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# The Shaping of New Testament Narrative and Salvation Teachings by Painful Childhood Experience

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## **Abstract**

This article considers the influence of childhood corporal punishment, abandonment, and neglect on the development and reception of seminal New Testament teachings. Two related but distinct propositions are argued. First, that widespread patterns of painful childhood experience provided a thematic template that deeply shaped the New Testament during its formative period. Second, that this thematic shaping has contributed, on an individual level, to subjective experiences of faith and, on a cultural level, to the initial spread and subsequent persistence of Christianity. The approach is interdisciplinary, drawing on religious texts, historical evidence about the treatment of children, and several areas of psychology. The article ends with an exploratory excursus intended to stimulate thought about possible childhood influences in non-Christian religions and myths; the traditions considered are Judaism and Islam, the religious-philosophic system of karmic reincarnation that is foundational to Hinduism and Buddhism, and a Greek mythic text associated with the historically important Eleusinian mystery religion.

## **Keywords**

New Testament, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, karma, Homeric Hymn to Demeter, childhood, corporal punishment, trauma, abandonment

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## Introduction

In 1732, Susannah Wesley, mother of John and Charles Wesley, the founders of Methodism, recorded her reflections on childhood corporal punishment and the development of a religious world-view. Susannah, who began punishing her children before they were one year old, saw the physical inculcation of obedience as a necessary part of the child's *religious* education. She wrote:

I insist on conquering the will of children betimes [i.e., early in life], because this is the only strong and rational foundation of a religious education, without which both precept and example will be ineffectual. . . . This is still more evident if we further consider that religion is nothing else than the doing the will of God, and not our own. . . . (Greven, 1973, p. 48)

In this remarkable passage, Wesley posits a causal link between the experience of the child, who is coerced into renouncing his or her own will and following the will of the parent, and the experience of the adult religionist, who renounces his or her own will and seeks to follow the will of God. Wesley makes the striking suggestion that one who has not, as a child, been coerced into obedience will not develop a religious outlook. In essence, Wesley proposed that the child's experience of enforced submission to the parent provides a necessary psychological foundation for a belief system centered on submission to God.

In our own time, scholars from a variety of disciplines have likewise proposed a causal link between patterns of childhood submission, punishment, or suffering and patterns of religious experience. For example, Philip Greven (social history), Morton Schatzman (psychiatry), Rita Nakashima Brock (feminist theology), Jon D. Levenson (Judaic studies), Erik H. Erikson (psychoanalysis), Lloyd DeMause (psychohistory), Jay R. Feierman (human ethology), Michael A. Persinger (neuroscience) and still others have argued that aspects of religious narrative, belief, and practice reflect the painful experiences of children at the hands of parents or other adults. Freud, of course, also suggested links between childhood and religion, though much of his work is rooted in a vision of pre-historical childhood that is itself highly mythical (Greven, 1977, 1992; Schatzman, 1973; Brock, 1989, 1991, pp. 50-56; Levenson, 1993; Erikson 1993/1958; DeMause, 2002, Chapter 9; Feierman, 2009; Persinger, 1987, pp. 67-69, 113-122; Freud, 1913/1990; see also Faber, 2004).

This article, which markedly extends my previous work on the subject (Abelow, 2007, 2009, 2010), considers the influence of childhood corporal punishment, abandonment, and neglect on the development and reception of seminal New Testament teachings. Two related but distinct propositions are argued. First, that widespread patterns of painful childhood experience provided a thematic template that deeply shaped the New Testament during its formative period. Second, that this thematic shaping has contributed, on an individual level, to subjective experiences of faith and, on a cultural level, to the initial spread and subsequent persistence of Christianity. Note that nothing presented in this article precludes a role for factors unrelated to childhood; in fact, childhood and non-childhood factors could readily have acted together in shaping New Testament themes and influencing their acceptance on a personal and cultural level.

The article has five main sections. The first section describes parallels between historically widespread patterns of painful childhood experience and seminal New Testament themes. The second section introduces the argument that these parallels indicate a specific causal relationship—viz., that childhood in the ancient world shaped New Testament traditions. The third section considers the implications of these parallels for subjective experiences of belief and the cultural spread and persistence of Christianity. The fourth section discusses individual and social mechanisms that could have mediated the historical shaping of New Testament traditions in conformity with patterns of childhood. In addition, the fourth section concludes the argument that patterns of childhood in the ancient world did, in fact, shape New Testament traditions. The fifth section is an exploratory excursus intended to stimulate thought about possible childhood influences in non-Christian religions and myths.

### **New Testament Traditions Parallel Experiential Themes from Childhood**

Since time immemorial, children have been corporally punished to inculcate obedience. As suggested by proverbs in the Hebrew Scriptures—for example, “he who spares the rod hates his son” [Proverbs 13:24]—in most settings the father has been the primary or ultimate disciplinarian. This basic pattern of patriarchal punishment has been widespread in the West—some would say practically universal—for virtually all of recorded history. The evidence on

this point is substantial for the ancient Greek, Roman imperial,<sup>1</sup> medieval European,<sup>2</sup> and modern<sup>3</sup> contexts.

<sup>1</sup> For Greece, see M. Golden (1990, e.g., p. 101). For the Roman period, the following quotations, arranged in rough chronological order starting with the century before the birth of Christianity, include both prescriptive and descriptive material. The *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (first century B.C.E.) advocates that parents and teachers “chastise the young with special severity” (4.17.25) to shape them for a virtuous life. According to Cicero (106-43 B.C.E.), boys could be beaten by fathers, mothers, grandfathers, and teachers (discussed in Saller, 1994, p. 147). The poet Ovid (43 B.C.E.-17 C.E.) addresses the dawn-goddess Aurora: “You defraud boys of their sleep and hand them over to their teachers, so that their tender hands should suffer savage blows” (*Amores* 1.13.17-18); of course, it was the parents, not Aurora, who actually handed over the children. Seneca (3 B.C.E.-65 C.E.) explains that children are beaten for the same reason that animals are, “so that the pain overcomes their obstinacy” (*De Constantia Sapientis* 12.3). Seneca also describes how the father’s role was primarily disciplinary, in contrast to maternal nurturance (*Essay on Providence* 2.5). For Quintilian (35-95 C.E.), see my note 5, below. The poet Martial (40-103 C.E.) complained for [N.B.] comic effect that his sleep was being interrupted by school-house beatings “as loud as that of bronze being beaten on an anvil...” (*Epigrams* 9, 68). The medical authority Galen (130-200 C.E.) held that once children reach about one year of age they “can be made to obey by the use of blows, threats, reprimands, and admonishments” (Orbasius, *Libri incerti*, 17). Augustine (354-430 C.E.) describes school floggings and recounts how “our parents laughed at the torments which our teachers inflicted on us...” (*Confessions* 1, 9-14). Nonetheless, as an adult, Augustine preached, “The father who denies discipline is cruel... When a father thrashes his son [for disobedience], he loves him. Truly, his son has no desire to be beaten, but his father has no regard for his wishes...” (*Sermones* 13.8.9 [*Patrologia Latina* 38.III]). Note that, in Roman culture, the education of sons was considered a direct paternal responsibility, and teachers functioned, ultimately, as paternal surrogates; thus, even school punishments are revealing about the filial relationship.

<sup>2</sup> Of many examples: medievalist Shulamith Shahar (1990, p. 173) describes the standard medieval view as, “A teacher or parent who does not chastise the child in good time causes him to choose evil ways and even to lose his life and forfeit his soul.” Virtually all major Church sermonists from Gregory the Great (ca. 590 C.E.) until the end of the Middle Ages actively preached parental corporal punishment (Swanson, 1990). Of Benedict’s Rule, which formed the basis of Western monastic organization and to some extent was seen as a model of ideal family life (under the abbot = father), Quinn (1989, p. 119) writes, “an examination of all references to children [living in the monastery] in Benedict’s Rule reveals a startling fact—the greater part of these excerpts concern punishment”; the most common methods were “sharp blows, whipping, or fasts.” Chaucer describes in the *Prioress’s Tale* how even a seven-year-old child might be beaten in school “thrice within the [same] hour” (Orme, 1989, p. 233). Late medieval songs and Latin school books describe how school children were beaten with birch rods or whipped, sometimes on a daily basis, and not infrequently till they bled (Orme, 1989, p. 96; Orme, 2001, pp. 154-155).

<sup>3</sup> In these citations, I draw the line between medieval and modern at 1500. Of countless examples, in rough chronological order: Of Germany around 1500, Marius (1999, p. 23) writes, “The German attitude was that children were beasts to be tamed, an attitude common both at home and at school... Fathers ruled at home, teachers in the classroom. The stick was applied to the backs of children with the alacrity with which it was used on cattle, horses, and dogs.” In England, Shakespeare describes fathers as indulgent if they merely threaten children “for terror” but do not actually administer beatings (*Measure for Measure*, I, iii, 23-27; discussed in Orme, 1989,

In fact, physical discipline has historically been so central to the father's role that one finds reference to the idea that a child who is not punished might, *ipso facto*, be presumed illegitimate. This idea is expressed in the New Testament itself, where the book of Hebrews, after asserting that all sons are punished, asks, "For what son is he whom the father does not chastise?"—and at once supplies an answer: "If you are without chastisement... then are you bastards and not sons" [Hebrews 12:7-8]. As recently as the nineteenth century, John Epps (1806-1869) of Kent, England, wrote, "[M]y father felt obliged to testify to the fact of my being his child, by correction..." (Pollack, 1983, p. 183).<sup>4</sup>

Such punishments, which have been widespread at both home and school, have produced great fear in children. For example, St. Augustine, reared in fourth-century Roman North Africa, described the "fearful and cruel" punishments he received in school as a young child. The beatings were a source of such unbearable terror to him and his schoolmates that, writing as an adult, Augustine compared them to torture (*Confessions*, 1.9.15). Countless reports spanning 2,000 years have likewise described states of intense fear and terror in response to routine childhood punishments.<sup>5</sup> In some cases, unexceptional

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p. 275). In *Leviathan* (Chapter 17) Thomas Hobbes explained political power with reference to fathers and children: just as a father forces his children to submit, and can "destroy them if they refuse," so the sovereign compels his subjects. Several decades later, John Locke, in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, advocated decisive punishment early in childhood: "If you command and he refuses, ... you must be sure to carry it, whatever blows it costs..." (discussed in Sommerville, 1992, pp. 102-103). In seventeenth century France, the law allowed fathers to kill older children under specific circumstances, and it may have granted him unlimited power to kill younger children; and French children who wet their beds were commonly beaten, driving some boys to tie cords around their penises to prevent accidents (Marvick, 1988). An eighteenth-century German encyclopedia, in an entry on "Child," tellingly states that, through their exposure to lower class nurses, children learn bad habits that "not even the severest discipline can knock out of them" (Lindemann, 1981, p. 383). A late-nineteenth century German advice manual for parents advocates blows to the head, slaps to the mouth, hair pulling, and boxes to the ears (Miller, 1990, p. 44). For a broad discussion of corporal punishment among English and especially American Protestants from colonial times until the early 1990s, see Greven (1992). In America, studies done in 1975, 1985, and 1995 consistently found that over 90 percent of three-year-old children were spanked (discussed in Strauss & Donnelly, 2001, pp. 20-25). A 1997 study of urban London found that almost all children were hit at some time, with the youngest punished most frequently; 52 percent of one-year-olds were hit or smacked at least once a week (Nobes & Smith, 1997, pp. 271-281).

<sup>4</sup> Whether these expressions were fully literal in intent, or were to some extent conventional, may be impossible to determine; they are telling either way. Given Hebrews' prior assertion that all sons are punished, the author's intent may be literal.

<sup>5</sup> For example, in his *Institutio Oratoria* (1.3.16), Quintilian hints that Imperial Roman children often became so terrified during beatings that they lost bowel or bladder control: "... when

experiences of punishment have produced psychological dissociation and amnesia, responses often considered to be indicia of psychological trauma.<sup>6</sup>

The abandonment of children, like corporal punishment, has also been widespread in the West, with historians and anthropologists documenting high levels of infant exposure and other forms of abandonment. The historian John Boswell, who helped trailblaze the study of Roman and medieval child abandonment, estimated that of all children born in Rome during the first three centuries C.E., somewhere between 20 and 40 percent were abandoned (Boswell, 1990, p. 135).<sup>7</sup> High levels of abandonment persisted throughout the medieval and much of the modern periods (Boswell, 1990). Writing primarily of the 18th and 19th centuries, the anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy (1999, p. 303) notes that European abandonment affected not tens or hundreds of thousands of babies, but millions; and historian and anthropologist David Kertzer (1993) has shown that in mid-nineteenth century Europe over 100,000 babies were abandoned annually.<sup>8</sup> In many settings—certainly during the Roman period and, often, in medieval and modern times as well—the decision to abandon a child, like the decision to punish, was made or overseen by the father.

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children are beaten, the pain and fear often have results which it is not pleasant to speak of and which will later be a source of embarrassment.” Winston Churchill describes how merely witnessing a beating can terrify; he tells how boys at his prep school, routinely assembled to watch exemplary beatings of wayward classmates, “sat quaking” (Rose, 1991, pp. 186-187). The early twentieth century evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson describes how the threat of beatings led her to a state of disorganized panic: “I stood looking wildly about for a way out of the dilemma. No earthly recourse was nigh. . . . Dropping to my knees on the side of my bed, I began to pray, loudly, earnestly. “Oh, God, don’t let mama whip me! Oh, God, Dear, kind, sweet God, don’t let mama spank me!” (Greven, 1992, p. 24). Similar examples are legion in the historical record.

<sup>6</sup> See Greven (1992, pp. ix-x) for a personal example by a respected historian.

<sup>7</sup> For the Roman period, Boswell may be uniquely bold in estimating percentages based on sources that, while numerous and suggestive of widespread abandonment, are qualitative. For a more typical, suggestive, and conservative manner of assessing levels of abandonment during this period, see the discussion in Bakke (2005, pp. 28-29) and his one line summary (p. 51): “We do not know what percentage were in fact exposed, but there is no doubt that *exposito* was well-known and societally accepted in both the eastern and the western regions of the empire.” While Boswell’s numerical estimates have generally been considered plausible, his interpretive thesis, reflected in the title of his book (1990), that abandoned children were often rescued out of “kindness,” and his supposition that many abandoned children survived, have not; see e.g. the discussions by Fuchs (p. 12) and Kertzer (pp. 17-18) in Tilly, Fuchs, Kertzer, and Ransel (1992).

<sup>8</sup> Because institutional foundling homes kept careful numerical records, information on abandonment is most detailed for the modern period. See also Panter-Brick and Smith (2000), Fuchs (1984), McClure (1981), and Ransel (1988).

In addition to frank abandonment, countless millions of children—a substantial fraction of the West’s population—were sent away from home as babies or children for a period of years, to nurse, work, apprentice, or study (e.g., Boswell, 1990, pp. 357-358; McCracken, 1983, pp. 303-313; Fildes, 1988; Klapisch-Zuber, 1985, pp. 106-109; J. Golden, 1996; Sussman, 1982). Many of these children were too young to understand that their removal from home was to be temporary. Even while living at home, many and possibly most children were subject to deficient parental care, empathy, and nurture, with fathers tending to be especially cool and distant; and large numbers of children, both poor and rich, also experienced neglect of basic physical needs.<sup>9</sup> This relatively widespread neglect apparently reflected a range of factors, including social norms that considered overt expressions of parental affection as “indulgent” or “coddling”; limited understanding of the psychological needs of children; and levels of infant mortality so high that, according to some historians, parents were unwilling to invest emotionally in children until they survived the vulnerable period of early childhood.

Holding in mind these endemic patterns of painful childhood experience, let us consider the writings of the New Testament. Doing so, we find clear thematic parallels with the experiences of children.

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<sup>9</sup> Of many examples, in rough chronological order: Bakke (2005, p. 36) notes that if children in the ancient Roman world received “the physical closeness and attention that we today consider essential for the further development of the child,” such came from nurses, pedagogues, and others, not parents. Wiedemann (1989, p. 17) writes, “Romans, Greeks, and most European peasant cultures . . . did not allow themselves to feel enough affection for the young child to need a specific word for him.” In medieval England, “the father’s role was limited to providing an inheritance for his children and disciplining them, but it did not extend to nurturing them” (Hanawalt, 1986, p. 185). Of Norway, from Viking times almost to the present, childcare was never a priority for fathers; even studies from the 1950s and 1960s showed fathers to be “primarily socially and emotionally distant” (Martinson, 1992, p. 53). In France, Michel Montaigne wrote, “I have lost two or three children in infancy, not without regret, but without great sorrow”; regarding which historian Lawrence Stone notes: “The phrase ‘two or three’ indicates a degree of indifference and casual unconcern which would be inconceivable today” (Stone, 1977, p. 105). Of seventeenth-century Holland, Dekker (2000, pp. 128-129) describes “an attitude of emotional indifference” by parents. In Russia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in a typical and frequently lethal peasant pattern, “the child went to a fly-infested crib suspended from a rafter and filled with rags. The baby was left among the rags and its own waste products . . .” (Ransel, 1988, p. 269; on lethality, see p. 266). Among nineteenth-century Italian peasants, the mother’s treatment of children was rough, abrupt, of few words, with only rare expressions of affection (Kertzer, 1993, p. 177). In England during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “affection between fathers and their children seems to have been far more rare in comparison with that between mothers and children” (Hendrick, 1997, p. 26).

To begin, observe that the Son, Jesus, suffers corporally according to the will of his heavenly Father. This teaching is emphasized throughout the New Testament. According to Paul, the Father “did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all” [Romans 8:32]. In the Gospel of John, when Peter tries to prevent Jesus’ capture, Jesus rebukes him, saying, “the cup which my Father has given me, shall I not drink it?” [18:11] The cup, of course, refers to the fate that Jesus knows awaits him. John’s Gospel goes so far as having the Father himself, speaking in “a voice from heaven,” indicate that He is responsible for the crucifixion [12:27-28]. The Acts of the Apostles states that Jesus was “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” [Acts 2:23]. Acts even gives the impression that the Father, like a divine playwright, scripted the actions of everyone involved in the crucifixion: Herod, Pontius Pilate, Gentiles, and Jews all “were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus... to do whatever Thy hand and Thy plan predestined to take place” [Acts 4:27-28]. In observing the central role of the Father in his Son’s suffering, we find close thematic parallels with the historical situation of ordinary children.<sup>10</sup>

As Jesus contemplates his fate, his sadness and fear is palpable. In the Gospels of Matthew [26:38] and Mark [14:34], Jesus is “very sorrowful, even to [the point of] death.” In Luke’s Gospel [22:44] we read of Jesus’ emotional “agony.” The book of Hebrews [5:7] describes Jesus’ “loud cries and tears” and his intense “fear.”<sup>11</sup> Filled with sorrow and fear, Jesus implores his heavenly Father to remove the cup of punishment, or pain, from before him: “Father, all things are possible for you; remove this cup from before me” [Mark 14:35-36; Matt. 26:39, Luke 22:42]. In all this, Jesus’ responses closely parallel the sadness, terror, and desperate pleading of ordinary children faced with impending punishment. Ultimately, Jesus resigns himself to his fate, saying, “Father... not what I will, but what you will” [Mark 14:36; Matt. 26:39, Luke 22:42]. In so speaking, Jesus expresses a posture of filial submission that has, from time immemorial, been forced upon ordinary children. And when

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<sup>10</sup> It may be relevant that Jesus is a *Son*, for the paternal punishment of male children may have been especially systematic. Note that both Psalms (e.g., 13:24) and the New Testament epistle to the Hebrews (12:6-11) emphasize the punishment of sons, and many Roman sources refer specifically to sons. More generally, as an historical phenomenon, girls were certainly punished as well but, as a result of their lower social status and the greater role that mothers played in their upbringing, they may have received a less consistent paternal discipline.

<sup>11</sup> These New Testament images of suffering were, centuries later, reflected in church doctrine, which declared that Jesus is fully human (and divine), capable of suffering the same physical and emotional pain as other humans. Luke 22:44 may be a late scribal insertion.



Hebrews [5:8] says of Jesus, “he learned obedience by the things which he suffered,” the parallels with ordinary childhood discipline are unmistakable.

In the Gospels, we also find thematic parallels to widespread patterns of child abandonment and neglect, most strikingly in Jesus’ so-called Cry of Dereliction from the cross—“My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?” [Matt 27:46, Mark 15:34] This cry was taken verbatim from Psalms [22:2] and, in the Gospels, placed into the context of a Father-Son relationship. No longer is it a Hebrew’s generic lament to God; it is a Son crying out to his Father—just as we might expect of the countless children abandoned or neglected by *their* fathers. Thus, with respect to both corporal punishment and abandonment, we find in the Passion of Jesus tight thematic parallels with the “passion” of ordinary children.

Parallels with childhood are prominent also within Christian salvation teachings. In childhood, historically and often still, disobedience leads to punishment by the father whereas obedience leads to benign treatment. Starting with Paul’s New Testament letters, we find the same pattern within Christianity. Disobedience—Adam’s sin in the Biblical garden—leads to Paternal punishment for humans; whereas obedience to the Father—the behavioral and attitudinal stance of Jesus—leads to salvation. Here are the seminal lines from Paul, which became foundational for Christianity:

Then as one man’s [Adam’s] trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man’s [Jesus’] act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous. [Romans 5:18-19]

The strength of this parallel with ordinary childhood becomes even clearer if we allow ourselves to apply the term “salvation” to childhood. Then we can say that for both the child within the family and the believer within the cosmos, salvation from punishment is attained through filial obedience. This parallel is rendered yet more precise by two facts. First, human beings are themselves considered children of the heavenly Father. Thus, both in ordinary childhood and in Christian teachings about damnation, it is children who are subject to punishment by the father/Father. Second, Adam himself is sometimes described as a child—Luke’s Gospel [3:38] calls him “the Son of God”—and his sin has a distinctly child-like quality to it;<sup>12</sup> thus, there is a sense in which

<sup>12</sup> See e.g., Gunkel’s classic Genesis commentary (1901/1997): “The first sin was only a child’s sin” (p. 1); “The model [for the Biblical portrayal of Adam and Eve] . . . is clearly the state of children who are not yet ashamed” (p. 14); “Just as the child who has transgressed its father’s

Adam's sin is not simply disobedience, *per se*, but filial disobedience—that is, the disobedience of the child.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, observe the central place of fear in the believer's relationship with the heavenly Father. The Gospel of Luke [12:4-5] has Jesus intone about the heavenly Father: "I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear him!"<sup>14</sup> In the opening lines of the earliest surviving Christian text (ca. 50 C.E.), Paul recounts the conversion of the Thessalonians to Christianity: they turned from idols to God and waited for "Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" [1 Thessalonians 1:9-10]. In the letter to the Ephesians [2:2-3], we read that the Father's wrath is specifically provoked by the disobedience of his human children.<sup>15</sup> Again, the parallels with ordinary childhood are unmistakable. Just as the righteous anger of human fathers has, throughout history, filled children with fear, so the heavenly Father's righteous anger is a source of terror for His human "children." Likewise, paternal wrath, both human and divine, is provoked by disobedience.

New Testament thematic parallels with patterns of painful childhood experience are many, precise, and layered. Such extensive parallels are unlikely to have arisen by chance. Furthermore, the themes in question are central to the New Testament and to the broad Christian tradition. Jesus' experience of

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commandment flees his look, so the man did not dare appear in God's sight" (p. 19); "The man is portrayed as an erring child, not as a hardened sinner" (p. 19); "The sin the man committed is indeed portrayed . . . as a child's sin." (p. 32) Likewise, Speiser's (1964) Anchor Bible commentary: "When Adam has been caught in his transparent attempt at evasion, Yahweh speaks to him as a father would to his child: 'Where are you?' In this context, it is the same thing as, 'And what have you been up to just now?' This simple phrase—a single word in the [Hebrew] original—does the work of volumes. For what [the Biblical author] has thus evoked is the childhood of mankind itself" (p. 25).

<sup>13</sup> The situations of the child and the believer can be compared and contrasted as follows: For the ordinary child interacting with the human father, disobedience and obedience are attained directly, by the actions of the child; whereas for the believer interacting with the heavenly Father, disobedience and obedience are primarily attained indirectly, through metaphysical affiliation with Adam and Jesus—that is, disobedience through Adam, obedience through Jesus.

<sup>14</sup> It is remarkable that this blunt assertion of Paternal threat is followed by a series of lines that seem almost designed to conceal the fear and coercion that is central to, and provides the underlying need for, salvation. The very next lines, which are often quoted out of context, read, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows" [Luke 12:6-7; see also Matt. 10:28-31].

<sup>15</sup> Referring to the "sons of disobedience," Ephesians states: "Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath. . . ."

sorrow, fear, physical suffering, abandonment, and filial submission define and epitomize the Passion of Christ; and the ultimate responsibility of the Father for Jesus' Passion lies at the heart of New Testament narrative and theology. The teaching that divine punishment is a response to disobedience, and that salvation is a response to obedience, is a crucial emphasis in Paul and is certainly one of the most influential ideas in the history of Christian thought. Much the same can be said of the image of God as a terrifying Father. To find in the New Testament such fundamental parallels with childhood experience is remarkable and warrants the closest scrutiny.

### **New Testament Parallels with Childhood Indicate a Causal Relationship**

If New Testament parallels with childhood are too extensive to plausibly be explained by chance, one must ask how they could have arisen. Later, I will argue the thesis strongly, but for now I will merely assert, as a working hypothesis, what some may already intuit as the probable explanation: that foundational New Testament traditions were shaped as a reflection of the painful historical realities of childhood. Expanding this assertion slightly, I suggest that those persons involved in the creation of early Christian ideas, having been reared in a punitive patriarchal context, unknowingly projected or "mapped" patterns of childhood onto a religious cosmos.<sup>16</sup> According to this explanation, canonical themes of innocent suffering, salvation through filial obedience, and the like were fundamentally shaped in response to childhood experience.

This possibility must be considered of first importance. The New Testament's theological narrative and salvation teachings are constructed almost entirely around the relationship of a Son and his Father. If one is willing to countenance any role for human psychology in shaping images of the divine, then one must suspect, *a priori*, that childhood could be an important or even decisive formative influence.

Basic to the argument presented here is a simple methodological feature: the process of identifying and drawing inferences from parallels that cannot adequately be explained by chance. A similar methodological feature is central to the work of scholars who study textual relationships among the synoptic Gospels—specifically, that group of textual relationships that underlies the so-called synoptic problem. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are

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<sup>16</sup> Among such persons, I include those who may have participated in anonymous collective processes, such as oral transmission, as discussed later in the article.

similar to each other in structure, story, and, at many points, specific wording. These similarities, which are often conceptualized as “parallels,”<sup>17</sup> are so strong that, at least since Augustine, it has been recognized that the three Gospels must have a common source. Augustine himself thought that Matthew’s Gospel provided the foundation for the other two; currently, most scholars ascribe priority to Mark. Whatever the exact details of the sourcing process, virtually all scholars agree that linguistic parallels among the synoptic texts cannot plausibly be explained by chance and must therefore indicate a sequence of causation and copying. Similar logic applies to our current concerns: like the *textual* parallels among the Gospels, so, on a macro level, do *thematic* parallels between text and social-historical reality appear to be too precise and extensive to have arisen by chance. This fact points to some form of causal relationship between social-historical reality and text. Because entrenched patterns of childhood corporal punishment and abandonment long preceded the development of Christianity,<sup>18</sup> the primary direction of this causal sequence, with respect to the particular themes we are considering, must be that childhood shaped Christian tradition, not vice versa.<sup>19</sup>

In considering the shaping influence of childhood on Christianity, an obvious question is, “Childhood where?” It is likely impossible to determine, with any confidence, the precise origins of the New Testament traditions we are

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<sup>17</sup> In fact, these three Gospels are termed synoptic (Gk: “seen together”) because, due to their similarities, the texts are often arranged in parallel columns and studied together.

<sup>18</sup> e.g., see evidence cited in my footnote 1.

<sup>19</sup> The structure of this argument can be portrayed, with additional detail, in formal terms. If patterns A and B overlap or parallel each other to an extent that cannot plausibly be explained by chance, three main explanations are possible: (i) A shapes B, (ii) B shapes A, and (iii) C (a third variable or set of variables) independently shapes both A and B in parallel fashion. In the case under consideration in the text, one of the first two possibilities must be excluded because of a clear temporal sequencing between A and B. The third possibility cannot be definitively excluded until the entire universe of possible C has been tried. However, it is exceedingly hard to imagine an instantiation of C that stands in the required relationships to both A and B and is, simultaneously, more plausible on its face than the proposed causal relationship between A and B. This same general type of inferential argument is central not only to the work of Biblical scholars on the synoptic problem but also to the scientific discipline of observational epidemiology. There, statistical associations (typically between patterns of health or disease in the population and potential causal factors in the environment) are identified; plausible causal mechanisms are adduced (to demonstrate the “biologic plausibility” of the proposed cause-effect relationship); and potential confounders of the proposed causal relationship (i.e., alternate causal explanations for the observed association) are specified and, where possible, ruled out. As one epidemiological example of this methodological approach, see Abelow, Holford, and Insogna (1992). As applied to the study of religion, the demonstration of non-random parallels, e.g. among texts or between text and context, can provide the evidential basis for a rigorous empirical methodology.

considering. But two main cultural contexts, or streams of influence, are of signal relevance: Imperial Greco-Roman society, which provided the immediate cultural matrix for the writings of the New Testament,<sup>20</sup> and Jewish culture. Either of these contexts, or some combination of them—for they overlapped in both Palestine and the Diaspora—could have shaped early Christian ideas in the way being suggested: on a template provided by patterns of childhood experience.

Consider, first, the broad Imperial context. In Roman society, obedience to the father was an absolute ethical imperative. Central to civic life was the moral concept of *pietas*, one of the three primary Roman virtues, and filial obedience was fundamental to that concept. In jurisprudence, the laws of *patria potestas* (“paternal powers”) delineated the almost unlimited legal rights of fathers over the property, bodies, and even lives of their children. As noted above, a wide range of contemporary sources, including the New Testament itself, make clear that the corporal punishment of children by fathers was normative and extremely common.

Although patriarchy has been the dominant form of social organization in many cultures, Roman patriarchy was exceptionally explicit and well defined. In fact, Roman self-awareness of its rigorous patriarchy became, for Romans themselves, a point of comparison, self-differentiation, and even subtle pride with respect to other cultures. Insight into this patriarchal context can readily be gleaned from two contemporary quotations about the laws of *patria potestas*. The first comes from Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a Greek teacher of rhetoric who lived in Rome from 30 B.C.E. to 8 B.C.E.:

[T]hose who drew up constitutions for Greek communities set a very short period for sons to be under the control of their fathers. . . . But the founder of the Roman constitution gave the father unrestricted power over his sons. That power was to remain until the father’s death. He might imprison or beat him, chain him up and send him to work in the country, or even execute him. (Gardner & Wiedemann, 1991, p. 12)

The second quote comes from Gaius, who during the second century C.E. wrote in his influential textbook of Roman law:

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<sup>20</sup> It was in this broad Roman world where the Gospel traditions apparently circulated extensively in oral form before being written down in *koine* (“common”) Greek, which was the lingua franca of the Roman Empire; it was in this same Roman world where Paul was born, and where he developed and preached his ideas. Most scholars thus assume that the writings of the New Testament represent a Roman-culturally modified formulation of earlier, presumably historical traditions about Jesus.

Some persons are legally independent, some are subject to another. [O]f those subject to another, some are in *potestas* [power]. . . . Slaves are in *potestas* of their masters. This *potestas* rests on universal law, for it is observable that among all peoples alike, masters have power of life and death over their slaves. . . . Also in our *potestas* are any of our children who are the offspring of a lawful marriage. This right is peculiar to Roman citizens, for there are virtually no other peoples who have such power over their children as we have. . . . (Gardner & Wiedemann, 1991, p. 5)

These two quotations are of special relevance because, as their dates indicate, they chronologically bracket the period when the books of the New Testament were written.<sup>21</sup> These quotes thus provide rather specific insight into the cultural milieu from which Christianity most directly emerged. In fact, when read in the context of the passage from Gaius, which describes the similar legal status of children and slaves, Paul's statement in Galatians 4:1 is seen to be particularly revealing: even the "heir to an estate," when still a child, "is no better than a slave."<sup>22</sup>

Consider, next, the Jewish cultural context. Writing in early first-century Alexandria, Egypt, a flourishing Jewish community and center of Imperial Hellenistic culture, the Hellenistic-Jewish philosopher Philo comments approvingly on Mosaic laws that make offenses against one's parents a capital crime. In fact, perhaps as a result of the cultural influence of *patria potestas* (Balla, 2003, p. 102, esp. n. 42), Philo goes beyond the already rigorous Mosaic law.<sup>23</sup> At the end of the first century, another Hellenized Jew, Josephus

<sup>21</sup> Most scholars believe the component writings of the New Testament were produced during the period circa 50-150 C.E.

<sup>22</sup> It is significant that Paul uses his child-slave comparison as an explanatory analogy when making a theological point (see Galatians 4:1-7 for the full context). This use implies that Paul's readers and hearers would find the child-slave comparison meaningful and intelligible, rendering it useful as the basis for explaining something unfamiliar. A similar point about meaning and intelligibility applies to Hebrews 12:6-11, a non-Pauline text, regarding the ubiquity of childhood punishment.

<sup>23</sup> According to Exodus [21:17] and Leviticus [20:9], one who insults his parents is subject to death, as is one who strikes his parent [Exodus 21:15]. According to Deuteronomy [21:18-21], a child who is persistently disobedient to parents in the face of chastisement should be turned over to the community for execution by stoning. In *The Special Laws*, Philo writes,

For these reasons it is allowable for parents even to accuse their children, and to reprove them with considerable severity, and even, if they do not submit to the threats which are uttered to them by word of mouth, to beat them, and inflict personal punishment on them, and to imprison them; and if they behave with obstinacy and resist this treatment, becoming stiff-necked through the greatness of their incurable wickedness, the law permits them to chastise them even to the extent of putting them to death. [2.232] . . . And even if he has not laid hands upon his parents, but has only spoken ill of [them] . . . or if he has in any

Flavius, who was reared and lived the early part of his life in Palestine, did much the same.<sup>24</sup> Paul, of course, was also a Hellenized Jew; and his comparison of children to slaves, quoted above, may therefore be informative about the Hellenistic Jewish context (just as it is informative about the life experiences and expectations of his primarily gentile audience). Other Jewish texts show that the corporal punishment of children, especially by fathers, was common during the centuries before and after the birth of Christianity, both in Palestine and the Diaspora.<sup>25</sup>

Given the rigorously patriarchal character of the Christian formative matrix—whether this matrix is presumed to be pagan patriarchy, Jewish Hellenistic culture, more traditional streams of Jewish influence, or some combi-

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other manner done anything which can tend to bring his parents into disrepute, still let him die. [2.248]

Notice that Deuteronomy 21:18-21, on which Philo seems to be most directly commenting, does not authorize parents to directly execute a child; Philo may in 2.232 be reading Deuteronomy as providing such authorization. Harm to parental reputation is not a capital offense under Mosaic law, as Philo suggests in 2.248.

<sup>24</sup> In *Against Apion* (Book 2:28), Josephus writes, “The law ordains also that parents should be honored immediately after God himself, and delivers that son who does not requite them for the benefits he has received from them, but is deficient on any such occasion, to be stoned.” Notice that Deuteronomy 21:18-21, on which Josephus, like Philo, seems to be commenting, does not even discuss neglect of parents by older children. Josephus’s aim in writing *Against Apion* was to provide a defense of Judaism as a classical religion and philosophy. Perhaps Josephus conflated Deuteronomy with Plato, who asserts that a parent who suffers neglect of filial duty should report it to the authorities, who will punish the child for the offense (see Balla, 2003, pp. 7, 27). While both Philo and Josephus in these passages extend Mosaic law in some respects, both refer, in conformity with the cited Mosaic texts, to parents, and not specifically to fathers, as the objects of filial obedience. This may suggest that Roman notions of *patria potestas*, while perhaps engendering an overall intensification of parental rigor, exerted a somewhat limited influence on contemporary Jewish views of the specifically paternal role.

<sup>25</sup> Sirach, written in Hebrew in early second century B.C.E. Jerusalem, instructs, “He who loves his son will whip him often. . . .” (30:1-3), and “bring them [i.e., children] under with cutting stripes and make them submissive” (30:12; discussed in Bakke, 2005, pp. 182-183 and associated note 120). Sirach makes clear that punishment should begin before the age of speech: “Beat his sides while he is an infant, lest he be hardened and disobey you” (30:12). Within 50 years of its writing, Sirach was translated into Greek in Egypt; the text likely both reflected and influenced childrearing norms in both Palestine and the Hellenistic Diaspora, especially among the upper classes. For a discussion of corporal punishment during the Talmudic period, as well as hints that such punishments may have been less rigorous or consistent than in ancient Rome and Greece, see Cooper (1996, pp. 91-93). For a discussion of childhood corporal punishment as prescribed in Christian writings during the early centuries C.E. (e.g., Ephesians, Didache, Barnabas, Didascalia, Apostolic Constitutions, John Chrysostom, Augustine), see Bakke, 2005, especially Chapter 5.

nation of these—it is striking, though not surprising, that the New Testament, at the heart of its theological narrative, tells the story of an innocent Son who suffered obediently according to his Father's will. The precision with which this New Testament teaching comports with the explicit patriarchy of the Roman world, as well as with aspects of Jewish culture in both Palestine and the Hellenistic Diaspora, highlights the possibility that important Christian traditions may have arisen as a cultural reflection of childhood. This possibility is sharpened when one considers Paul's major salvation teaching [Romans 5:18-19]—punishment for (Adam's) child-like disobedience, salvation through (Jesus') filial obedience—for, as we have seen, this teaching can be understood as an almost direct transposition, into theological concepts, of the childhood strategy of punishment-avoidance through obedience to the father. In fact, Paul's salvation teaching in Romans appears to be the unwitting theological projection of the very same childhood reality he portrays, in literal language, in his comparison of children and slaves in Galatians 4:1, quoted above.

We will say more later about the possibility that patterns of painful childhood experience shaped the New Testament's core theological traditions. But first we must examine how Christian parallels with childhood could have affected subjective experiences of belief and faith.

### **New Testament Parallels with Childhood as a Source of Psychological Resonance**

To frame this part of the presentation, I begin by posing a question: Given that seminal New Testament traditions closely parallel historically endemic patterns of childhood experience, what suppositions can we make about the psychology of belief as it pertains to these traditions? For reasons that will become apparent, it is useful to begin answering this question by discussing dreams and, in particular, the relationship that often exists between dreams and waking reality. To start with a simple, impressionistic example: Most people, I suspect, would find nothing strange if a friend told them, "I had to give a talk to a skeptical audience and, the night before, I dreamed I was a soldier going into battle." Although not all persons would infer the same underlying mechanisms, most, I suspect, would see in this dream a symbolic reflection of the dreamer's waking concerns.

In fact, it is well recognized that dreams can portray symbolically, and even provide solutions to, specific waking problems. As an historical example, Elias



Howe, who worked unsuccessfully for years to perfect the lock-stitch sewing machine, realized in a dream that the solution lay in moving the eye of the needle from the middle to the end of the shank. Howe dreamed that a group of cannibals was going to boil him alive. Awaiting death, he noticed that the spears held by his captors had eye-shaped holes near their tips. Howe awoke, realized the implications of the dream, and whittled the first fully functional shank (Van de Castle, 1994, p. 37). Many other problem-solving dreams pertaining to a wide variety of scientific, technical, political, literary, and artistic problems (Van de Castle, 1994, pp. 10-42) as well as to personal problems (e.g., Hartmann, 1998, pp. 152, 156) have been documented.

The dreaming mind's capacity to represent waking events or concerns symbolically is also operative following painful, frightening, or traumatic experiences (Brenneis, 1997, pp. 21-25; Hartmann, 1998, pp. 10, 18, 23; Van de Castle, 1994, pp. 32, 345-346; Crile, 1915, p. 27; Terr, 1990, p. 216). Consider this dream recounted by a Jewish man who, as a child during World War II, wandered through central Europe, always afraid of being captured by the Nazis: "I am on a conveyor belt moving relentlessly toward a metal compactor. Nothing I can do will stop that conveyor belt and I will be carried to my end, crushed to death." (Brenneis, 1997, p. 24). While containing virtually no literal elements, this dream vividly captures the experience of a child whose life is dominated by the relentless pursuit of an anonymous killing force of overwhelming power.

As another example, consider the 1976 hijacking of a school bus carrying 26 children in the town of Chowchilla, California. After the bus was taken, the children were transferred at gunpoint into light-sealed vans, driven to a prepared site, and buried *en masse* in a crudely constructed underground chamber. Most of the children, all of whom were ultimately rescued, thought they were going to die. After their ordeal, the psychiatrist Lenore Terr, a pioneer in the study of childhood psychological trauma, recorded the children's dreams (Terr, 1990, pp. 210-214). Here are the dreams of three different children:

I dreamed when the man gets on... [and] when we get on the vans. (Child 1)

This first dream is a relatively literal retelling of central aspects of the kidnapping.

[I was] in an alligator hole and the alligator bit me. (Child 2)

This second dream is partly symbolic: the underground chamber, where the children were buried, becomes a “hole” in the ground, and the kidnappers are represented as a dangerous alligator.

Someone will get me and take me away in the ocean. You'd go down and down with the fish. The shark would eat me. (Child 3)

This third dream, while even more thoroughly symbolic, still captures the nature of the event and the terror it aroused: a terror no less than what one might experience in a shark attack. During the kidnapping, this last child had feared that the underground chamber would fill with water; this concern seems to have shaped the particular symbolic construct of his dream.

As these examples suggest, the human mind possesses a remarkable capacity, even tendency, to generate symbolic narratives about personally experienced realities.<sup>26</sup> This tendency, I suggest, is relevant to an understanding of Christianity. The Gospel story of Jesus' suffering according to the will of his heavenly Father is, like many dreams, a narrative. Likewise, Paul's teaching on salvation is also rooted in narrative—for Paul recounts, elliptically but sequentially, Adam's sin and its subsequent rectification through Jesus. Like many dreams, these religious narratives can be understood as symbolic portrayals of aspects of waking reality—in this case, the painful experiences of children.

To see this point clearly, do the following thought experiment. First, imagine that you know nothing about Christianity. Then imagine that you know a child whose father used harsh corporal punishment to inculcate obedience. Finally, imagine that this child had a dream about a divine Child's innocent suffering according to the will of his heavenly Father, or a dream about the sin of disobedience being rectified through a divine Child's obedience to this

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<sup>26</sup> Some have even suggested that this symbolizing capacity represents a continuously operative mechanism that, so to speak, runs in the background of human mental life. The neuropsychologist Louis West, for example, has suggested that dream-like mental processes occur continuously but are perceived consciously, with full hallucinatory power, only when literal mental processes are stilled, as during sleep. He writes, “[An] analogy might be that dreams, like stars, are shining all the time. Though the stars are not often seen by day, since the sun shines too brightly, if, during the day, there is an eclipse of the sun, or if a viewer chooses to be watchful awhile after sunset or awhile before sunrise... then the stars, like dreams... may always be seen. A more brain-related concept is that of a continuous information-processing activity (a kind of ‘preconscious stream’) that is influenced continually by both conscious and unconscious forces and that constitutes the potential supply of dream content. The dream is an experience during which, for a few minutes, the individual has some awareness of the stream of data being processed” (quoted in Sagan, 1997, p. 106).

Father. How would you explain these dreams? Many persons would surely understand them as symbolic expressions of a painful waking reality.

In the case of the Chowchilla school bus kidnapping, we saw that a group of children, similarly traumatized, experienced thematically related dreams. These dreams, while using different symbolic constructs, expressed the same underlying circumstance. This phenomenon, which I term “dream concordance,” is well documented among persons who experience similar or identical painful, frightening, or traumatic circumstances (e.g., Hartmann, 1998, pp. 10, 18, 23; Van de Castle, 1994, pp. 32, 345-346; Crile, 1915, p. 27; Terr, 1990, pp. 210-214). One might even suspect that if concordantly dreaming minds could somehow be linked—as in a science-fiction scenario—they would all share the same symbolic dream.

This fanciful science-fiction scenario is suggestive, I believe, of what can actually happen in the case of religious myths. Unlike dreams, which arise as unique and evanescent creations within each dreaming mind, myths are durable and can be shared by the community. Whereas the original formulation of a myth, as with a dream, requires the creation of a new symbolic construct to portray reality, psychological participation in an already extant myth requires only a conviction that the symbolic account is in some important way true. I believe this explanation is relevant to Christian narrative and salvation teaching. There, the culturally stereotypical dynamic between a human father and his child is symbolically transposed into the dynamic between a divine Father and his child, Jesus. In like manner, the childhood strategy of punishment-avoidance through filial obedience is transposed into a vision of human salvation through the filial obedience of the divine Son.

In the history of our culture, childhood corporal punishment has almost universally been viewed as necessary and beneficial. Furthermore, the potential for psychological harm has been at most dimly and inconsistently perceived, even in the context of severe punishment. In such a culture, the situation of children could not be communicated literally because the requisite framework of cultural understanding did not yet exist. However, a symbolic “language,” such as that provided by Christianity, could fill the gap—expressing widespread childhood suffering, and its enduring effects in adults, without the need for either literal speech or cultural understanding. In the lands where Christianity was prevalent, New Testament themes and the myriad traditions and life-patterns associated with them<sup>27</sup> may have provided the primary culture-wide expressions of the unrecognized traumas of childhood.

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<sup>27</sup> Examples of such traditions and patterns, which portray and epitomize core New Testament themes, and through which these themes circulated in the culture of Christendom, include

These points also apply to abandonment. As John Boswell (1990, pp. 76-77) has noted, many ancient myths involve abandoned children. As examples, Boswell lists Oedipus, Ion, Cyrus of Persia, Paris, Romulus and Remus, Telephus, Habis, Jupiter as well as Jupiter's twin sons, Zethus and Amphion, Poseidon, Asculapius, Hephaistos, Attis, the Goddess Cybele, King Sargon of Akkad—all these and others, according to myth, were exposed or abandoned as children.

These myths of abandonment appear to have arisen and persisted because they reflected a pervasive social reality. They made sense in terms of actual, lived experience. It is striking that, in many cases, these myths end happily, with the children ultimately being reunited with their original parents and often going on to great things, most typically kingship. This “happy ending,” of course, was much different from the outcomes experienced in reality by most abandoned children; for *their* abandonment usually ended in death or some form of enforced servitude. Perhaps one can see in the abundance of these myths and their embedded happy endings a form of cultural wish fulfillment, a way to make bearable a terrible reality by holding in mind the image of a glorious outcome.<sup>28</sup>

The Gospel Passion, I suggest, is part of this same cultural tradition. Jesus experiences himself as abandoned by his Father, crying out from the cross, “Why have you abandoned me?” Yet like those children in ancient myths who are ultimately reclaimed by their parents and go on to kingship, Jesus is resurrected by his Father, ascends to his side [e.g. John 20:17], and is exalted as the head of a great people. Like its ancient predecessors, this portrayal may have provided a mythic compensation for, or psychological distraction from, the grim realities of child abandonment. As I have noted, such abandonment was

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liturgy, preaching, artistic and architectural products, processions, passion plays, catechisms, school materials, and hymns. I thank Jennifer Glancy for focusing my attention on these various cultural expressions.

<sup>28</sup>) Sometimes the narrative inversions required for these happy endings are remarkable for their specific, idiosyncratic features. Consider the story of the abandoned twins Romulus and Remus, the mythical founders of ancient Rome. According to myth, the twins were rescued and suckled by a *wolf*. This is the very animal that Tertullian says was most likely to kill and eat abandoned babies (Boswell, 1990, p. 78). We thus see not only a rather generic and formulaic happy ending, involving the rescue and ascension to kingship of the abandoned children, but an inversion of the context-specific risks that the abandoned child faced: the animal that, in reality, posed a great threat of death is mythically rendered as the child's protector and nurturer. To modern ears, the idea that abandoned children might be killed and devoured by wild animals may sound strange, but this risk was great until relatively recently; see Kertzer (1993, p. 105), who discusses the frequency of such attacks by wild dogs and pigs in modern Europe.

widespread not only in the Roman formative matrix of Christianity but throughout the medieval and much of the modern periods as well. The same is true of neglect and “temporary abandonment”—i.e., the sending away of babies and young children to nurse, apprentice, work, or study. Thus, the image of Christ’s abandonment, resurrection, and ascension would likely have been emotionally resonant for most of the Christian era.<sup>29</sup>

In dreams, symbolic reflections of waking reality are typically subliminal or unconscious, in that thematic links to waking experience only become apparent, if at all, as the result of deliberate efforts to uncover them. Likewise, religious parallels with ordinary childhood experiences—often including one’s own—are practically never spontaneously or fully grasped on the level of explicit thought; the parallels are unlikely to be recognized without careful excavation. Similarly, while one may recognize that religious texts and teachings can produce powerful emotional resonances, childhood sources of these resonances are unlikely to be identified on a conscious level. In addition, if a symbolic narrative can, with at least some plausibility, be construed as a literal description of real events, the possibility that a narrative may be other than a literal description may never even be considered. This point is of particular relevance to religion, for religious myths commonly have historical or pseudo-historical foundations, which lend the myths an aura of veracity and encourage the acceptance of associated belief structures at face value.

Furthermore, if a symbolic narrative provides an individual with subjective benefits, then the individual may be psychologically motivated to avoid entertaining the possibility that the narrative is in fact symbolic. For to recognize the narrative’s symbolic foundation would tend to undercut the subjective benefits, which are rooted in a perception of the narrative’s literality. Again, this point is of special relevance to religion. Beyond the generally recognized subjective benefits of religious belief (e.g., community affiliation and support), religious myths, as I have argued above and will consider again later, frequently

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<sup>29</sup> Abandonment was often more frequent among later-born children in a family, after continuity of the family lineage, name, and patrimony was established through survival of earlier-born children, especially males. This was especially the case in the Roman period, where preservation of the family name was considered of utmost importance, but was often true of other periods as well. Consequently, vast numbers of older, non-abandoned (i.e., surviving) children witnessed or were otherwise aware of the abandonment of younger siblings. Abandonment may thus have had an enduring emotional impact not only on that (often small) fraction of abandoned children who survived, and on the much larger fraction of children who experienced “temporary abandonment” and neglect, but on the countless older siblings who lived through the abandonment of younger siblings. These various experiences of abandonment and neglect together affected vast numbers of children and were often layered, affecting the same child in multiple ways.

express painful childhood themes in a palliated form. That is, they represent the experiences of childhood—rendered as theological projections—with embedded “happy endings.” Engaging emotionally with these ameliorated representations of childhood can provide a psychological compensation for, and distraction from, painful childhood experiences that may in actuality have been unmitigated. Such compensation and distraction can provide a powerful motive not to distinguish symbolic from literal representations of reality.

Finally, there is reason to expect that religiously constructed symbolic narratives that reflect childhood would generate powerful emotions. Clinical psychologists and psychiatrists have long noted that strong affects originally generated in the setting of childhood can be re-experienced later in life in thematically related contexts. Traditionally understood in psychoanalytic terms and discussed with reference to the patient-therapist relationship, this “transference” of emotions is increasingly recognized as a pervasive social phenomenon that is consistent with the insights of modern neuroscience (Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, 2000, pp. 121-144; Gynther, Calford, & Sah, 1998; Javanbakht & Ragan, 2008). Intense negative emotions from childhood—e.g., fear and anger—may be especially prone to such “transference” because, for a variety of reasons, such emotions can be especially threatening to children and difficult for them to contextualize (Freyd, 1996, e.g. pp. 3-4, 10-11, 63, 71; Howe, 2000, p. 63; van der Kolk, 1989, p. 392; Miller, 1990, p. 4; Ferenczi, 1932/1984, pp. 289-290; Shengold, 1991, p. 26; Herman, 1992, p. 103). In addition, emotions can be “transferred” onto imaginary persons, such as characters in movies, or even onto inanimate objects (Gibbs, 1994, p. 401; Lewis, 1995, pp. 405ff.; Laing, 1972, pp. 8-9; Stout, 2001, pp. 31-32). This fact suggests that powerful emotions, sourced in childhood, could be experienced with reference to transcendental phenomena, divine beings, and religious narratives, whether or not such exist or are grounded in reality.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the possibility that emotions from childhood could be re-experienced in parallel-themed religious contexts—e.g., childhood fears of punishment by the natural father later experienced as adult fears of punishment by a divine Father—is entirely plausible. The same can be said of intense childhood longings for paternal affection; these could, in principle, later be experienced as

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<sup>30</sup> Further, if one allows that some experiences of corporal punishment may be frankly traumatizing, then it is relevant that dissociation, which sometimes occurs in the setting of trauma, can powerfully, and even selectively, affect emotions (see e.g. Chu, 1991, p. 329; and Stout, 2001, p. 9). It seems likely that these necessarily negative dissociated emotions, because less tightly linked with explicitly remembered circumstances, might be especially prone to be re-experienced later, i.e., transference, in other settings, including in symbolic religious contexts.

intense adult longings for the affectionate presence of a heavenly Father. More generally, the possibility of negative emotional transferences, along with the experience of spontaneous relief and joy in response to symbolically constructed “happy endings,” can help explain the wide range of powerful emotions, as well as, too often, the rage-driven violence that may be associated with religious belief (Miller, 1990).<sup>31</sup>

Before moving on to the next section, let me recapitulate and extend some of the above ideas by focusing on two propositions: (1) An innocent child obediently suffers according to the will of the father for the sake of salvation; and (2) Children are subject to punishment by the father for disobedience and saved from punishment through obedience. Observe that these propositions are central to the religious world-view expressed in the New Testament, especially in the narratives of the Gospels and the theory of damnation/salvation most clearly expressed in Paul’s seminal letter to the Romans. Strikingly, these same two propositions also pertain directly to the family situation of most children throughout history. One thus finds *a fundamental overlap in the propositionally expressed content of Christianity and the culturally normative patterns of childhood.*

The extent of this overlap suggests that (a) if one experiences traditional modes of inculcated obedience during childhood, and (b) unwittingly generalizes or assimilates childhood patterns and lessons to religious contexts, then (c) central aspects of New Testament Christianity may appear to be accurate descriptions of reality. Further, to the extent that the propositional overlap between childhood experience and New Testament teachings is not recognized, then (d) Christian teachings may seem counter-intuitive, mysterious, or even “absurd”—to use an adjective famously attributed to Tertullian and later used by Kierkegaard—when they are, in fact, precisely the opposite. That is, *when understood contextually, with reference to their socio-historical setting of childhood, Christian teachings are highly intuitive.* This fact goes far in explaining why putatively “irrational” religious teachings have exerted, and continue to exert, such a powerful influence on so many.

Childhood experiences are not automatically encoded into verbal descriptions or conceptual understanding (Fivush, Pipe, Murachver, & Reese, 1997). For this reason, persons reared with corporally inculcated obedience may lack

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<sup>31</sup>) Although one need not understand these happy endings in terms of trauma, it is noteworthy that the Lenore Terr (1990) has posited the formation of “post-traumatic compensatory fantasies” (p. 202)—which are essentially similar to the “happy endings” discussed here—as being one common sequel of psychologically overwhelming experiences.

an explicit understanding of their early experiences of parental coercion or of their subjective response to those experiences. This may be especially true when such coercion is endemic, normative, and accepted as a cultural given—for under these circumstances adults may feel little need to engage in the explanatory verbal dialogue that may be necessary for the child to develop understanding or even explicit memories (Fivush, et al., 1997). In this situation, Christian teachings may do much more than “overlap” in theme and content with patterns of childhood. The teachings may offer—perhaps uniquely so in the believer’s life—a precise propositional portrayal of intensely painful and preoccupying personal experiences.

### **Revelation and Oral Tradition as Mechanisms for Generating Symbolic Expressions about Childhood**

Earlier, I introduced the argument that core New Testament traditions were shaped in response to patterns of childhood in Christianity’s formative matrix. Having now explored a number of relevant psychological topics, we are in a position to discuss in greater detail how this shaping of New Testament traditions might have occurred. I will offer two scenarios, both of which involve processes that many scholars believe played a key role in the historical development of Christianity. In the first scenario, I discuss revelation, such as that described by Paul in his New Testament letters. In the second scenario, I consider the oral transmission of narratives, a process often said to explain how early traditions about Jesus became available, decades after Jesus’ death, to the Gospel writers.

As my use of the word “scenarios” in the last paragraph suggests, my aim here is not to strongly assert which *particular* processes mediated the influence of childhood. Other scenarios are possible. My aim is a limited one: to demonstrate, using specific hypothetical scenarios, the overall plausibility of my argument, i.e., to show that childhood could have shaped New Testament writings in the ways proposed. As I note later, this plausibility is an important element in the overall persuasiveness of my thesis.

Because revelation can occur within individual minds, it provides an obvious route for producing symbolic representations of reality. Specifically, religious revelations could arise from internally generated expressions about one’s own experiences, including one’s own childhood. This process is truly a kind of revelation, but not in the usual, supernatural sense. Rather, it is an unrecognized form of *self*-revelation. For terminological clarity, we can refer to this



process as “endogenous revelation,” to distinguish it from a traditionally conceived revelation, which is putatively exogenous.<sup>32</sup>

Certain forms of self-awareness might be experienced as divine revelations because the content comes from parts of the self that are not normally accessed and not normally thought of as “self” at all. Examples of such content could include (1) seemingly forgotten memories from early childhood, which were laid down before explicit or autobiographical memory systems became fully operative;<sup>33</sup> (2) memories rendered inaccessible due to motivated forgetting (Freyd, 1996); and (3) memories, both cognitive and emotional, that became dissociated from normal streams of consciousness as a result of psychological trauma.<sup>34</sup> Such content, because it is not integrated into the individual’s sense of self, can be perceived as coming from *outside* the self. The psychiatrist Morton Schatzman (1971, 1973) has described divine “revelations” that apparently resulted from, and symbolically reflected the content of, childhood traumas occurring decades earlier. He explains this revelatory process as follows: “Experiences that arise from regions of one’s mind of which one is not ordinarily aware may appear to have extraordinary sources and qualities” (p. 53).<sup>35</sup> Schatzman’s work suggests that some “revelations” about a presumed spiritual or supernatural realm are akin to dreams, consisting of symbolic expressions about patterns of painful or traumatic childhood experience. Others, too, have suggested that spiritual and religious revelations may have psychological origins in unbearable earthly suffering (e.g., Stout, 2001, p. 21).

These understandings may be relevant to the historical development of seminal Christian traditions, some of which, including distinctively Pauline teachings, apparently arose through personal revelation. I am here suggesting that Paul may have experienced, in the form of seemingly divine revelations, symbolic representations of painfully salient patterns of filial interaction from his own childhood. Further, I suggest that because the underlying childhood

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<sup>32</sup> Endogenous = “caused from within.” Exogenous = “caused from without.” I have borrowed these terms from physiology, where they distinguish intrinsic internal processes (such as normal metabolism) from externally induced processes (e.g., ingestion of metabolism-altering substances).

<sup>33</sup> On the endurance of mental imprints of childhood experience, see Howe (2000, e.g., p. xvi).

<sup>34</sup> On the fragmentation of traumatic memories, see, e.g., Bremner, Vermetten, Southwick, Krystal, and Charney, (1998).

<sup>35</sup> Schatzman (1973, pp. 103-104) goes so far as to ask, “Should *all* religious experiences... be regarded *only* as transforms of interpersonal events in the subjects’ childhoods? Is this all that ‘revelations’ reveal?” (Italics in original.) Note that Schatzman uses the term “transforms” as a plural noun, to designate internally generated, directly experienced symbolic representations of external reality.

experiences were part of a widespread cultural pattern, the revelations, which reflected these experiences, were relevant, meaningful, and emotionally resonant for broad segments of the culture.

In an ideal universe, revelations of this sort would, so to speak, come packaged and labeled in a way that tells the recipient and thus the community how to understand them. Applied to the early Christian context, such labeling might say: "This communication comes from within yourself. Notwithstanding its outward form, it is not about a divine Son of God, a supernaturally omnipotent Father, an eternal punishment, or an otherworldly salvation. It is about your own childhood." But lacking such labeling—especially in a pre-modern culture possessing limited psychological understanding—the recipient of the revelation, and the original community of potential believers, might well mistake the message for a literally descriptive, here-and-now communication from a transcendent realm. Once socially validated in the form of a widely accepted religious tradition, the revelation gains contextual plausibility; as a result, future generations, even when possessing greater psychological insight, may continue to accept the original community's view that the revelation was exogenous.

This radical scenario may initially be hard to countenance, but I believe it can simply, even elegantly, account for the phenomena in question. Let us review some of the evidence. We know that the Imperial world—that is, Paul's world—was rigorously and explicitly patriarchal, and that the corporal punishment of children was endemic. This assessment is supported by a wide range of sources, including pagan, Jewish, and Christian. Hebrews [12:6-11] goes so far as to assert that all legitimate children were physically punished; even allowing for possible hyperbole, the assertion is remarkable. Paul himself seems to capture the subjective responses of children to their situation when he asserts that children were treated "no better than slaves" [Galatians 4:1]. Given the routine, highly visible, and often severe punishment of slaves—masters could beat, torture, maim, or kill slaves as they saw fit, and such punishments were often enacted publicly, as a warning and deterrent to other slaves—Paul's statement may itself have had rather overt corporal overtones. Lacking relevant biographical information, we can do no more than speculate about Paul's own childhood. Nonetheless, given what we know of Imperial childhood in general, and Paul's own sweeping comment in Galatians, it seems reasonable to assume that Paul, like many others in his cultural milieu, experienced his childhood painfully; that Paul, like many others, was physically punished; and that Paul, like others, had been compelled to adopt a posture of

obedient submission to save himself from more frequent, extensive, or severe punishment.

Given this probable life context, and the human capacity, even proclivity, evident in dreams, to generate symbolic narratives that portray one's experiences, it is not far-fetched to suggest that Paul's central teaching about damnation and salvation [e.g., Romans 5:18-19] was a theological projection of his own formative experiences. If these teachings had their origin in direct, personal revelation, which may well be the case,<sup>36</sup> then the scenario I present must be considered plausible, even likely. Otherwise—and this is a key point—no one can account for the precise childhood parallels contained in Paul's teachings. In fact, even if Paul learned his ideas about salvation not through revelation but from the teaching of others, the general point holds: these ideas likely had their ultimate source in childhood, because the childhood parallels cannot otherwise be explained.

It is also plausible that Paul's teachings were found believable, and tended to spread within the culture, in part because they thematically portrayed the childhood experiences of many persons in the Roman world. We have already seen that powerful emotional "transferences" arising from childhood can be experienced, later in life, in settings that are thematically related to the original, childhood circumstances. It is thus possible that many early Christians and potential converts experienced potent subliminal resonances, sourced in their own childhoods, when they encountered Paul's teachings.

In fact, this view must be considered likely. I have already noted that the divine Father was perceived as terrifying [Luke 12:4-5; Matt. 10:28], that early Christian converts were motivated by a wish for salvation from the Paternal "wrath to come" [1 Thessalonians 1:9-10], and that this wrath was understood as arising from the disobedience of believers-qua-children [Ephesians 2:2-3]. Similar motivations to conversion apparently persisted at least until Augustine's time—that is, until the close of the fourth century, past the point where Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Specifically, we read in Augustine, "Very rarely, no never, does it happen that someone comes to us with the wish to be Christian who has not been struck by some fear of God" (*On Catechizing the Uninstructed*, 5.9). In a highly patriarchal culture such as that of Imperial Rome, where punishment was widespread and

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<sup>36</sup> E.g., in Galatians 1:11-12 Paul states: "For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ."

children felt themselves (as per Galatians) to be treated as “slaves,” it is hard to imagine that such fears of God-as-Father, and the intensely experienced need to escape His punishment, did not have their source in childhood. Put differently, there is strong reason to suspect that the seemingly remarkable spread of Christianity in the Roman world was driven, in part, by childhood resonances arising in the context of a rigorous Roman patriarchy.<sup>37</sup>

In contrast to revelation, which can arise fully formed from an *individual* mind, the oral transmission of narratives and other teachings could provide a collective *social* mechanism for shaping religious myths on the pattern of childhood. Oral traditions, which are thought to have played a central role in the spread of early Christian narratives, can change during the transmission process. As one scholar describes it:

There is an important feature of oral tradition that demands our attention—namely, its fluidity. Oral tradition is typically in a continuous state of evolution, as it absorbs new experiences and adjusts to new conditions and needs within the community. (Lindberg, 1992, p. 6)

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<sup>37)</sup> Though the details of the process are not central to my argument, it is intriguing to attempt to parse the psychological resonances that Christian teaching and imagery may have had in the Imperial context. Consider the fact that crucifixion was the ultimate punishment for rebellious slaves (i.e., slaves who fomented or participated in insurrections). These crucifixions were enacted publicly, as a deterrent to other slaves, and thus were part of the Roman public consciousness. In historical writings on childhood, filial disobedience is often termed “rebellion” or even “insurrection”; the father is commonly designated “master” (against whom no childhood “rebellion” can be brooked); and, occasionally, freeborn children are actually referred to as “slaves.” In the Roman context, the ultimate authority to punish within the family lay with the father (or, more specifically, the *paterfamilias*, who often was simply the father) and it was on his authority that both children and slaves were typically punished. Thus, to the Roman mind, the image of a *crucified* Child-savior might well have carried a particular and potent subliminal resonance. Specifically, to the extent that (1) children perceived themselves, consciously or not, as “no better than slaves” (as per Galatians; see text and my note 22), or even in some sense as slaves themselves, and (2) childhood disobedience was thought of as rebellion against the authority of the father/master/paterfamilias, it would be natural to liken the child’s punishment for disobedience to crucifixion, the punishment par excellence for rebellious slaves. On the level of resonant symbolism, the image of a Child being crucified according to the will of his Father might precisely capture the child’s sense of being harshly punished, like a slave, for rebellion against the paternal authority. This resonant imagery would be especially strong if the Child was a Son, for sons received the most consistent paternal discipline. Here, it is worth recalling Dionysius of Halicarnassus’s comment (see text, above) that fathers could legally execute their own sons. Though it is unclear if such paternal executions were, even in the Republican period, actually carried out, this culturally visible legal potential makes the specific resonance I am positing here even more plausible.

This quote, with its reference to “evolution,” suggests a mechanism by which religious parallels with childhood could have developed and intensified over time. Because this mechanism has specific parallels to Darwin’s theory of evolution, it is useful to say a few words about Darwin’s ideas.

Although it is sometimes forgotten, Darwin’s innovation was not that species evolved. Many before Darwin believed in evolution. Darwin’s particular insight was that evolution might occur by a simple and specific mechanism, termed natural selection. According to Darwin, random variations in physical or behavioral traits that produce a better “fit” with the environment—that is, traits that better enable an organism to survive—tend to be preserved in the species. The traits are preserved, Darwin believed, because the individuals who possess them are more likely to reach reproductive age and to pass the traits to offspring.<sup>38</sup> After relatively few generations, even traits that impart only modest survival advantages may begin to spread within the population. Conversely, traits that result in a poorer fit with the environment tend to be extinguished, because individuals who possess them are less likely to survive and reproduce.

The concept of natural selection provides a powerful way to think about the cultural implications of some of the ideas I have already articulated. As we have seen, there is reason to think that personally relevant themes embedded in a religious context can generate emotional resonances; and that such resonances can render a religious teaching engaging. If a pattern of childhood experience is endemic in a culture, then religiously constructed symbolic narratives that reflect the pattern would have a good “fit” with their cultural environment. These religious teachings would be thought worthy of communicating to others and, like a favorable genetic trait, would tend to spread within the population. As already discussed, it seems likely that within the highly patriarchal world of the Roman Empire, teachings about an innocent Son who suffered according to the will of his Father would resonate powerfully and thus tend to spread. The same can be said of Paul’s teaching about damnation through disobedience and salvation through filial obedience, as well as related teachings about a fearful and wrathful Father.

Although Darwin observed random variations within species, and recognized that natural selection could explain why some traits became prevalent in the population, he did not understand how the variations arose in the first place. It is now known that trait variations arise primarily through genetic mutation; this mutational diversity provides the substrate upon which natural

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<sup>38</sup>) In other words, these traits were “selected” for survival by “natural” means, as opposed to by breeding—hence “natural selection.”

selection acts. Analogizing to religion, we can say that oral traditions tend to mutate rapidly, and that those variants with the best cultural fit will be selected for survival. According to the thesis presented here, emotional resonances arising from religiously constructed thematic parallels with childhood function as a primary selection criterion during the evolution of a religious tradition. Thus, like the process of “endogenous revelation” discussed above, natural selection among variant oral traditions could have provided a mechanism through which childhood experience shaped the writings of the New Testament.

Although they do not consider the possible role of childhood, various scholars have attempted to account for the development and spread of religious ideas in terms of a Darwinian model, based on the fit of these ideas with the mental environment (e.g., Dawkins, 1976; Dennett, 2006; Blackmore, 1999). In fact, one can find broadly similar approaches within the field of Biblical studies. In particular, Werner Kelber’s *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (1997) presents a “multilateral model of pre-canonical orality” (p. 31) in which “pre-Markan [oral] traditions... diverge into a multiplicity of forms and directions” (p. 94)—a description that almost perfectly matches Darwinian models of random variation. Kelber also describes a process of “selective retention” (p. 29), which, though not formulated on explicitly Darwinian lines, closely matches Darwinian notions of selection:

Spoken words... thrive on communal response, and, if they are to be successful, share in and play on collective interests. If a message is... a matter of indifference [to an audience]... it will not be continued in the form in which it was spoken. It will either have to be altered... or eliminated entirely... [V]ariant compositions are forever in the making... [Oral tradition] can show infinite flexibility in molding a message so as to make it compatible with social needs. It can also exercise powers of innovation by attracting and creating fresh materials. (pp. 28-30)<sup>39</sup>

Although Kelber does not consider the possibility that patterns of childhood could influence the acceptance of religious teachings, his model is consistent with the variation-selection scenario I have described.

In this article, I have suggested that core New Testament traditions arose as reflections of widespread childhood punishment and abandonment within the patriarchal Roman world. I based this argument on strong thematic parallels between patterns of childhood experience and canonical narratives and beliefs.

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<sup>39</sup> See also the foreword in Kelber (1997) by Walter Ong, who styles the New Testament environment as a “residually oral culture.”

When two sets of phenomena are correlated or associated, as in the parallels we are considering, this fact does not in itself indicate a cause-and-effect relationship. However, as already suggested, additional factors are present, which I will now summarize. First, the parallels are too numerous and precise to be plausibly accounted for by chance. Second, the proposed explanation is intuitive, in that it is consistent with the commonplace notion that religious traditions reflect their cultural milieus, especially their milieus of origin. Third, the proposed explanation is elegant in its simplicity, requiring virtually no *ad hoc* additions or modifications to account for the complex phenomena under consideration. Fourth, it is no simple matter to come up with alternative plausible explanations for the observed parallels. This difficulty becomes especially apparent when one recognizes that corporal punishment and abandonment of children were widespread long before the birth of Christianity; this temporal sequence precludes the possibility that patterns of childhood punishment and abandonment arose primarily as a reflection of themes in the New Testament. Fifth, the explanation is plausible in terms of the mechanisms of both individual psychology (e.g., early childhood memory, traumatic dissociation, and the capacity to generate symbolic narratives) and processes of religious formation (e.g., endogenous revelation and the evolution of oral traditions). Such plausibility of mechanism forms a basic element in any causal hypothesis. Taken together, this constellation of factors supports a strong presumption that endemic patterns of painful childhood experience deeply shaped foundational New Testament traditions.

I conclude this argument by offering three clarifications, to address potential misunderstandings.

First, to assert, as I have done, that seminal New Testament traditions can be explained through psychological processes, is not to argue that these traditions arose—*ex nihilo*, so to speak—from an inchoate psychological miasma. Instead, traditions can arise through the modification, combination, and re-contextualization of elements derived from other sources. For example, if one assumes, as is often done, that Isaiah's "suffering servant" [e.g., Isaiah 53] provided a literary model for New Testament images of Jesus, it should be clear that, in the New Testament, Isaiah's image of the servant has been transformed in ways that caused it to reflect more accurately the experiences of children in the Roman world. No longer is the servant merely a righteous innocent (or even just the literary personification of the people of Judea) who suffers according to the will of God; he is a Son who suffers according to the will of his Father. Much the same can be said about Jesus' "Cry of Dereliction." As I discussed earlier, the words of the Cry were taken directly from the

Hebrew Scriptures [Psalm 22:2], but their meaning was radically altered through their insertion into a new context. Many similar examples could be offered.

Second, to focus on the punishment, abandonment, and neglect of children is not to suggest that other forms of widespread suffering or trauma, both human-caused and natural, have been unimportant in Western culture. War, famine, epidemic disease, pillage, early parental death, sexual and spousal abuse, and more have all been common. But these experiences, however profound their psychological effects, appear not to have directly shaped the New Testament traditions we are considering. It is the content of these traditions themselves—with their emphasis on the Father-Child dynamic, punishment-avoidance through filial obedience, and the like—that reveals the particular experiences on which the traditions were patterned, and to which they respond psychologically and culturally.

Third, although I have sometimes used the term “myth” when discussing religious teachings, including those pertaining to Jesus, I do not presuppose a “mythical Jesus” as opposed to an “historical Jesus.” In fact, my thesis is indifferent to this distinction and is compatible with either conception. Within the framework of historical approaches to the figure of Jesus (i.e., scholarly attempts to discern an historical individual within textual portrayals that may contain mythic embellishments or distortions), the ideas presented above help explain why Jesus came to be portrayed in his particular canonical forms, and why these forms took on such great cultural importance.<sup>40</sup>

### **Exploratory Excursus: Other Religions and Myths**

It is not possible to consider non-Christian religions and myths in detail within the scope of a single article. However, some discussion of the subject nonetheless is desirable, for three reasons. First, patterns of painful childhood experience have not been limited to the Christian world, and many of the

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<sup>40</sup> Methodologically, with respect to the historical Jesus endeavor, the ideas presented here are of signal relevance to the “criterion of dissimilarity” (or related criteria, such as the “criterion of embarrassment”) as it applies to key elements of the Gospels, especially the crucifixion. If teachings about the suffering and death of the Son, when understood in full context, are neither counter-intuitive nor “absurd,” then it is inappropriate to assume that the crucifixion of the Lord is a “dissimilar” or “embarrassing” teaching that, *ipso facto*, is more likely to be true. To the extent that such teachings fulfill a strong psychological need and could plausibly be generated through mechanisms of religious formation (e.g., revelation, oral tradition) in response to that need, arguments for their historicity are, if anything, weakened.



psychological processes discussed in this article are likely relevant cross-culturally. Thus, our discussion of Christianity immediately raises the possibility of childhood influences in other traditions. Second, because Christianity emerged from Judaism and shares a scripture with it, some discussion of Judaism and the Hebrew Scriptures is needed. Some discussion of the Abrahamic traditions as a group also seems desirable. Third, a comparative perspective can highlight specific aspects of Christianity. Accordingly, this excursus presents brief, exploratory comments on a small but diverse set of important non-Christian religions and myths. These include (1) the polytheistic *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, a Greek myth central to the Eleusinian mysteries, often considered the most important mystery religion in the ancient world; (2) the religious-philosophic system of karmic reincarnation, which is foundational to Hinduism, Buddhism, and related traditions; and (3) Judaism and Islam, the most important non-Christian Abrahamic faiths. It should be stressed that the following comments stand outside the main argument of the article, are rendered with a broad brush, and are intended not to propose definitive positions but, instead, to raise questions and stimulate thought.

### *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*

I begin with the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* because, as noted below, and in contrast to the situation with Christianity, the mainstream of scholarship has recognized thematic parallels between the core content of the myth and the childhood context with which the myth is associated. The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* recounts the story of Persephone's abduction by the god Hades, and the search for Persephone by her mother, Demeter.<sup>41</sup> This myth provided the narrative foundation for the Eleusinian mysteries. According to the *Hymn*, Persephone, the young daughter of Demeter and Zeus, who is the Father god, was playing in a field with her girlfriends. In a plan hatched by Zeus and his brother, Hades, god of the underworld, the earth yawns open and Hades emerges. Hades captures Persephone in his chariot and carries her, screaming, to the underworld. There, Hades gives her pomegranate seeds to eat; according to the myth, eating the seeds binds Persephone permanently to the underworld, making her a life-time captive and consort to Hades. Persephone and Demeter pine terribly for one another.

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<sup>41</sup>) "Hades" refers to both the underworld and the god who rules it. Many other versions of the Demeter-Persephone myth exist, but the *Hymn* is "the oldest, most complete, and most important" (Lincoln, 1979, p. 224). This and the other "Homeric" hymns, all of unknown authorship, are so-named because of stylistic similarities with works traditionally ascribed to Homer.

Compare this myth to the stereotypical experience of Greek girls.<sup>42</sup> Following a traditional pattern, girls, typically around age 14, were forced into marriages, arranged by their fathers, with a man, typically around age 30, who, in fact, was not uncommonly the father's brother (Foley, 1994, p. 36).<sup>43</sup> During the ceremony, the girl was taken by her husband, typically via cart or chariot, to his home, to which her residence was permanently and abruptly transferred. On the wedding night, the virginal girls ate fruit offered by the husbands and were expected to have intercourse; it appears that force was sometimes involved in the sexual consummation, with some sources suggesting that the brides spent part of the wedding night "screaming."<sup>44</sup>

After her transfer to the husband's home, the girl, like all Athenian wives, especially among the middle and upper classes, was largely restricted to the house. The home was considered the proper domain of women, and it was generally considered unfitting for women to go outside except for ritual purposes (e.g., festivals, burials). In fact, women were typically sequestered in the "women's quarters," in the most remote and protected part of the house, often with no direct access to the public space of the men's quarters. Plato (*Laws* 781c) refers to this lifelong arrangement when he describes women as a race "accustomed to a submerged and shadowy existence." Unless a mother and daughter happened to live as close neighbors, in which case they might visit with one another, the sequestration of mother and daughter in their respective

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<sup>42</sup> This pattern is best documented for Athenian girls, especially during the classical period, but appears to have been present in the Archaic period as well; see, e.g., Fantham, Foley, Kampen, Pomeroy, and Shapiro (1994, p. 27); also Oakley and Sinos (1993).

<sup>43</sup> In fact, in a family with no sons, the daughter was required to marry her father's closest fertile relative, usually his brother, with the objective of having the daughter produce a son who could then inherit the grandfather's property (Pomeroy, Burstein, Dolan, & Roberts, 1999, p. 237). According to Greek myth, Persephone is the only child from the mating of Zeus and Demeter.

<sup>44</sup> See Oakley and Sinos (1993): on eating of fruit, p. 35; on coercion during the wedding night, p. 37, which is worth quoting: "After the bride and groom had entered the bridal chamber, a friend of the groom served as *thyroros*, closing the door and guarding it. The friends who had escorted the couple remained outside, singing songs and pounding on the door. The scholia to Theocritus 18 explain the purpose of their songs: 'Maidens sing the epithalamium before the bridal chamber so that the voice of the virgin might not be heard as she is violated by her husband, but might go unnoticed, covered by the maidens' voices.' The poignant scene evoked by this note is echoed in Pollux' explanation of the *thyroros*' job—to 'prevent the women from helping the screaming bride'" (3.42).

homes meant that, starting immediately after the daughter's marriage, they might have little or no contact other than at public ritual events.<sup>45</sup>

In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, we see transparent reflections of the actual, stereotypical situation of Greek girls. The culturally sanctioned pattern of *de facto* marital abduction, enacted by the father in collaboration with (not infrequently) his brother, followed by the experience of the wedding night and the confinement of the wife to the "shadowy" recesses of the husband's home, are mythically represented as abduction, imprisonment, and marriage in the subterranean realm of Hades. In like manner, the permanent separation of daughter and mother are reflected in the mutual pining of Persephone and Demeter. Given the element of force that may have been involved during the wedding night, and the possibility that the bride spent part of the night crying out, it is striking that the *Hymn* describes Persephone as screaming during her abduction by Hades. This focal parallel raises the possibility that the *Hymn* may emphasize specifically traumatic aspects of the experience of young girls in ancient Greece. Although the above explication of the *Hymn* is original in some respects, close links between the myth and the marital reality of Greek girls have been well recognized by classicist scholars.<sup>46</sup>

It may be instructive to suggest a few comparisons between Christianity and the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Earlier in this article, in discussing Christianity, I suggested that intense negative emotions, because they are difficult for

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<sup>45</sup> On the domestic situation of women in the classical period, see Pomeroy et al. (1999, pp. 233-239, 476); Fantham et al. (1994, Chapter 3, esp. pp. 68-74, 79-80, 101-106; on Socrates' quote, see p. 103).

<sup>46</sup> For example, Fantham et al. (1999, p. 27) writes, "The *Hymn*... highlights the pain that the transition to marriage can cause both mother and daughter... As seems often to have been the case in the human society of Archaic Greece, the divine father Zeus exercises his authority to promise his daughter... in marriage to his brother... without the permission... of either mother or daughter." Oakley and Sinos (1993, p. 35) write of the Athenian bride's eating fruit offered by the husband, "With this gesture, she accepted the first food from her husband's house, and her acceptance bound her to him, just as Persephone was bound to stay with Hades after she had eaten only two pomegranate seeds." Lincoln (1979, p. 228) writes that Persephone "has, in effect, been initiated by rape, a pattern found in a number of male-centered, misogynistically inclined cultures, and strongly suggested in a number of Greek myths." Foley (1994, p. 80) writes, "On the divine level, the *Hymn* represents first a resistance, by the bride and her mother, to an arranged marriage and then stresses the goddesses' reluctant acceptance of this painful transition." Parker (1991, p. 6) notes, "At one level, the Persephone of the myth is just Kore, 'Maiden' or 'Daughter': any maiden or daughter, that is to say, snatched away from her mother in marriage. The ugly complicity of the father, who arranges the marriage, might therefore appear bitterly appropriate." See also Foley (1994) p. 39 and, for a cross-traditional perspective, the striking quote by Adrienne Rich on p. 79.

children to grasp and contextualize properly, may be especially prone to symbolic expression. This possibility is consistent with central themes of both Christianity and the *Hymn*, each of which embodies reflections of painful and frightening patterns of childhood experience. In both cases, we see images of childhood, especially the child's relationship with parents and other relatives, transposed and projected onto a theologically constructed cosmos. In both cases, the human child is paralleled by a divine Child, and the human father is paralleled by a Father-God. In both cases, we find plausible mechanisms that can account for the "translation" of childhood experience into a mythic context—for the *Hymn*, like the Gospel narratives, is rooted oral tradition.<sup>47</sup>

Even where Christian teaching and the *Hymn* diverge from the realities of childhood, we find much in common between the two textual traditions. In the *Hymn*, Demeter eventually forces Zeus to arrange for Persephone to spend most of the year visiting her parents; Persephone must ultimately spend only one third of each year in Hades. This plot element—like the redemptive conclusions to the Christ narrative and the various abandonment myths referred to previously—forms a "happy ending" much different from the historical reality of childhood, for in ancient Greece the mother had no power to effect a change in the marital arrangement.<sup>48</sup> That is, in both the *Hymn* and the New Testament we find symbolic portrayals that at once reflect and imaginatively ameliorate the painful realities of childhood.

### *Karmic Reincarnation*

The parental use of corporal punishment to compel obedience, which has been a defining *external* circumstance of childhood, has necessarily carried with it an *internal* requirement: that the child must suppress his or her desires and will when they are not in accord with the will of the parent. It is striking that this internal requirement, like the external circumstances of childhood, is paralleled within religious teachings. Within Christianity, this internal requirement is expressed in the powerful language of salvation myth: To avoid eternal punishment, the believer must "die to the self" and be reborn "in Christ." Here it is important to recognize that, especially within the Pauline tradition,

<sup>47</sup> According to Parker (1991, p. 6) the oral performer "could never be merely inertly reproducing the local myth. On the contrary, he was probably constantly involved in choosing between variants, in giving shape and coherence to more fragmented traditions, in creating his own myth, in short, as Greek poets normally had to do."

<sup>48</sup> As Foley (1994, p. 112) notes, "As in the *Hymn*, goddesses retain a far wider range of powers and capacities for independent action than do their mortal counterparts."

the “self” that must die is the *disobedient* self—specifically, the self that is born tainted with Adam’s primal act of childlike disobedience. Likewise, the Christ in whom the Christian is said to be reborn is the Son who, in his relationship with his heavenly Father, is the obedient child *par excellence*. Once it is recognized that Adam and Jesus personify, respectively, filial disobedience and obedience, an important dimension of the Adam-Jesus story is rendered transparent. In becoming a Christian, the believer endeavors to realign himself or herself ontologically from Adam to Jesus, changing from disobedient to obedient child, thereby avoiding damnation by the Father; in the process, the believer symbolically but precisely reenacts the child’s internal experience of subjugating the will to avoid paternal punishment.<sup>49</sup>

An analogous emphasis on self-negation as a way to avoid suffering is evident in Indian religious teachings about karma and reincarnation. These teachings are central to Hinduism, Buddhism, and related traditions; in fact, it is sometimes asserted that karmic teachings provide the cornerstone, or even the essential “creed,” of these religious systems.<sup>50</sup> In general, according to these systems, individual desire and will, as well as the self-serving actions that arise from desire and will, drive the cycle of rebirth or reincarnation.<sup>51</sup> This cycle, which persists without end unless interrupted, results in and is mythically construed as suffering; this suffering is posited to arise both during life on earth and in the torturous, purgatorial hells that one may experience between earthly incarnations.<sup>52</sup> Karma plays a mechanistic, mediating role in the cycle

<sup>49</sup> This reenactment also appears to be embodied in specific Christian behavioral practices (Abelow, 2009).

<sup>50</sup> In the words of one modern scholar of karmic thought, this creedal assessment, first made by the great Muslim scholar al-Biruni (b. 973 C.E.), “may be questionable, but it is certainly understandable” (Halbfass, 1998, p. 209).

<sup>51</sup> Of many examples that suggest this broad theme, see Hallisey (2000, p. 29), who summarizes: “Through our desires and our consequent actions, we are born again and again. . . .” Smith (2000, p. 108) notes similarly: for one who is attached “to desires and action, rebirth is perpetual.” See also my note 53, below.

<sup>52</sup> Smith (2000, p. 109) writes, “From the time of the Upanishads onward, the earlier theory of an afterlife in heaven or hell is combined with the notion that one also is eventually reborn again on earth. In many texts of Hinduism it appears as though the individual undergoes a kind of double retribution, first in another world of reward or punishment and then again in the type of rebirth one receives in this world. . . . Heavens and hells, often depicted in detailed imaginative terms, are not permanent states but function as transient and intermediate way stations as one moves along one’s way toward the next rebirth.”

These temporary hells are often portrayed in ways quite close to Western images of hell. For Hinduism, see e.g., Smith (2000, p. 110). For Buddhism, Masumian (1995, p. 52) writes: Often, Buddhist scriptures use very graphic, indeed gruesome, language to describe the plethora of torments that await the wicked in hell. . . . Here is a brief account of some of these torments from

of rebirths. Specifically, individual desire and will, and the actions associated with them, lead to the accumulation of karma, and it is this karma that drives the cycle of births.<sup>53</sup>

If one can mentally screen out the complexity inherent in these karmic systems, it becomes clear that core features of these systems are quite close to those found in Christianity. In both karmic and Christian traditions, metaphysically mediated suffering—which is often corporal in nature and serves as the underlying reason why salvation is necessary in the first place—is caused by the privileging of the self, its personal desires and will, and the actions that arise from them. It follows that, in both karmic and Christian traditions, salvation from suffering is attained by negating the self and its personally motivated desires, volitions, and actions. This fundamental similarity is highlighted by comparing two key phrases. In Christianity, as noted, the internal process that leads to salvation is often described as “dying to the self.” This same phrase also characterizes the goal of the internal process: to die to the self. In karmic religions, final liberation is often—especially in Buddhism—described as *Nirvana*, literally, an “extinguishing” of all desires and passions associated with the self, or even an extinguishing *of* the self. These two phrases, and the central roles they play in their respective salvation systems, are virtually interchangeable.

Before considering some possible implications of this tight parallelism, let me note that the underlying similarity between karmic teachings and Chris-

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the Pali canon: First, the wardens of hell drive red-hot iron stakes through the victim's hands, feet, and chest to prevent him from struggling. Then, using sharp razors, they will shave off his flesh, head downwards. . . . Then he will be forced to climb up and down a fiery mountain of red-hot embers. From here, he is taken into a huge boiler full of melted copper, where he is thoroughly boiled and hurled into the Great Hell where he remains in flames for a long time. . . .

<sup>53</sup> On the mechanism of karma, examples are provided by Halbfass (1998), as follow. Within Buddhism, traditional teachings define “the [karmic] act as rooted in, or even as essentially identical with, volition. . . .” (pp. 213-214); the Sautranitka school teaches that “any intentional act. . . initiates. . . a process of. . . transformation. . . which will lead to. . . retribution” (p. 214), and the Madhyamika school holds that “Karma is inseparable from. . . selfhood.” Within Hinduism, the system of Patanjali Yoga posits desire (and aversion, the negative expression of volitional desire) as the fundamental “affliction” on which the karmic system depends (p. 212). Within Jainism, which has an explicitly material understanding of karma, “A soul defiled by. . . passion and selfish desire attracts particles of potentially karmic matter. . . and through the ‘vibrations’ produced by volitional activities, it binds or glues these particles to itself and converts them to actual karma” (p. 215). As these examples suggest, conceptions of karma vary in detail among the traditions or even within a single tradition over time; yet broad themes are evident.

tian salvation theology, however impressive, can be difficult to recognize. There are, I suggest, several reasons for this difficulty.

First, unlike in Christianity, where the individual self and will are seen as real and therefore must be actively combated, the karmic traditions teach that the individual self, and hence its desires and will, are in a fundamental sense illusions—for which reason it is folly even to attempt to follow one's desires and will.<sup>54</sup> That is, the assumed metaphysical frameworks of Christianity and the karmic systems, within which one must negate the self, are radically different. This makes it difficult to recognize that the contents—the things being framed—are similar. In fact, to the extent that one consciously or unconsciously accepts the premises of the karmic systems, even as a methodological strategy or as the result of a culturally relativistic view about the nature of reality, the very categories of self, desire, and will appear to be unreal, or at least ontologically ambiguous; and this fact militates against the analytic application of these categories cross-culturally.

Second, Christianity and the karmic systems posit entirely different mechanisms as mediating the causal link that is held to exist between privileging of the self and suffering. In karmic systems, as noted above, the link is mediated by a metaphysical system (of karma) that is generally understood to be impersonal, value-neutral, and mechanistic, akin to a natural or causal law; in Christianity, in contrast, the link is mediated by a moral Agent who is analogous to a human (and especially paternal) judge.<sup>55</sup> This radical difference in presumed metaphysical mechanisms, like the difference in metaphysical frameworks, makes it difficult to recognize the essential similarity of the two systems. More generally, many Westerners think about myth ethnocentrically, that is, on the model they are most familiar with. This tendency can inhibit the recognition that karmic systems can be just as “mythical” as those involving volitional Agents.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> The illusory nature of the “self” (which is sometimes termed by modern scholars the “empirical self” or “phenomenal self,” to indicate its putatively illusory nature) is understood differently within the various traditions—e.g., in the fundamental Buddhist concept of no-self; or the formula, variants of which are central to Hindu thought, of *atman* (~individual self) = Brahman (~undifferentiated, unlimited, ultimate reality).

<sup>55</sup> However, the value-neutrality of karma is often incomplete, as evidenced by phrases such as “karmic *retribution*”; retribution, like punishment, is a concept associated with moral judgment. Karma is also occasionally linked to concepts of divine Agency; see e.g., the discussion of the *Bhagavadgita* in Mahony (2005); this link is especially prominent in Sikhism.

<sup>56</sup> In the Eastern traditions, because the self and passions are posited to be illusions, nothing real appears to be lost when the passions and will are “extinguished.” To the non-Christian observer, this formulation may seem more palatable psychologically than the Christian view, which

Third, Westerners often think of salvation as synonymous with salvation from death and other-worldly punishment. This makes it difficult for Westerners to recognize that karmic images of *preservation* in life, accompanied by perpetual *this*-worldly suffering, can serve the same mythical and psychological functions as Christian images of eternal damnation. This difficulty is exacerbated because, unlike in Christianity, which portrays retributive suffering as occurring predominantly in an after-life realm for which no empirical evidence exists, karmic systems project their myth of metaphysical suffering onto a this-worldly human reality that patently does include significant elements of pain. Thus, karmic religions superimpose mythically constructed suffering onto a situation that contains empirically real suffering. This superimposition can make the existence of the mythic projection or overlay difficult to see.<sup>57</sup>

Fourth, Christianity and the karmic systems use different words, terminologies, and conceptual formulations to express their teachings. In Christianity, eternal suffering is described as “hell”; avoidance of this suffering is termed “salvation”; and this salvation is typically construed as arising from “obedience” or “submission” to the divine Will. In karmic traditions, perpetual suffering is considered synonymous with the cycle of rebirths (karmic hells, when discussed, are generally considered an element in this cycle); and salvation is construed as “liberation” or “release” from this cycle, which is attained through “enlightenment.” The two systems thus speak different languages, which makes it hard to see that they are ultimately talking about much the same thing.

Christianity and the karmic systems both posit, at the core of their teachings, that (1) privileging the individual self, desires, and will leads to suffering; and (2) subjugating or negating the individual self, desires, and will obviates this suffering. As we will see shortly, these two propositions also are consistent

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requires that a real (if undesirably disobedient) self be annihilated. A similar situation exists with respect to the Eastern view of metaphysically mediated suffering, which generally does not presuppose moral condemnation, as it does in Western traditions, but rather the judgment-free fact of karma; this value-neutrality can superficially seem more palatable than the Western view, even though the proposed link between self and suffering, and the resulting prescription for psychological self-annihilation, is fundamentally the same. Perhaps an acceptance—whether conscious, unconscious, methodological, or relativistic—of the Eastern myth on its own terms helps explain why those who portray Western religions critically may still hold karmic traditions in high esteem.

<sup>57)</sup> This overlay, and its importance in shaping Eastern conceptions of the world, is rendered more visible when one considers the difference between Eastern and Western conceptions of immortality: Whereas Westerners have long sought immortality, Easterners, who believe, in some sense, that immortality already exists as the “default position” of human reality, wish to put an end to it through ultimate “liberation” (*moksa*), which is essentially a final and eternal death.



with foundational teachings of Judaism and Islam. These propositions might thus be understood as forming a generic substratum that underlies the particularistic surface contours of major Eastern and Western religious traditions. The two components of this generic substratum also accurately portray the situation of children reared with traditional patterns of discipline. Observe that, for the child, privileging the self, desires, and will leads, through disobedience and punishment, to suffering. Observe that the child's experience of punishment extends over a phase of life that can, from a small child's perspective, seem practically eternal<sup>58</sup>—consistent with both Western teachings on hell and Eastern conceptions of perpetual reincarnation. Observe that the parent, who to the child appears to possess Godlike omnipotence, presides as Judge—consistent with Western religious traditions. Likewise, the parent may punish willful disobedience so routinely or even (so it may seem to the child) automatically that, from the child's perspective, retribution may seem to arise through a kind of natural law—consistent with karmic traditions. Finally, observe that the child can escape the threat of punishment only by obeying the parent implicitly. To achieve this saving goal, the child, like the religionist, must engage in an intense, internal struggle to “extinguish” the desires, deny the will, “die to the self,” and “liberate” the self *from* the self.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Regarding the infant's experience of time, see Terr (1990, p. 157): “[T]ime, especially durational sense, is . . . experienced with relativity. Time moves slowly when you're young and more quickly when you're old. . . . The future is infinite at birth and minutely finite by old age.” See also Howe's (1990, p. 89) suggestion that early memories may be coded without reference to the variable of time.

<sup>59</sup> Christian concepts of sin and damnation, and Eastern concepts of karma and reincarnation, are both rooted in, and presuppose the existence of, entities that can be described as *self-prototypes*—viz., either Adam (in the Christian context, humans are said to be born “in Adam,” in an innate spiritual union) or earlier incarnations of the self (in karmic religions). It is striking that one influential theory of childhood memory holds that early memories are non-autobiographical, or pre-autobiographical, in nature—that is, arising in a context before the individual clearly recognizes the self *as* a self. These early memories are said to be “remembered,” but in an abstracted form that is incomplete with respect to awareness that the events actually happened *to oneself* (Howe, 2000, e.g. p. 89; Howe, Courage, and Peterson, 1996). According to this theory, as young children mature, they “remember” their early experiences but do not clearly recollect that it was *they* who had those experiences. If this theory is correct, then it is psychologically plausible that adults might tend to attribute their early childhood experiences, including punishment in response to disobedience or other forms of privileging the self, to someone who, like a religiously understood self-prototype, is ambiguously self-referential, i.e., simultaneously self and not self.

In considering the religiously constructed linkage of desire to suffering, I have focused on the role of deliberate corporal punishment. But another developmental route for this linkage may exist. For a baby or infant, experiencing unfulfilled needs for food or nurture can be intensely

What can account for the overlap in the core teachings of Christianity and the karmic traditions, as well as of Judaism and Islam?—and is the confluence with childhood themes merely incidental? Although other explanations can be proposed, one must consider the straightforward possibility that cross-culturally similar elements of childrearing, especially the coercive suppression of willfulness and the inculcation of obedience, led to the development of superficially differentiated but fundamentally similar salvation myths. We have previously seen that thematically “concordant” dreams can arise among individuals who experience the same or similar traumas. In like fashion, it is possible that fundamentally similar patterns of painful childhood experience within different cultures resulted in the emergence of religious traditions that are “concordant,” portraying cross-culturally similar childhood circumstances through different symbolic constructs. We can describe such religious traditions as being symbolically differentiated but thematically concordant. One must wonder if Christianity, the karmic religions, as well as Judaism and Islam fall into this category.

Regarding the “cross-culturally similar childhood circumstances” mentioned in the last paragraph, children in the East, as in the West, have suffered greatly. In traditional Indian culture, for example, severe physical punishment to inculcate obedience, as well as potentially lethal neglect, may have been common.<sup>60</sup> Much the same can be said of traditional Chinese culture. The first and most important of Confucius’ Eight Virtues, *Xiao* (“filial piety”), which

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painful and frightening. If a baby or infant repeatedly has needs (which can be understood as biologically rooted desires) that are not adequately fulfilled, then need and desire can become psychologically associated with suffering, with the occurrence of need and desire leading to an expectation, whether conscious or subliminal, of suffering. Thus needs and desires, *per se*, to the extent that they are not fulfilled during childhood, may come to be felt as something dangerous, frightening, and anxiety provoking, something to escape from and suppress (see e.g. Stettbacher, 1994, pp. 33-34: “the child will develop a fear of its own needs”). Given the historical prevalence of inadequate and neglectful parenting, this point may shed light on the religiously constructed association of desire and suffering, and on strategies, including ascetic practices, designed to overcome or desensitize the self to desire and need.

<sup>60</sup> Of traditional peasant culture in India, Poffenberger (1981, p. 91) writes: “Young girls must be obedient and must learn to conform both in their own homes and in the homes of their in-laws. . . . Sons must. . . be not only obedient, but emotionally dependent. These characteristics may be socialized through a prolonged period of infant gratification followed by indulgence-withdrawal and threats of punishment and destruction. This early conditioning may be followed in later childhood by rather severe physical punishment. Neglect that results in death, and severe child-rearing practices that seem contrary to [modern] Western ideals for the optimal growth and development of the individual, may occur with some frequency among peasant groups in India.”

was considered a life-long, all-encompassing obligation and imperative, states that children must never disobey parents, especially fathers, or cause them unhappiness under any circumstance; as a practical matter, this has meant great physical suffering for children.<sup>61</sup>

### *Judaism and Islam*

I noted earlier that many ancient myths portray abandoned children. I described how these myths typically portray outcomes that are much better than those experienced by actual abandoned children. Often, the mythical child is rescued and goes on to lead a great nation. It is hard to imagine a more striking inversion of the brutal and frequently lethal realities of infant exposure.

Myths of child abandonment with embedded “happy endings,” extend back to the beginning of recorded history. For example, King Sargon the Great of Akkad, who ruled 23 centuries B.C.E., was, according to myth, abandoned as an infant into the river Euphrates. Unlike the apparently more typical historical experience of children, which may have involved deliberate infanticide by drowning,<sup>62</sup> it is said that Sargon was placed into a reed basket, which was carefully waterproofed with pitch, from which he was subsequently rescued and declared king. Moses, too, is said to have been rescued from a river, in his case the Nile. Having been placed into a pitch-covered basket, Moses was not only rescued but also wet-nursed by his own mother. In fact, according to this myth, Moses was not even abandoned in the usual sense of the word but was placed among the reeds for his own protection, from an infanticidal Pharaonic decree, out of love. Here we can discern not only a happy ending but a happy beginning as well.<sup>63</sup> In general terms, Moses, like Sargon, follows a common

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<sup>61</sup> Of traditional childrearing culture in China, Korbin (1981, p. 167) writes, “Children, according to the ethic of ‘filial piety,’ were considered the sole property of their parents. As such, they could be dealt with in whatever manner the parents chose. . . . Severe beatings, infanticide, child slavery, the selling of young girls as prostitutes, child betrothal, and foot binding were not uncommon.” I thank Hal Switkay for drawing my attention to the centrality of *Xiao* to traditional Chinese culture.

<sup>62</sup> As one striking, albeit possibly apocryphal, example: the first European foundling home, in Rome, was said to have been established (ca. 1198) because Pope Innocent III was distressed by the large number of dead infants pulled out of the Tiber River, in nets, by fishermen (Herlihy, 1978, p. 123).

<sup>63</sup> In the Moses story, the river functions as the means by which the parents protect the child from death. This protective alliance between parent and river stands in stark contrast to what, historically, appears to have been the more typical scenario: an infanticidal alliance. This contrast is reminiscent of the inverted role played by the wolf in the Romulus and Remus story, discussed above in my note 28.

pattern: he is rescued, ascends to power, and goes on to lead a great nation. Regarding the psychological resonance of these stories, William H. C. Propp's authoritative commentary on Exodus (1999) is worth quoting:

The abandonment of children is probably universal. . . . Mesopotamian texts, our oldest sources, refer to real or symbolic abandonment. . . . In societies practicing exposure. . . childhood fears of abandonment, and suspicions (or hopes) of being a foundling, would be widespread. Tales of adoption would be particularly fascinating. Listeners would identify with the endangered infant, who embodies their primal fears and fantasies. . . . We must leave open the question of whether the Moses story depends directly upon an Assyrian, Egyptian or Hittite prototype. . . . But whether Israel inherited the Floating Foundling Tale or created it anew, its truth must be sought within the human psyche, not in historical fact (pp. 156-158).

The story of Abraham's sons, Ishmael and Isaac, may likewise embed ameliorated images of painful childhood. Ishmael, who is said to have provided the founding lineage of Islam, was abandoned twice—first by his father, Abraham, and then by his mother, Hagar—yet survived to become the source of a great nation. Isaac, through whose line Judaism is said to have arisen, obediently submitted to sacrifice according to the will of his father, who himself was obediently following the command of *his* God and heavenly Father. Isaac, like Ishmael, was miraculously saved. Though the origins of these Abrahamic stories are shrouded in pre-history, it is sometimes asserted that the stories, which are mythical in character, emerged as oral traditions. As described previously, oral transmission could readily shape religious traditions based on psychological resonances. For most of history, abandonment and corporal punishment have been stereotypical traumas of childhood. It may be no mere coincidence that the two sons of Abraham, who are said to form lineal roots of two great world religions, are portrayed as having been victimized corporally (Isaac) and abandoned (Ishmael) by their own father. Further, the cultural persistence of these Abrahamic stories may provide insight into the emotional and cognitive resonances of believers. In this regard, it may be telling that most Muslims believe it was Ishmael, not Isaac, whom Abraham attempted to sacrifice. Perhaps we can see in this fact an unconscious attempt to express a cultural legacy of both childhood abandonment *and* corporal assault.<sup>64</sup> This dual legacy, in

<sup>64</sup> Of note, traditional Arab culture is highly patriarchal, and children have often been treated with great brutality; in fact, in one traditional pattern, the father threatens a disobedient child with a knife, rather like what Isaac experiences; see the discussion and literature review in Patai (1971, pp. 412-419). As an aside, it may be relevant that in both the Ishmael and Isaac narratives we see double—in fact, nested—iterations: twice abandoned (by Abraham, by Hagar), twice

any case, became central to the Christian tradition, with Jesus, during the crucifixion, suffering both corporal pain and abandonment according to the will of his heavenly Father. As discussed previously, Jesus was miraculously redeemed by this same Father, through resurrection and ascension: a supernatural variant of a time-honored happy ending.<sup>65</sup>

Within their salvation traditions, too, the Abrahamic faiths share an underlying belief structure that parallels the experiences of children. Just as the child must submit his or her will to, and obey, the seemingly omnipotent parent, so must the religionist submit his or her will to, and obey, the omnipotent God. The child who does not so submit will suffer punishment and the withdrawal of parental love, support, and protection; the religionist who does not submit to God can expect essentially the same painful outcome—i.e., divine punishment and abandonment. This basic pattern, common to childhood and Abrahamic religion, can be schematized as follows:

Disobedience → punishment & withdrawal of affection  
Obedience → non-punishment & increased affection

Christianity is a specific expression of this general pattern, as we have seen: the child-like disobedience of Adam leads to punishment, and the obedience of the Child (Christ) to the Father leads to salvation. Other embodiments of this general pattern are discernable in Judaism, the quintessential religion of divine commands, and Islam, the very name of which literally means “submission” to the will of God. Unlike in Christianity, where obedience is attained metaphysically, through belief in, and ontological union with, an exemplar of

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obedient (Abraham’s obedience to God, Isaac’s obedience to Abraham). To the extent that these myths could have arisen as unwitting symbolic portrayals of childhood, this iterative pattern may be significant, for dreams not infrequently embed multiple and sometimes nested iterations of central themes and concerns arising from the dreamer’s waking life. I have not discussed the myth of Isaac’s near-sacrifice in the context of actual practices of child sacrifice in ancient Israel and its environs; entry points for the study of this complex issue include Levenson (1993) and Propp (2006, pp. 263-271; see comment on Exodus 22:28).

<sup>65</sup> A Hindu story about the god Shiva is strikingly similar to the story of Isaac. According to myth, Shiva appeared to a great devotee and demanded this devotee’s son for a cannibalistic meal. After the man killed and cooked his son, Shiva reversed himself, refused to eat, and restored the child to life (Attran, 2002, p. 5). As in the story of Isaac, the deity demands the death of a devotee’s child, then reverses himself and redeems the child—yet another happy-ending variant. To my knowledge, these Israelite and Hindu myths originated independently, raising the possibility that they arose as parallel symbolic-narrative responses to fundamentally similar childhood circumstances.

absolute filial obedience (i.e., Christ),<sup>66</sup> obedience in Judaism and Islam are attained through following the dictates of God's revealed instructions (i.e., Torah and the Koran). In all three faiths, disobedience leads to punishment, though the form of that punishment varies. In Islam, as in Christianity, disobedience leads to individual punishment in hell; in Judaism, on the other hand, punishment is frequently understood to be collective—e.g., the devastation and expulsion of the people Israel from their land—though individual punishment has played a role as well.<sup>67</sup> These several differences can properly be understood as variations on a common theme.<sup>68</sup> Note that Judaism's traditions about sin, punishment, and obedience are usually characterized as pertaining to "redemption," not "salvation," but the meaning is fundamentally the same.

As discussed previously, the opening lines of the earliest surviving Christian document, Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, emphasize the centrality of God's wrath to theology, conversion, and belief. In like fashion, the very first lines of the Koran portray God as bursting with wrath. There, believers implore God to keep them from straying in ways that could lead to punishment: "Keep us on the right path. The path of those upon whom Thou has bestowed favors. Not [the path] of those upon whom Thy wrath is brought down . . ." [1.1-1.6]. This is the central theme of the Koran's first Sura, and it thematically frames the entire Koran. It is in this context that the Koran's repeated insistence on God's mercy must be understood.<sup>69</sup> God is merciful in the specific sense that he supplies believers the means (i.e., Koranic instruction) to know His Will. If

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<sup>66</sup> Christian believers are said to attain (at least some degree of) metaphysical union with Christ; they share in the life and/or body of Christ. Thus, believers themselves, to the extent that they have through this union *become* Christ, directly establish an obedient relationship with the Father. It follows from this obedience that believers are loved and not punished.

<sup>67</sup> In this context, it should be noted that the punishment of children appears to have been normative in ancient Israel: see Exodus 21:15,17 and Deuteronomy 21:18-21; Meyer (1997, p. 31); Cooper (1996, p. 10); and Perdue (1997, p. 180); see also Philo and Josephus' later (first century C.E.) views, cited previously. The Arab (my note 64) and Christian (text and notes) contexts have already been commented on.

<sup>68</sup> In Judaism and Islam, salvational parallels with childhood are impressive, but the formulations are less clearly or exclusively filial than in Christianity. This renders the parallels less specific and, hence, the formative links with childhood more speculative. That said, it should be emphasized that a non-filial scheme of redemptive obedience—such as that provided by the Mosaic covenant, whose system of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience was formally patterned on the political model of Ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties (Propp, 2006, pp. 34-35)—still could allow for powerful, though less specific, childhood resonances.

<sup>69</sup> Virtually every one of the Koran's 114 Suras begins with the words, "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful."

the believer succeeds in the struggle to adequately conform to that Will, punishment can be avoided, should God so wish. This is much the same concept of divine wrath and mercy that is implicit in the New Testament and the Hebrew Scriptures, in that believers can avoid God's wrathful punishment through, respectively, belief in Jesus and adherence to the Mosaic commands. It is also the kind of wrath and mercy that has been shown to children, in most cultures and for most of history, by their fathers (and sometimes their mothers as well): the father is prone to wrath, and may act with summary brutality, yet he is merciful in the specific sense that he usually does not punish, and may act lovingly towards, a child who obeys his will.<sup>70</sup>

In observing these childhood parallels in the core narrative and salvation teachings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, one must again consider the possibility that endemic patterns of painful childhood experience provide the explanation: that ancient Israelite culture expressed an initial monotheistic (or proto-monotheistic) embodiment of childhood fear and longing, and that Christianity and Islam later diverged as culturally modified expressions of fundamentally similar childhood realities. I have already noted the possible role of oral tradition in the emergence of the Abrahamic myths. Here it is worth emphasizing generally that, as in the New Testament, core teachings of the Pentateuch and Koran, including both salvation and narrative traditions, may have emerged, in part, through oral tradition and revelation. As discussed, these formative processes are well suited to mediating the shaping of religious traditions in conformity with experiential themes from childhood.

## Conclusions

New Testament narrative and salvation teachings form close thematic parallels with endemic patterns of childhood punishment and abandonment in Christianity's formative matrix. These parallels are too extensive and precise to be

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<sup>70</sup> A somewhat similar salvational pattern can be observed in an important devotional stream of Hinduism. As many as 90 percent of Hindus follow the "path of devotion" (*bhakti marga*), which—as opposed to more abstract and ritualistic paths—"offers immediate, unconditional salvation to those who throw themselves on the mercy of God," as one scholar of Hinduism describes it. Conversion in this path "is similar to that in Christianity" in that one must choose a deity and "surrender totally" (P. G. Hiebert, cited and discussed in Kirkpatrick, 2005, pp. 97-98). As with the Isaac-Shiva narratives (see note 65), these salvation teachings, in which the believer attempts to avoid wrath and gain the deity's mercy through submission, suggest that religious narratives, East and West, may have been shaped in response to fundamentally similar cross-cultural childhood realities.

explained by chance. When considered in the context of other factors, the parallels strongly suggest a causal relationship, one in which experiential patterns of childhood provided a thematic template for the development of seminal New Testament teachings. Put differently, painful childhood experience appears to have shaped Christianity, during its formative period, at the most basic level. Further, given widespread childhood punishment, abandonment, and neglect for most of history, these parallels have likely been, and in some cases may continue to be, a source of powerful emotional and cognitive resonances among believers and potential believers. For this reason, recognition of pervasive childhood parallels in the New Testament may provide important insight into the initial spread and subsequent cultural persistence of Christian faith.

These points, which were presented in the first several sections, form the central argument of the article. In contrast, the final section of the article, which is a broad-brush, exploratory excursus on non-Christian traditions, stands outside the main argument; this excursus is intended not to propound definitive positions but, instead, to stimulate thought and raise questions. The excursus describes childhood parallels of varying levels of concreteness and specificity in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, the religious-philosophic system of karmic reincarnation, and the narrative and salvation traditions of Judaism and Islam. Some or all of these parallels might indicate a shaping influence of childhood on religious texts. In addition, these parallels raise the possibility of childhood resonances among believers past and present. When Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism are considered together, a thematic overlap across traditions is evident. A possible explanation for this overlap is that these diverse traditions all were shaped by a cross-culturally prevalent aspect of childhood experience—viz., the suppression of willfulness and the inculcation of obedience by physical punishment and coercion.

In broad terms, the traditions considered in this article are disparate in both their teachings (e.g., polytheistic vs. monotheistic, divine Agent vs. autonomous natural law) and cultures of origin. The existence of childhood parallels in these diverse traditions raises the possibility that some, and perhaps many, religions and myths not considered in this article might also portray cultural patterns of painful childhood experience. This possibility, along with the need to clarify the preliminary investigations presented in the excursus, can generate a rich variety of descriptive and causal hypotheses.



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