

Black Girls are at their LAST: Exploring a Womanist/Childist Reading of Jairus' Daughter in Mark 5

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And he implored him much saying, "My daughter is at her last..." (Jairus in Mark 5:23¹)

Introducing the importance of womanist and childist approaches

On April 20, 2021, about twenty minutes before a judge announced that a jury found former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin guilty in the murder of George Floyd, police officer Nicholas Reardon shot and killed sixteen-year-old Ma'Khia Bryant outside of her foster home in Columbus, Ohio. This child was holding a knife in self-defense because grown women had come to fight her over household duties within her foster home. No de-escalation tactics were used. Officials deemed that the officer's use of force was justified, and no charges were filed against him or anyone. Moreover, Ma'Khia Bryant has not been a part of the #SayHerName movement because many in media and politics have not viewed this child as a "blameless victim." She had her own blame to shoulder as a large black girl child living in foster care. No one discussed the fact that black children are disproportionately in foster care and, oftentimes, experience violent situations.² Ma'Khia Bryant was at her last.³

What can the Gospel of Mark speak to this situation and vice versa? As I read the story of Jairus' daughter in Mark 5 where do I see Bryant? Why do I even undertake such an endeavor? First, I am a black mother and grandmother with granddaughters and a grandson. I am angered and horrified that black children can be shot and killed by police with no repercussion. Second, I am a womanist⁴ New Testament scholar who takes seriously the experi-

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ences of black women and girls as valid theoretical frameworks for reading biblical texts. I am also a critically thinking black woman. I believe that had the child been white presenting, she would probably still be alive today.

What am I proposing in this article? I am proposing combining a childist⁵ approach to biblical interpretation with my own

as a type of thought pertaining to black women in order to set aside mainstream white feminists from feminists of color while also resisting anti-blackness within the feminist movement. By focusing specifically on black women, Womanism aims for the transformation of society and liberation of all people in the black community. Some seminal texts include Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ, Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995); Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, *Exorcising Evil: Theodicy and African American Spirituals—A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993); Emilie Maureen Townes, *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993); and Townes, *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993).

5. The term "childist" first entered religious studies through John Wall's essay "Childism and the Ethics of Responsibility," in *Children's Voices: Children's Perspectives in Ethics, Theology, and Religious Education*, edited by Annemie Dillen and Didier Pollefeyt (Walpole, Massachusetts: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2010). Others who bring childist readings into biblical scholarship include Julie Faith Parker, who first applied the term childist to her exegetical method in *Valuable and Vulnerable: Children in the Hebrew Bible, Especially the Elijah Cycle* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013). Also, Amy Lindemann Allen has provided an excellent childist reading of Luke's Gospel in her book,

1. All translations of the New Testament are this author's translations.

2. See "Child Welfare Practice to Address Racial Disproportionality and Disparity," chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/racial_disproportionality.pdf. Accessed September 4, 2023.

3. I will explain the phrase "at her last" when I introduce Jairus below.

4. As a term coined by Alice Walker, "womanism" may be defined

womanist hermeneutical approach. Recognizing that scholars such as Sharon Betsworth and Julie Faith Parker engage childist interpretation as a child-centered approach and that said approach comes from feminist biblical studies, it seemed the natural extension for such a reading would be how scholars who identify as womanists follow this lead and read biblical texts with a child-centered approach but with a particularity to the lived experience of black girls and women.⁶ Therefore, in this essay I reclaim and reexamine child characters in the biblical text to discover how Jairus' daughter functions as metaphor, symbol, and/or trope.

Further, as I think through the childist approach, I will engage womanist methodologies that I already possess in my interpretative arsenal. For example, the womanist tenet of radical subjectivity is an essential part of my developing womanist hermeneutic. Radical subjectivity is the epistemological privileging of black women's identity and selfhood. Radical subjectivity stems from the African folk expression, "You actin' womanish." Black mothers would often say this to their black daughters whenever the daughter acted as though she knew too much. For me, as the daughter of a black woman who was born in Alabama and whose own mother worked land during Reconstruction Alabama, I remember my questions of "why?" I think even in my beginning years I was wrestling with my own struggles for wanting to know more than what others thought I should know. In essence, womanists are gazing upon and wrestling for justice in order to assert their own radical subjectivity in the face of white hypocrisy and supremacy and black male misogyny. Further, one of the tenets of womanism is traditional communalism. That means that we are not striving for the liberation of black women alone but also striving for the liberation of the entire community, including black girls. Therefore, the question I must ask is how do I read Mark 5:21-23; 35-43?⁷

Mark's Gospel and the reign of God

Scholars of the Gospel of Mark believe Mark was the first gospel written, probably between 66 and 70 CE during the Jewish War against Rome. The context of war is important for proper interpretation of the Gospel of Mark as scholars know the Jewish nation stopped paying taxes to the Roman Empire as a show of revolt for heavy taxation. The years leading up to this revolt show a clash between the Jewish nation who understood themselves as God's chosen nation while the Romans also understood themselves as

For Theirs Is the Kingdom: Inclusion and Participation of Children in the Gospel According to Luke (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019).

6. Sharon Betsworth and Julie Faith Parker. "Where Have All the Young Girls Gone? Discovering the Girls of the Bible through Childist Analysis of Exodus 2 and Mark 5-7." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 38, no. 2 (2022): 125. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudeli.38.2.09>.

7. I am specifically bracketing out the episode on the woman with the flow of blood. I will treat that text later in my forthcoming book titled *Bodies, Violence, and Emotions*. In that work, I will engage the woman as a woman battling various fertility issues such as fibroids and lack of abortion care, as these issues are pressing in adult black women.

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being chosen by their gods to rule all the other nations. Part of these clashing ideologies renders a society that is unbalanced. For example, during the time before the Jewish War against Rome, many Jews had difficulty supporting themselves, feeding themselves, and caring for themselves because of sickness and health disparities.⁸

The reign of God

As readers enter the Gospel of Mark at Mark 1, I am taken by the gospel writer's use of the language of preaching throughout. In Mark 1:4, John the Baptist comes proclaiming or preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Further, the gospel writer describes Jesus as proclaiming the goodness in 1:14. While I wholeheartedly believe that the preaching and proclaiming of John and Jesus are important, I would argue that because the preached word has become so central in our contemporary contexts, present-day Jesus followers might lose sight of what it means to actually live in the "reign of God" (i.e., the Greek phrase *basileia tou theou*). Scholars define the *basileia* as the "kingship, sovereignty, authority, rule, especially of God, both in the world, and in the hearts" of people.⁹ I think that we would be remiss to dismiss the idea that the *basileia* of God often contrasts and contradicts with the *basileia* of the Roman Empire. Nonetheless, I have decided to translate *basileia tou theou* as "reign of God" to encompass the totality of kingship, sovereignty, authority, and rule.

Contrasting the reign of God against the reign of Rome is similar to the work of Wes Howard-Brook who specifically contrasts the gospel of Jesus Christ versus the gospel of Empire.¹⁰ For Howard-Brook, a religion of creation is similar to the reign of God where God is the source of power and creation that shows

8. See Warren Carter. *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: an Essential Guide*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006.

9. Alexander Souter, *A Pocket Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1917), 47.

10. Wes Howard-Brook, *Come Out My People! God's Call out of Empire in the Bible and Beyond*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), 393-398.

a preferred treatment for encounter, fellowship, and intimacy all stemming from egalitarian kinship, hospitality and love. On the other hand, the reign of Rome stems from hierarchical patronage, money, debt, scarcity, suspicion, violence and only belongs to the king and those who can afford to buy it.¹¹ Unfortunately, we can make the same arguments for how the American empire exists with its capitalistic and militaristic prowess that exists in the world. As I will argue momentarily, children provide a meaning for the reign of God that is vastly different from the reign both in the Roman Empire and in the context of the United States of America.

Children as the reign of God

In Mark's Gospel Jesus imparts an idea about the reign of God which I believe most of us do not take seriously. Amy Lindeman Allen argues in her work on the Gospel of Luke that Jesus confers ownership of the reign of God onto children in Luke 18:16.¹² While I am not working in the Gospel of Luke, I am looking at the parallel version in Mark 10:13-16. I translate the text as follows:

And the mothers were bringing to him children so that he may touch them; but the disciples rebuked them, and Jesus was angered and said to them "let the children come to me, do not deny them, for such as these are the reign of God. Truly I tell you all, whoever does not receive the reign of God as a little child, will surely not enter into her." And hugging them, he was blessing them, placing his hands on them.¹³ (Parker translation)

As I have pondered my translation of Mark 10:13-16, I differ from many standard translations such as the New Revised Standard Version by adding "Mothers" instead of "People" in the NRSV. I imagine mothers bringing their babies, little children, and toddlers to Jesus for a blessing.¹⁴ While I cannot confirm such an interpretation, it makes better sense to me especially when I translate the Greek word *evankalisamenos* as "hugging" them instead of "taking them up in his arms." The writer's use of the word *evankalisamenos* may be a specific association with the Phrygian mother of the gods (and the goddess of motherhood) Cybele. Cybele was also known as the goddess of fertility and

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the mountains.¹⁵ This goddess was known for hugging children and "saving" them. The word for "saving" is the same word for our Christian understanding of salvation (i.e., *sozw.*) The act of saving has many connotations beyond salvation from sin but also connotes ideas of healing and wholeness.

For me, thinking of Jesus as a mother scooping up children after declaring them to be the reign of God allows a different reading of what has come before with the raising of Jairus' daughter. Further, it is interesting to note that Luke's rendition of this passage in Luke 18:15-17 deletes the idea of Jesus being angry (Mark's *ananaktnasen*) with the disciples while also taking out Mark's idea of Jesus "hugging" the children. I would argue that these words in Mark evidence both "mother rage" and "mother love" (ideas which Luke redacts).

Noting that Jesus has singled out children as specific recipients of and participants in the reign of God, we must now wrestle with the ways that this text has traditionally been taught and preached in ecclesial settings. Normally, the text of Jesus blessing the children serves as a sermon or lesson about humility. We must learn to come to Jesus with humble spirits just as children. Often, we forget that children were the most vulnerable and oppressed group in ancient Palestinian society. Our readings cannot just be theological but must account for the fact that up to 50 percent of children died by age ten in Palestine.¹⁶ Further newborns were often denied protein-rich, infection-fighting colostrum because of early weaning and inadequate food consumption by mothers. Imagine living in Jesus' world and knowing that it takes six thousand boatloads of grain per year to keep Rome fed and that much of that grain comes from working Palestinian farms: resentment brews.¹⁷

The above recognitions demand different and expansive readings of Mark's Gospel and the children within said Gospel. We must move beyond theological readings that focus on humility and engage what the actualities of children would have been.

11. Howard-Brook, *Come Out My People*, 6.

12. See Amy Lindemann Allen, *For Theirs Is the Kingdom: Inclusion and Participation of Children in the Gospel according to Luke* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019). I would also commend to the reader Bridgett A. Green's "Nobody's Free Until Everybody's Free: Exploring Gender and Class Injustice in a Story About Children (Luke 18:15-17)," in *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible*, 291. SBL Press, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1h1htgx>.¹⁷ While Green does not propose a childist interpretation, her work is thoroughly womanist in that she engages Luke 18 with Fanie Lou Hamer.

13. All translations of the New Testament are this author's translations.

14. While my translation does highlight mothers bringing babies and toddlers to Jesus, I do not want to take away from the fact the Jairus as a father interceded with Jesus on behalf of his 12-year old daughter. She is simply not an infant who would, more often than not, be cradled in her mother's arms.

15. William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 330.

16. See Warren Carter. *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: an Essential Guide*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 116.

17. Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament*, 107.

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A womanist/childist interpretation of Mark 5:21-23; 35-43

As we enter Mark 5:21, the gospel writer introduces the reader to Jairus, who is described in the Greek as an *archisynagogen*. Generally, an *archisynagogen* is a leader or president of a synagogue. This term was used for the Jewish nation just as it was also found in polytheistic cults; meaning there is no strictly "Jewish" use of the phrase.¹⁸ Moreover, scholar Bernadette Brooten has found inscription evidence that also related this title to Jewish women.¹⁹ Of course, in the literature of the New Testament, this title only refers to the Jewish synagogue with the duties of the *archisynagogen* being the duty to take care of the physical arrangement of the worship service and perhaps act as a patron for the buildings. Accordingly, Jairus is usually thought to be a person of economic means and would have been able to provide a physician's attention to his daughter. While the text does not state that Jairus sought a physician for his daughter first, the New Revised Standard Version translates verse 23 with Jairus saying that "my little daughter is at the point of death." The Greek text literally states that the daughter is *eschatos exei* or literally "has [her] last" or "at [her] last." This is an interesting phrase and a *hapax legemenon*, meaning that this is the only time the phrase appears in the Greek New Testament.

As I was reading and pondering the phrase "at her last," a song came to me which has been sung at many black funerals. The song, titled "The Last Mile of the Way," is a song written by Sam Cooke and performed when he was a member of The Soul Stirrers.²⁰ The interesting feature of songs written by Sam Cooke is how they are literal soul stirrers with the lyrics that embody the feelings of African American communities in the 1950s and 1960s.²¹ One lyric in the song talks about working "til the close of day" symbolizing African American life in the '50s and '60s where domestics and laborers worked with little pay. Relief comes in the hereafter where "joy of the day" comes upon death. Even though advocacy, change, and respite may not arrive, African Americans experienced salve with some of these lyrics.

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vocacy is the public support and assistance for a recommendation regarding causes or policies to alleviate social issues and problems in society. Jairus was advocating for his daughter, but I wonder who advocates for the predominantly black and brown children in foster care as I referenced while introducing this essay.

Moreover, gaslighting occurs when spectators around an aggressive incident doubt or question the reality of said incident while questioning the anger of the aggressed person. In the Ma'Khia Bryant case, no one could question the reality of her life because she was not a voiceless and blamed victim of police brutality. How many people doubted, questioned, or even had sympathy for Ma'Khia Bryant? Black and brown members of society note that we often experience escalated policing practices that produce more trauma. Indeed, that is what happened in the Bryant incident. There was no patriarch to advocate for Bryant as Jairus advocated for his daughter. I have been wondering where her savior is who comes to take her hand, telling her to arise.

Nonetheless, I am not without hope. As I continue to read the Mark 5:35-43 passage, I believe that there is a message for the ecclesial church today on how we do ministry to black girls in our contemporary context. At verse 35 (after the woman in the flow of blood has initiated her own healing), members from the house of the chief synagogue leader came to tell Jairus that his daughter had died and there was no need to trouble the teacher (Jesus) any longer.

What is interesting is how the gospel writer says that Jesus responds in verse 36. The gospel writer uses the Greek word *parakousas*. The word is normally translated in the New Revised Standard Version is "overhearing." However, when I teach and preach this passage, I note that the verb has a connotation of both overhearing AND ignoring.²² I think that part of ministry to black girls is the idea that many will say that black girls are "lost" and have no hope for any type of salvation. Indeed, there were moments in my own years where I have felt those sentiments.²³

22. See Arendt, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 767.

23. I love to let students know that I was a teenage mother and many felt my life was over when I became pregnant but God and perseverance have allowed me to obtain not only a college degree but also

18. Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 139.

19. New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity, ed. G. Horsley, vols. 1-5 1980/81-89 214-20

20. Please go to https://youtu.be/ELA_pkY11fA?si=cEz2Pwxaufb6kY0o to listen to this soul stirring song.

21. Sam Cooke is also known for his song "A Change is Gonna Come" which is a protest song that was played at Malcolm X's funeral and served as the closing anthem in Spike Lee's Malcolm X movie. Also, in his presidential victory speech, Barack Obama paraphrased the song when he said "It's been a long time coming, but, tonight, because of what we did on this day, in this election, at this defining moment, change has come to America." See <https://www.npr.org/2008/11/05/96624326/transcript-of-barack-obamas-victory-speech> Accessed September 4, 2023.

But what Jesus does is ignore the naysayers. Part of ministry to black girls, I would argue, is to stay in the work and ignore the naysayers no matter what.

After arriving at the synagogue leader's house, the gospel writer notes that wailers and mourners have already arrived to grieve the child's death. However, Jesus does something odd during his raising the daughter from death. At verse 40, the gospel writer states that Jesus expelled (Greek *ekbalon*) all the mourners from the house except for the father and mother of the child and his disciples who were with him. The interesting issue with the verb "expels" is the force that is often behind it. In Mark's Gospel *ekbalon* often occurs as Jesus is exorcising demons out of "their" synagogues (See Mark 1:34, 39). The verb also occurs as Jesus is expelled into the wilderness by the Spirit as he undergoes his 40 days of temptation in Mark 1:12. The connotation behind the expulsion in *ekbalon* is normally a violent and forceful driving out. This verse makes me realize that not everybody is supposed to be a part of a healing or a raising of the dead. Such miracles are too much for some people. Ministry to black girls requires a discerning Spirit that helps ministers recognize such truth. Mark 5:40 states that the mourners laughed at Jesus. Those who are not available for ministry but only for ridicule must be cast out.

Further, as I preach and teach this text, I often make the connection of *how* we do ministry. Specifically, one cannot do ministry to black girls when there are others around who may want to sabotage the ministry. Such an issue may arise when someone asks "why can't you do ministry to all children? Don't all children matter?" And, of course, all children matter but we must recognize that black children, and specifically black girls, suffer from higher consequences in loving homes and more so when they are in the foster care system.

For example, black girls specifically must contend with gendered and racial issues because of their visible minority status. A critical part of this racial issue is the American standard of beauty. Studies have proven that the standard of beauty in the United States is straight hair, light skin, thin build, and fine facial features. Black girls begin to realize at any early age that African-American women are often the antithesis to this standard.²⁴ What does a ministry that tries to actively counteract those issues look like?

Third, Jesus grasps the daughter's hand in verse 41 and says, "*Talitha cum*" which means "Little Girl, get up." While scholars note that Jesus is speaking Aramaic, which is his native tongue, hearing the Aramaic language in a Greek text would be jarring to Greek readers. As I ponder this verse for a ministry context to black girls, my takeaway would be that anyone in serious ministry to black girls would have to "speak their language." In the introduction to this essay, I noted that the police officer who shot Ma'Khia Bryant did not attempt any de-escalation techniques and the child

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was shot and killed within minutes of the police officer's arrival. In contemporary policy conversations around policing, people have argued against such phrasing as "defund the police" while refusing to acknowledge that some states, counties, and cities may require the use of more mental health providers and counselors who are trained in specific de-escalation techniques and "speak a child's language."

Finally, Jesus tells the parents to bring the child something to eat in verse 43. This final verse in this pericope makes me believe that some situations can also be soothed with a good meal.

Concluding thoughts

As I have attempted to argue in this essay, black girls, much like Jairus' daughter, are "at their last" and require advocacy, intervention, and ministry from well-equipped faith groups and policy workers. Even as biblical scholarship has turned its attention to children, I believe that a specific turn to the particularity of black girls can open up what advocacy looks like on behalf of those black girls. While I am new to childist interpretation, I believe that coupling it with my specific womanist lens has allowed an expanded interpretation of Jairus' daughter as we ponder issues facing black girls today. Even though Jairus' daughter is a child of privilege who has a patriarch to advocate for her, I argue that each of us can be an advocate in the way of Jesus for black girls who would be considered one of the least protected groups in the world.

Finally, while not a trained social worker or victim's advocate, I am a biblical scholar who takes seriously the lived experiences of women and girls as I read biblical text. My hope is that re-imagined readings and liberating preaching will serve as the fire that needs to light every faith-based community toward work that brings transformation in the world. As readers of texts, culture, and society, we must charge one another to read critically when girls appear so that re-imagining Jesus' ministry in contemporary contexts can bring about that change and transformation.

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24. M. L. McCreary and D. R. Jones, "Black Issues in Psychology and Pastoral Care," ed. David G. Benner and Peter C. Hill, *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology & Counseling*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 149–151.