this part of the world are social democracies with relatively high standards of living, a strong protestant past but an increasing multicultural population, public welfare systems, and gender equality. Public universities still have money and can prioritize mobility and internationalization; accordingly, although few people live in the Nordic countries relatively many biblical scholars have roots here. At the Annual Meeting held by the Society of Biblical Literature each November, the Nordic University Reception fills a ballroom with international partners and networks, showing that researchers and scholarship from these countries are noticed and appreciated.

What characterizes Nordic New Testament scholarship is a more complicated question to answer. As in the field in general, there is great diversity in interest, source materials, preferred theories, and methodology. In this volume, we have identified three sub-themes, all of which include numerous topics and perspectives. Part 1, *Text, Translation, and Reception*, describes recent trends where interpreters ask questions to not only the New Testament texts and their historical or literary context, but also to the afterlives of these texts, in scholarly convention, in interpretation, in commentaries, and in translations. Part 2,

*Gender, Empire, Emotion, and Drama*, names some of the perspectives that have been characteristic for Nordic New Testament scholarship for a while now, in particular in theoretical orientation and interdisciplinary approaches. The final Part 3, *Perspectives on Paul and Jesus*, plays with the contested concept of “perspectives,” old, new, radical, or within Judaism, which has challenged Pauline scholarship, in particular, over the last years. In this part, also the character of Jesus is interpreted from various perspectives such as ancient philosophy and by help of additional literary tools.

## 2. Text, Translation, and Reception

The four essays included here address and discuss questions like: What kinds of meaning have New Testament texts constructed? How is meaning negotiated? In what way have translations and interpretative conventions overlooked complexity and ambiguity? What are the dynamics between the cultural contexts in which these texts were written and contemporary societies, ideologies and conceptualization? In recent years, such questions have become an integrated part of the field of biblical studies. Numerous journals, handbooks, and encyclopedias from a variety of publishing houses have been introduced to the scholarly community.<sup>1</sup> Bible and reception is also one central element and growing field in Nordic New Testament scholarship. Many of these articles reflect on the ancient context of the text and potential tensions or analogy to our contemporary context. In this part of the book in particular, it makes a difference that these contributions come from a Scandinavian or Nordic discourse, for instance by referring to a specific cultural context, language tradition, or scholarship. Translation, reception, and meaning construction based on a variety of ancient texts are categorized as theology in the making.

Gitte Buch-Hansen’s “Permit the Slaves to Come to Me’: Reimagining Markan Church and Household Ethics” reinterprets one of the best-known passages of the New Testament among lay people, Mark 10:13–16 on the blessing by Jesus of τὰ παῖδια, where Buch-Hansen suggests the translation “the slaves” instead of the classic reading of “the children.” With the growing field of slavery studies in New

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, *The Centre for the Study of the Bible in Theology and Culture* in Copenhagen; De Gruyter’s *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* as well as *Journal of the Bible and its Reception* (<https://www.degruyter.com/view/j/jbr>), *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible* (<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-oxford-handbook-of-the-reception-history-of-the-bible-9780199204540?cc=no&lang=en&>), and also the growing number of program units related to bible and reception at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual and International Meetings.

Testament scholarship and various theoretical tools, she makes a convincing argument placing this well-known text in a new social and rhetorical context.

Halvor Moxnes suggests a new hermetical approach to New Testament studies in his article, “Social Scientific Interpretation of the New Testament and a Hermeneutics of Dialogue.” Theories and perspectives from social science criticism have since the 1970s contributed to the study of the New Testament. For Moxnes, social science criticism has implications for the hermeneutics as it points at the foreignness of the texts opening for a hermeneutics of dialogue and democratization.

Gunnar Haaland has analyzed the concept of “Pharisees” in recent homiletic commentaries within a Nordic context in his contribution, “Who are the Pharisees of Today? Gospel Reception in Norwegian Lectionary Resources.” He observes that the level of knowledge about ancient Judaism is surprisingly low and demonstrates how stereotypes about “the Jew” function as a foil for Christian self-definition.

Morten Beckmann looks at a concrete case of translation in his article, “Negotiating Christology: The Translation of Colossians 1:15 as a Case Study,” and discusses the impact of ideology and theology in the process of translating Greek terms and concepts into a contemporary language, in his case Norwegian. He shows that a Bible translation is an important tool in shaping theological discourse.

### 3. Gender, Empire, Emotion, and Drama

In the second section of this volume, five essays are included, highlighting dimensions of ancient texts that are not normally connected. Nordic scholars such as Lone Fatum and Turid Karlsen Seim have been pioneers in the application of critical gender theory to New Testament texts.<sup>2</sup> Within masculinity studies Halvor Moxnes as well as Fredrik Ivarsson and Hanna Stenström have played important roles.<sup>3</sup> Post-colonial and empire critical studies have also had some Nordic contributors, in particular Hans Leander and Christina Petterson.<sup>4</sup> This section also deals with Christianity on the border of the orthodoxy/heresy divide,

2 See, for example, Fatum, *Images of God; Christ Domesticated*; also Seim, *Double Message; Feminist Criticism*. Jorunn Økland and Hanna Stenström have, as well, the last two decades published extensively on gender.

3 Moxnes, *Conventional Values*; Stenström, *Masculine or Feminine?*; Ivarsson, *Vice Lists; A Man Has To Do*.

4 E. g. Leander, *Discourses of Empire*; Petterson, *Acts of Empire*.

which is a well-represented discipline in the Nordic countries as well, especially in Aarhus, Bergen, Helsinki, and Oslo.<sup>5</sup>

In the first essay, “Jesus, a Wise and Courageous Man: Representations of Masculinity in the Fourth Gospel,” deals with masculinity studies, Martin Friis examines the characterization of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel. Contrary to the Synoptic Gospels, the Johannine Jesus is emphasized to hold traditional masculine characteristics, such as bravery, outspokenness, and wisdom. These virtues are typical in the characterization of great ancient men outside the New Testament, leading Friis to argue that the Johannine Jesus is meant to be perceived as an ideal ancient masculine hero.

In the next article, “Voicing the Resurrection: Narrative, Authority, and Gender in Stories of the Women at the Tomb,” Maria Stureson looks at the various stories of the women at the tomb in New Testament and non-canonical sources, at the intersection of feminist theory and narrative criticism. She argues that the women solely function as receptors of the message of resurrection as the formulation of this is uttered by the authoritative narrative voices.

Niko Huttunen’s contribution, “After Anti-Imperial Readings: Early Christians in the Empire Re-Examined,” goes through recent studies of Empire with a critical perspective on anti-imperialism as the sole header for early Christianity. Huttunen argues that there were pro-imperial tendencies as well, and brings two examples to the discussion: Romans 13 on civil authorities and the view of military service among the Christians.

Paul Linjamaa works with a Valentinian text and its connection to Stoic thoughts, especially their theory of emotions in his article, “An Early Christian View on Emotions: Stoic Thought in the *Tripartite Tractate*.” Despite multiple differences between the Valentinian text and Stoic ideas, Stoic thoughts are concluded to have influenced the *Tripartite Tractate* in several areas: the protological system, the portrayal of an apathetic Saviour, the cosmic system associated with passions, and finally the normative statement on ethical behavior.

The final essay in this section, “ΤΕΤΕΛΕΣΤΑΙ (John 19:28 and 30): A Dramatic and Eschatological Turning Point,” is by Louise Heldgaard Bylund. She works with the utterance of Jesus at the cross in John 19:30, *τετέλεσται*, investigating the meaning of *τελέω* within the biblical corpus and occurrences of *τετέλεσται* in ancient Greek fiction. Bylund suggests that the use of the notion underscores a dramatic as well as an eschatological turning point in the Fourth Gospel.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the Biblia Manichaica project in Aarhus, led by Nils Arne Pedersen, on Manichaean Bible use, cf. Pedersen et al., Old Testament; and also the NEWCONT project in Oslo, led by Hugo Lundhaug, on the Nag Hammadi Codices in the monastic context, cf. Lied and Lundhaug, Snapshots.

## 4. Perspectives on Paul and Jesus

In the third and last section of this book, we have collected various essays that deal with Pauline and Synoptic texts. In Pauline scholarship, the debate about new, or even radical new, perspectives also has its Nordic voices.<sup>6</sup> Magnus Zetterholm shows in “From Jewish- to Gentile ‘Christianity’: A Change of Perspective within the Radical New Perspective on Paul” how the change of perspective on the Pauline texts from the traditional into the radical new has altered the view on Paul and Judaism in the early Christianity movement. Zetterholm’s exposition concludes that the radical new perspective on Paul has caused to the insight that the dichotomy between Judaism and Christianity is anachronistic as Paul was not concerned with the Jews but the nations.

Samuel Tedder also places himself and his article, “Children of Promise: Ishmael, Isaac and Isaiah in an Intertextual Reading of Gal 4:21–5:1,” in the framework of the radical new perspective on Paul as he agrees with the importance of locating Paul within a Jewish context. Nevertheless, Tedder’s intertextual reading of Galatians challenges the radical new perspective’s emphasis on a stable and secure identity of the Jews as the people of God.

Jacob P.B. Mortensen’s article, “Do We Uphold the Law for the ‘Weak’?: Rom 3:31 and 14:1–15:6,” investigates Paul’s view on the law in Romans, taking his starting point in the hypothesis that the assembly, divided in two segments, is completely Gentile. Mortensen’s reading of Romans 3:31 leads to the conclusion that Paul upholds the law but insists on a different relationship for Jews and Gentiles to the law. Mortensen defines the two groups in Romans 14:1–15:6 as “strong” and “weak” respectively concluding that Paul in identifying himself with the strong position upholds the law for the weak.

We end with three essays that read gospel texts and reflect different perspectives on the character of Jesus. Runar M. Thorsteinsson’s article, “Jesus as Philosopher in the Gospel of Mark,” explores the character of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark in the context of ancient philosophical schools and figures, especially the Stoics and Cynics. Thorsteinsson finds points on which Jesus is parallel to a philosophical sage such as an ascetic appearance and the understanding of family. When it comes to display of emotions, the resemblance is more complex. Thorsteinsson concludes that across the various topics there are ideological ties

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6 The study of Paul in the context of his Jewish heritage (the new perspective) is often viewed as instigated by Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, though with significant Nordic precursors: Munck, *Paulus und die Heilsgeschichte*; Stendahl, *Apostle Paul*; Dahl, *Rettfærdiggjørelseslærens sosiologiske funksjon*. Concerning Nordic voices in recent discussions on Paul within Judaism (the radical new perspective), cf. Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul*; and also Nanos and Zetterholm, *Paul within Judaism*.

that suggest that Mark intended to attribute Jesus with classic philosophical characteristics.

The second article dealing with the character of Jesus is “The Jesus of the Text: Unmanipulated Parables as an Alternative to Historical and Theological Reconstructions” by Lauri Thurén. In the quest for the historical Jesus, Thurén suggests that the synoptic parables can be used as a new source in that search. Jesus as a literary protagonist in the Lukan parables may help to reveal reliable information about the historical Jesus when read in respect of the integrity of each text that Thurén believes they deserve.

In the final essay, “Divine or Human Emotions? The Character of Jesus in the Gospel of John,” Kari Syreeni examines the character of Jesus and emotions as well. In his redaction critical study, Syreeni focuses on the Johannine Jesus and the balance between divine and human attributes. Through redactional layers, the complexity of the characterization of Jesus unfolds, resulting in a Johannine Jesus characterized as a master of destiny but mixed with vulnerability and an intimate relationship with his disciples.

## 5. Current Nordic Suggestions and Answers

We view this book as an invitation for others to join the conversation of our northern European neighborhood. As all neighbors around the globe, we are not only part of our region but also part of the global community. Instead of offering final answers to the challenges with which New Testament scholars struggle, we invite others to continue the conversation. Most essays in this volume started out as work-in-progress papers at the Nordic New Testament Conference at Aarhus University on 29 May–2 June 2015, but have been reworked for the purpose of this book. The Conference was organized by Mogens Müller (Denmark), Kari Syreeni (Finland), Runar M. Thorsteinsson (Iceland), Ole Jakob Filtvedt (Norway), Cecilia Wassen (Sweden), Jacob P.B. Mortensen and Dan Nässelqvist (doctoral students’ representatives), René Falkenberg (local organizer), and Kasper Bro Larsen (chair, local organizer).

Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to PhD Candidate Erich Pracht (Aarhus University) who did a marvelous and most helpful task when proof-reading the entire manuscript. We also wish to thank the staff at Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Miriam Espenhain, Elisabeth Hernitscheck, Elisabeth Müller, and Renate Rehkopf, who helped preparing the finalized manuscript for publication, and, of course, the series editors for including this volume in the SANt series.

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## I. Text, Translation, and Reception



Gitte Buch-Hansen

## “Permit the Slaves to Come to Me”

Reimagining Markan Church and Household Ethics

### 1. Introduction: Mark’s παιδία: Children or Slaves?

The fact remains, however, that slavery caused no one in antiquity a crisis of conscience or an agony of the soul as it did abolitionists in later history, and as it still does some modern historians today. For a thousand years and more slavery was not a problem in classical culture.<sup>1</sup>

#### 1.1 Mark 10:13–16: A Baptismal Text?

Especially in a Protestant context, the wording of Mark 10:13–16 is one of the best-known passages of the entire New Testament among lay people. The episode, in which Jesus is asked to lay his hands upon a group of παιδία, forms part of the mosaic of texts accompanying baptism in Protestant denominations. However, in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus’ disciples object to his blessing of τὰ παιδία. Their reaction angers Jesus, who corrects their attitude: No one should hinder τὰ παιδία from coming to him because the Kingdom of God belongs to them. In addition, only the person who receives the Kingdom of God ὡς παιδίον will enter it. I have refrained from translating the semantically flexible phrases, to which we shall soon return. In itself, Mark 10:13–16 mentions nothing about baptism, but when read aloud in conjunction with Matthew’s command to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19 NRSV), it can serve as the liturgical text that legitimizes the baptism of children.

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1 Bradley, Problem of Slavery, 282.

However, apart from Jesus' own baptism, we have no direct – or even indirect – references to baptism in Mark's Gospel. This stands in contrast with Paul's letters, where the theological arguments repeatedly refer to the baptismal experience, and with John's Gospel, where the baptismal medium trickles through the chapters in order to finally be recirculated through Jesus' crucified body (John 19:34). Instead, Mark discusses questions about access to the community and its rituals in terms relating to eating and table fellowship. Consequently, scholars focus exclusively on Mark's inclusion of the Gentiles in the table fellowship. They draw attention to Jesus' repeated crossings of "the sea of Galilee," which weave Gentiles and Jews into one community (Mark 4:35–8:26). Nevertheless, I shall argue that, in addition to the discussion of ethnicity, Mark addresses questions about the inclusion and status of slaves in the Christian community. This is where Mark's *παιδία* enter the picture.

It is well-known that according to dictionaries well-versed in the classical Greek corpus – as e. g. the *Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon (LSJ-Online)* – the Greek term *παιδίον*, which is used in the Markan 'baptism text' (10:13–15), also denotes (young) slaves. Yet Bible translations unequivocally translate the Markan phrase as 'young children' (KJV), 'children' (NAU/NRSV), 'små børn' (DO), or 'små barn' (NO). Perhaps the parallel text from Luke's Gospel has influenced the translations. After all, Luke 18:15 closes down Mark's semantic uncertainty by changing *τὰ παιδία* in Mark 10:13 with *τὰ βρέφη* – a word which, according to *LSJ-Online*, unambiguously refers to new-born babes.

A series of texts from the Markan Jesus' teaching on proper leadership, which he gives on his, his disciples', and their female followers' way to Jerusalem, will be key to my discussion. In addition to Mark 10:13–16, there are thematically parallel texts in Mark 9:33–37, in which Jesus also uses a *παιδίον* to illustrate his point, and in Mark 9:42–50, in which the reader is warned against behavior that may cause apostasy among *οἱ μικροί*. I shall argue that both of these passages concern slaves. In addition, in the teaching on leadership and status given in Mark 10:42–45, Jesus unequivocally addresses the issue of slavery in his metaphorical use of *δοῦλος* as an indication of the attitude with which the disciple who aspires to be the first (*πρῶτος*) among the members of the congregation must serve the rest (Mark 10:44). However, we must immediately address two obvious objections against these readings. First, the attentive reader may point to the fact that Mark uses the phrase *παιδίον* in passages in which the term clearly refers to freeborn children. The question is now whether this well-defined use of the term also determines the meaning of *παιδίον* throughout the Markan Gospel. Second, although an overlap between *παιδίον* and *δοῦλος* exists, the two nouns represent different semantic fields. Consequently, we are required to inquire into the intersection between the two terms.

## 1.2 Markan *παιδία*: Children or Slaves?

It is in no way obvious that Mark's Gospel should be linked with antiquity's discourse on slavery. Since Mark employs the term *παιδία* as a reference to children several times in his gospel, when used in Mark 9:33–37 and in 10:13–16 the same term may simply refer to the children in the households that Jesus visits. In the narrative about Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:21–24, 35–43), τὸ παιδίον (5:39–41) is used synonymously with τὸ θυγάτριόν (5:23, 35) and τὸ κοράσιον (5:41–42). In the story concerning Jesus and the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24–30), Mark uses τὸ θυγάτριόν (7:25–26) in parallel with τὸ παιδίον (7:30), and in the exchange of words between Jesus and the woman, τὰ τέκνα (7:27) is used as a synonym for τὰ παιδία (7:28). In the narrative about the boy with an unclean spirit (Mark 9:14–29), ὁ υἱός (9:17) is used synonymously with τὸ παιδίον (9:24), and when the father explains to Jesus that the demon has tormented his son *since childhood*, the wording used is ἐκ παιδιόθεν (9:21). However, we also find a single case that unequivocally points in the other direction, which complicates the conclusion of our word analysis. In the narrative concerning Jesus' trial (Mark 14:53–72), we hear about Peter's repeated denials of his discipleship when confronted with the accusations of one of the high priest's *παιδισκῶν* (Mark 14:66, 69). Obviously, ἡ παιδίσκη – as the female diminutive of *παῖς* – must be a reference to the presence of young female slaves in the Jewish high priest's residence. Apparently, Mark imagined the presence of slaves to be a matter of fact, at least, in large Jewish households.<sup>2</sup> After all, the analysis of *παῖς* and its various diminutives documents a semantic ambiguity in Markan language.

When modern New Testament exegetes – including scholars acquainted with the discourse of slavery and the social world of Early Christianity, such as Jennifer Glancy – do not consider slavery as a possible topic for Jesus' admonition in Mark 9:33–37, 42–50; 10:13–16, it may be due to a word analysis like this. In spite of the fact that new commentaries on Mark's Gospel likewise unanimously translate *παιδία* as 'children,' I shall argue that if we take the ecclesiological context of these texts into consideration and situate them within the ideology and social history of Greco-Roman slavery, 'slaves' becomes a possible translation – and maybe even the better one. Let us therefore throw a quick glance upon the ideology.

2 Cf. Glancy, *Slavery*, 457.

### 1.3 The Intersection between παιδίον and δοῦλος in Aristotle's Politics

The semantic overlap between 'child' and 'slave' refers to the fact that, in Antiquity, we find a strong tradition for seeing slaves as mentally immature by nature or as bodies with no (legitimate) will of their own. Since the discourse of slavery that we find in Aristotle's *Politics* characterized the Greco-Roman world from the inception of chattel slavery as a social and economic institution in Alexander the Great's empire (356–323 BC) and long into the Constantine Era (306–337 CE), it is worth dwelling a bit on the argument in the *Politics*.<sup>3</sup>

According to Aristotle, slaves were as different from freeborn men as the human body was from the soul. This is more than just a comparison. Whereas the slave was to be identified with his physical body, the freeborn man's identity was determined by the rationality of his soul. Accordingly, the designation of slaves could simply be σώματα.<sup>4</sup> Since the primary function of slaves was the use of their bodies, they might also be compared to beasts of burden, though unlike animals, slaves were capable of understanding and learning. Still, when compared to freeborn men, the slave's intellect was passive; slaves did not themselves possess reason. They were a kind of intermediary beings situated between real – that is, freeborn – humans and animals. Consequently, so Aristotle argues, it was only natural and advantageous for the slave to have a master, who had the capacity to think for both of them. Aristotle's description of the slave's ontology deserves quotation:

Therefore all men that differ as widely as the soul does from the body and the human being from the lower animal (and this is the condition of those whose function is the use of the body and from whom this is the best that is forthcoming) – these are by nature slaves (οὔτοι μὲν εἰσι φύσει δοῦλοι), for whom to be governed by this kind of authority is advantageous [...]. For he is by nature a slave who is capable of belonging to another (and that is why he does so belong), and who participates in reason so far as to apprehend it but not to possess it (Aristotle, *Pol.* 1.1254a18–24).<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, when Aristotle defines the role of the slave within the household, he argues that the slave belongs to the category of commodities. Within this category, the slave again makes up his own class. The slave is a special kind of 'thing' because, despite being an instrument, he or she is capable of action even when separated from his/her/its owner. Aristotle's (in)famous reduction of slaves to an article of property runs as follows:

These considerations therefore make clear the nature of the slave and his essential quality: one who is a human being belonging by nature not to himself but to another is

3 Cf. Brandley, *Slavery in the Roman Republic*.

4 Kyrtatas, *Slavery and Economy*, 95.

5 Unless mentioned otherwise, all translations of Classical texts are from the LOEB editions.

by nature a slave, and a person is a human being belonging to another if being a man he is an article of property, and an article of property is an instrument for action separable from its owner (κτῆμα δὲ ὄργανον πρακτικὸν καὶ χωριστόν) (Aristotle, *Pol.* 1.1254a.15–19).

In her book *Slaves, Masters, and the Art of Authority in Plautine Comedy*, Kathleen McCarthy draws attention to "the crux of slavery," which is related to Aristotle's definition of the slave as an intermediary being. As a mere tool, the slave is worthless, but as a thinking human being, he challenges Aristotelian ideology:

Slaves become useful only when they can combine two contradictory attributes: being as much as possible an extension of the master's persona and yet exercising judgment and skills of their own. In other words, a slave who can merely carry out explicit orders is useless, and a slave who goes his or her own way is useless.<sup>6</sup>

Due to this tension between human agency and chattel fungibility, antiquity had to reinvent the symbolic world of slavery repeatedly. The tension also marks the extremes in the debate on slavery. Critics of Aristotle's ideology – e.g. the Stoics – emphasized slaves' humanity. However, no group in antiquity challenged the institution as such.<sup>7</sup> As we shall see, Mark's Gospel also belongs among the critics. Yet our analysis will demonstrate that, in an intriguing way, the Gospel also contributes to the preservation of the criticized ideology.

Apparently, the use of Mark 10:13–16 in the Protestant baptism ritual has provided this particular text with a strong hermeneutical lead in the reading of the aforementioned cluster of texts, even among scholars. In my analysis, I shall argue that we should instead assign this role to Mark 10:42–45. In order to sharpen our awareness of the pre-understanding with which we encounter these Markan texts, we must first – I am quoting Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's famous address as president of the *Society of Biblical Literature* – scrutinize "the rhetorical interests emerging in the history of interpretation or in contemporary scholarship."<sup>8</sup> In other words, we must turn to the reception history of Mark 10:13–16. First, we will glance briefly at the interpretations of the text in recent German, English, and Scandinavian commentaries on Mark's Gospel – that is, books published after 2005. These commentaries are written after the publication of some seminal books on the New Testament and slavery: above all, Dale B. Martin's *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* and Jennifer Glancy's *Slavery in Early Christianity*. Some are even written after the first African-American president of the *Society of Biblical Literature*, Vincent L. Wimbush, addressed the Society in 2010 on the theme of "Interpreters: En-

6 McCarthy, *Slaves*, 22.

7 Bradley, *Problem of Slavery*, 282.

8 Fiorenza, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation*, 28.

slaving/Enslaved/Runagate.” Thus, we can expect an awareness of the fact that the Bible was written in a slaveholding society to be reflected in the exegetes’ imagination and interpretation. Anticipating the result of my analysis, I shall reveal that this is not the case. In order to offer an explanation for this interpretive situation, we will then turn toward an analysis of the representation of Mark 10:13–16 in visual media from the Reformation to today.

## 2. The Reception History of Mark 10:13–16

Students of the Bible must learn how to examine both the rhetorical aims of biblical texts and the rhetorical interests emerging in the history of interpretation or in contemporary scholarship in terms of the vision of justice and well-being for all. This requires that we revive a responsible ethical and political criticism that recognizes the ideological distortions of great works of religion.<sup>9</sup>

### 2.1 Mark 10:13–16 in Recent Exegesis

As mentioned above, Markan scholars unanimously agree that Mark 10:13–16 addresses the presence and role of children in early Christian congregations. Their arguments typically draw attention to the narrative context in which the text appears. Apparently, the scene is staged in the house to which Jesus and his disciples have had recourse after Jesus’ dispute with the Pharisees concerning divorce (Mark 10:1–12). R. Alan Culpepper explains: “The transition from speaking of marriage in the preceding verses to speaking of children is also a natural connection, as is the connection between women and children as powerless persons.”<sup>10</sup> Jesus admonishes his disciples to be especially attentive to weak members of the family, and to Culpepper that implies “women and children.”<sup>11</sup> However, scholars also agree that the role and treatment of children in the early Christian communities is not the primary function of the text and point instead to Mark’s treatment of Christology. Culpepper’s remark is emblematic of the strong focus on Jesus’ role and identity in Markan scholarship: “The fact that children were being brought so that Jesus might touch them indicates that people

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>10</sup> Culpepper, Mark, 332.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 332.

recognized Jesus as a distinguished person, a prophet, or a teacher whose touch could confer a blessing or heal."<sup>12</sup>

In general, it is the exegetical discussion of Jesus' statement in Mark 10:15 – "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God *ὡς παιδίον* will not enter it at all" – that fills the pages of the commentaries.<sup>13</sup> According to the interpreters, the tumultuous scene staged in Mark 10:13–14 serves as the backdrop for Jesus' statement in v. 15 on the kind of faith, which provides access to the Kingdom of God. Most scholars understand the phrase *ὡς παιδίον* as an adverbial modification of the 'reception' and, accordingly, as a qualification of the required faith. Lars Hartman's description is representative (here in Swedish): "En enkel berättelse *bildar* ram kring de Jesusord som är textens *kärna* och belyser det som Jesus säger."<sup>14</sup> In other words, the scene's social set up (Mark 10:13–14, 16) functions as the *vehicle* that transmits meaning to the *tenor* of faith (v. 15), but apart from that, there is no connection between the scene and the statement. Consequently, we must inquire into the kind of qualities that scholars associate with this essential state of 'childishness' (*ὡς παιδίον*).

According to Volker Stolle, it is not a special childish mode of being to which the Markan text draws attention but instead the fact that small children are not able to bring themselves to Jesus; someone must carry them. Thus, it is human beings' passivity *coram Deo* that Mark wishes to communicate: "Die damit angesprochene Spezifizierung spielt nicht auf irgendeine kindliche Eigenart auf, sondern verweist auf den Umstand, dass sie [die Kinder] zu Jesus *gebracht* sind."<sup>15</sup> Geert Hallböck likewise draws attention to the child's powerlessness and dependency on others: It is flawed to believe that human beings themselves can do anything to gain access to the Kingdom of God.<sup>16</sup> Thus Jesus' admonition does not concern the children's situation; instead, the children serve as a metaphor for the human condition *coram Deo*. Yet we must recall that Mark's text does not speak about babies (*βρέφος*); this is only true for the Lukan version of the passage (Luke 18:15).

Culpepper's interpretation of the eschatologically qualifying 'childishness' points in a more emotional direction: "One must receive the Kingdom with the same delight and humility that a child shows when given a gift."<sup>17</sup> Thus, according to Culpepper, Mark has the child's spontaneity, immediacy, and unreservedness in mind. Hartman also emphasizes the gift-like character of God's Kingdom: "Att

12 Ibid., 332. Cf. Hallböck and Engberg-Pedersen, *Første evangelium*, 150; Collins, *Mark*, 471.

13 Unless otherwise mentioned, translations of the *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece 28* are my own.

14 Hartman, *Markusevangeliet*, 389.

15 Stolle, *Markusevangelium*, 238; emphasis added.

16 Hallböck and Engberg-Pedersen, *Første evangelium*, 151.

17 Culpepper, *Mark*, 333.

skaker är och/eller blir som Gud vill (= Gud's rike) är alltså då något i nuet, och det ges som en gåva åt människor.”<sup>18</sup> As an already-present reality, the Kingdom opens itself up to the person, who in order to enter it surrenders with no hesitation. Hartman thus contrasts the child's unreserved, emotional, and naïve response with the adult's maturity and reflection, which may prevent the reception of – and then, entry into the Kingdom.

Collins takes her understanding of Mark 10:13–16 in a third direction. She sees the episode as a prelude to the story about the rich man, whose opportunity of “entering the Kingdom is very low” due to his negative response to Jesus' invitation.<sup>19</sup> When Collins seeks to explain what is implied by ‘childishness’ as a qualification of faith, she points to Jesus' teaching on serving in Mark 9:33–37: “The connection between the two passages suggests that receiving the Kingdom as a child means receiving it without the ambition to be a figure of authority, but being content to be ‘last of all and servant of all’.”<sup>20</sup> In addition, Collins makes us aware that Matthew, who is keen on filling in Mark's gaps, is explicit about the expected attitude. According to Matt 18:3–4 NRSV, it is humility we need: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children (τὰ παιδία), you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child (τὸ παιδίον) is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven.”<sup>21</sup>

For my part, I find that the scholarly tradition surrounding Mark 10:13–16 raises as many questions as it attempts to resolve. *First*, it is remarkable that although exegetes are aware that the text is part of the section in which Mark discusses various matters related to family life, they do not address the fact that larger households – as we may presume those that were prepared to accept the housing of Jesus and his sizable group of followers to be – also included slaves. *Second*, scholars generally emphasize the Markan Jesus' care for vulnerable members of the household, yet they ignore the most exposed group of people in the house: the slaves. Scholars thus appear to have adopted the hegemonic ideology of slavery in antiquity: As commodities, slaves were a matter of fact – not to be addressed. *Third*, with regard to the humility, which the requested childishness is meant, according to Collins, to represent, this attitude would fit better if the exemplary virtue of the Markan παιδία referred to slaves instead of kids. Although children were expected to obey the head of the family (Eph 6:1–3), humility was, above all, the virtue of slaves (1 Pet 2:18–25; 1 Tim 6:1–2; Tit 2:9–10). Moreover, the Christological hymn in Paul's Letter to the Philippians explicitly links slavery with humility (2:7–8). *Fourth*, if we accept that Mark's παιδία are

18 Hartman, Markusevangeliet, 390.

19 Collins, Mark, 471.

20 Ibid., 471.

21 Ibid., 473.

household slaves, we will see a displacement from a soteriological understanding of the text to an ecclesiological interpretation. Moreover, we will also face a shift in focus from individual faith to the social history of early Christianity. Both changes fit perfectly with Jesus' teaching on leadership and discipleship, which constitutes the context of our text cluster. If Mark 10:13–16 is read in this way, then we have a scene that features slaves and a Jesus who speaks about slavery as a Christian virtue in the manner that he explicitly does in Mark 10:42–45. This takes us to the *fifth* and final point. We must add: Jesus' statement in Mark 10:15 does not concern 'faith' at all; the word is not mentioned! Thus, the focus on 'faith' in the commentaries must be ascribed to the interpreters themselves.

The *tour de force* analysis of the Protestant reception history of Mark 10:13–16 from the Reformation and onward, which follows in the next paragraph, will demonstrate how many scholars' interpretations of the Markan text appear to be very good Pietistic interpretations.

## 2.2 Visual Reception History of Mark 10:13–16

With the Reformation, Jesus' blessing of children became a popular motif in European fine art. During the 1540s, Lucas Cranach the Elder and his workshop painted a whole series of pictures illustrating Mark 10:13–16 – we know fifteen examples of the motif – with pushy mothers bringing their well-nourished babies to Jesus for his blessing.<sup>22</sup> These pictures formed part of the reformers' debate with the Catholic Church about the relationship between *sola fides* and the sacraments. Only God saves, and child baptism, on which the schismatic churches agreed, became an argument in favor of this. In addition, Cranach's paintings mirror the burgeoning modern family as the new and secular place in which, according to the reformers, the Protestant was now to perform his Christian duties. With the Reformation, the raising of the children became the mother's Christian calling and civic responsibility. The distribution of light in the paintings highlights the women's fertility, shining on their many children and their prosperous breasts, almost bursting with milk. In this way, the images communicate that childrearing is invested with divine meaning. Still, it takes a century before – as an effect of the new Protestant ethics – the bourgeois family becomes visible, though by this point, Dutch and Flemish painters had altered

22 See e.g. Lucas Cranach the Elder (German, 1472–1553). 1546. Johanniterkirche, Schwäbisch Hall, Germany: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b3/Lucas\\_Cranach\\_d.\\_J.\\_-\\_Christ\\_Blessing\\_the\\_Children\\_-\\_WGA05732.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b3/Lucas_Cranach_d._J._-_Christ_Blessing_the_Children_-_WGA05732.jpg).

See also Cranach the Elder. Mid-1540s. Wawel Royal Castle, Krakow, Poland: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/48/Cranach\\_the\\_Elder\\_Christ\\_blessing\\_the\\_children.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/48/Cranach_the_Elder_Christ_blessing_the_children.jpg).