

PETER BALLA

The Child-Parent Relationship in the New Testament and its Environment

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
zum Neuen Testament
155*

Mohr Siebeck

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Mohr Siebeck

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*To my parents
Eszter Nagy and Tibor Balla*

*to my wife
Dr. Gyöngyi Hegedűs*

*to our children
Zsolt, Gergely, Csanád, Csenge*

*and to the memory of
my spiritual father
Professor John C. O'Neill
(8.12.1930–30.3.2003)*

Preface

The present work was accepted for the degree of *Habilitation* (dr. habil.) at the Evangelical-Lutheran Theological University in Budapest, in October 2001. It has grown out of a twofold interest. On the one hand, my doctoral thesis, *Challenges to New Testament Theology*, had a primarily methodological emphasis, addressing issues in diverse areas in New Testament studies. For my research in connection with *Habilitation*, I wanted to turn to a new field, focussing on one particular theme. I have chosen the child-parent relationship from the viewpoint of the child: How did children honour their parents in the New Testament and its environment? This theme has enabled me to deal with many ancient sources outside the New Testament, and to concentrate on exegetical work in the New Testament itself. On the other hand, the theme is of special significance to me personally. My own life story is very much influenced by family relations: I am greatly indebted to my beloved parents; and I rejoice in living in my own family now. Their presence is a constant source of joy and strength to me. Therefore, I dedicate this work to my parents, to my wife, and to our children.

Apart from my family, many people and institutions have helped me in the process of carrying out this research. I was greatly helped by the *Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirchen der Schweiz*, which gave me a scholarship to study in Bern for seven months in 1997. I was able to spend another month in Bern in 1998, with the help of the Evangelical Faculty of the University of Bern. On the basis of the preparatory work carried out there, I was able to continue with research at home, and was in a position to apply for a scholarship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. With their help, I spent twelve months at the University of Heidelberg in 1999/2000. Without these scholarships the present work could not have been brought to light. I should like to add with gratitude that the A. v. Humboldt Foundation has also generously contributed to the publishing costs. During my time abroad, I have received much help from Professor Ulrich Luz (Bern), and from Professor Gerd Theissen (Heidelberg), both of whom have helped me with many suggestions concerning the manuscript. Professor Theissen has also written a helpful criticism and evaluation in the form of an official *Gut-*

achten for the procedure of *Habilitation*. I thank both of them for much support and hospitality. I thank Professor emeritus Christoph Burchard (Heidelberg) and Professor emeritus Eduard Schweizer (Zurich) for comments on the first draft of the manuscript. I thank the whole Faculty at the Lutheran Theological University in Budapest for their willingness to receive me for their first procedure of *Habilitation* after the democratic changes in our country. I thank especially Professor Sándor Cserháti for his *Gutachten*. I thank my doctoral student, Rev. Ottó Pecsuk, for proofreading the Greek texts in my manuscript.

Special thanks are due to my doctoral supervisor, Professor John Cochrane O'Neill (Edinburgh), who had patiently improved the English of the manuscript both before its submission for the degree and also before I presented it for publication. He has helped me in so many ways over the years; I remain ever grateful for all his support. I should like to thank also all the staff of the publisher Mohr Siebeck for very helpful and professional work first in connection to my doctoral thesis and now, a second time, when they have taken on themselves even more of the editorial work. I thank the editors of *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* who have accepted this work in the series: Professors Jörg Frey, Martin Hengel, and Otfried Hofius. Professor Frey has also helped me with thorough comments on the manuscript and with his suggestion that this work be published in the prestigious first series of WUNT.

To some extent, one's teachers become one's "parents" as well. I thank all those who have taught me up to the present; among them Professor János Bolyki who guided my infant footsteps in New Testament studies and has inspired and encouraged me at every stage to prepare myself to carry forward the work at the Faculty of Theology of the Károli Gáspár Reformed University. As his successor now in the professorship, I express my gratitude to him, and also to the Colleagues and students in the Faculty.

Budapest, Hungary, September 2002

Peter Balla

Just after I had received the final proofs of the present work, the sad news reached me that Professor John C. O'Neill died on 30 March 2003 after a short illness. May this book contribute to keeping alive the memory of this great scholar.

P. B.

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Abbreviations

As regards abbreviations, I follow Patrick H. Alexander *et al.* (eds.): *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies*. 1999, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers

The more frequent abbreviations are as follows:

EKKNT	Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
ET	English translation
fn.	footnote
Loeb	The Loeb Classical Library (see Bibliography, section 1)
LSJ	Liddell-Scott (see Bibliography, section 1)
LXX	Septuagint
NA27	Nestle-Aland, 27 th edition (of <i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i>)
RSV	Revised Standard Version (Unless stated otherwise, this edition is used when quoting the Bible in English translation.)

In this work, references are made by giving the year of publication and the page number in brackets in the main text. If the same work is referred to in the same context more than once, after the first reference giving both year and page, page numbers alone are given in subsequent references. If more than one reference is made to the same page in the same context, then the page number is not repeated. The next occurrence of a page number indicates that the reference is made to another page. On occasion I repeat the page number for the sake of clarity (for example, in the case of a reference to a new theme). The page number is introduced by “p.” if it is necessary in order to avoid a possible misunderstanding (for example, when there is a figure in the same context referring to a year or to a Bible verse). A page reference in a multi-volume work follows this pattern: vol. II , p. 453 is referred to as II/453. References in footnotes follow the same conventions.

Italics in quotations are always those of the author quoted.

When I use “he” for a non-specific pronoun in the third person, “he or she” should be understood. (As a justification for my usage I note that there is only one word for “he” and “she” in my native – Hungarian – language.)

Introduction

In recent decades there has emerged an increasing interest in family relationships in antiquity. Monographs and collections of essays have dealt with aspects of the Roman family. The number of publications on the Jewish family in antiquity has increased as well. Publications of papyri and inscriptions allow an insight into the life of Greek and Jewish families. Classical philologists, sociologists and biblical scholars alike turn their attention to the sociological dimensions of ancient family life. Some aspects have been studied extensively as, for example, the legal situation in the Roman family. In general, one may say that the child-parent relationship has been presented primarily from the perspective of the parents. In contrast to this prevailing emphasis in scholarship, the present monograph attempts to focus on the child-parent relationship especially from the point of view of the child, asking the question: How did they experience and fulfil the duties towards their parents? Or, to put it in another way, How did children honour their parents?

Within the New Testament there can be seen a twofold tension as regards the expectation that parents should be revered. On the one hand, there is a difference between reverence toward parents among the first followers of Jesus and in the settled congregations. The latter is represented, for example, by the Household Codes in the epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians, where children are addressed together with their fathers. This implies that the obedient children are together with their parents at home and even at the worship services of the household churches. This can be contrasted with passages in the Gospels that narrate that the first disciples of Jesus left their family homes when they followed their master.

On the other hand, there is a tension reflected even within the Gospel texts. Here we find, on the one hand, that Jesus subscribed to the commandment, "Honour your father and mother" (see e.g. Mark 7:9–13 in relation to the *Corban*; and Mark 10:17–27 par.: the passage concerning the "rich young ruler"). On the other hand, radical sayings concerning "leaving" one's parents are attributed to Jesus (see e.g.: Mark 10:29 and parallels) and also an extremely radical saying in Luke 14:26 about the necessity of "hating" one's father and mother.

Already in these few examples we can see that the duties of children to their parents applied to them even when they were grown-ups. This is reflected in the Greek term τέκνον, that can refer to the child-parent relationship irrespective of the age of the “child”. Accordingly, I shall use the term “children” to refer to children in their relationship to their parents. Children, in this sense, remain “children” to their parents as long as their parents are alive; and even longer: when they venerate the memory of their deceased parents. Due to the fact that the majority of the New Testament texts under discussion refer to grown-up children, this will be the primary area of our interest also when looking at the environment of the New Testament.

Although most of the New Testament texts that contain references to our present field of study were not written with the purpose of describing family relationships, they nevertheless do reflect child-parent relationships among the early Christians. In this study, New Testament texts will be examined in relation to non-biblical family ethics and practices in order to find answers to the questions: To what extent did early Christianity fit into the pattern of its environment?; and, What were the characteristics peculiar to the first few generations of the followers of Jesus? In order to achieve this aim, the “environment” has to be surveyed, even if only from the limited aspect of the expectation that parents should be honoured.

It is a matter of course that in order to find answers to our primary question, How did children honour their parents?, – or, to put it in a more concrete way, Did the first Christians fulfill the expectation to honour their parents? – other related areas have to be touched upon as well. However, this question will guide us when looking at the sources. Other – often also very important – questions have to be left out of the focus of this study. For example, the aspect of education will be excluded, because it is mainly dealt with in our sources from the point of view of the parents: what were their duties in this regard toward children. On the other hand, this investigation should include cases where children failed to honour their parents, in as much as it can be seen as non-fulfilling existing expectations. When, to a limited extent, the obligations of parents toward their children will nevertheless surface, this will happen only because we have to see also what children could expect from their parents in order to understand what they were expected to owe their parents in return. Fulfilled – or even unfulfilled – expectations from their parents may have played a role in children’s behaviour towards their parents.

When studying the New Testament texts as well as when examining their surrounding environment, practices of real life as well as the expectations and norms are important. A selection of texts will be quoted that describe

the relationship between children and parents and that prescribe in a normative way what that relationship should involve. The two areas cannot and need not be separated too rigorously. It can be expected that we may be able to reconstruct norms from real-life experience; and, vice versa, normative texts may reflect what life in reality was like, as norms sometimes reflect rather than prescribe practice: legislation is sometimes a belated verbal fixing of already existing practices. However, due caution is to be exercised, because there may be normative texts which describe the ideal that never really existed.

The final aim has already been named: to find out what is shared by the first Christian generations with their non-Christian neighbours, Jewish and pagan, and what may be called Christian characteristics in which they differed from their surrounding world (if in fact they did differ). In order to achieve that aim, the present study will have a historical, descriptive character. The main questions to be posed to the sources are: What were the major norms, i.e. what were the duties of children towards their parents?, What were the grounds for those duties?, and, What were the limits or the boundaries to those duties, beyond which they need not be performed? As there are fewer sources that mention mothers and daughters than those concerning fathers and sons, a special attention will be given to sources that involve women.

The study divides into two main parts: first the “environment” of the New Testament is examined, then the relevant New Testament texts are discussed. For the first part, the period of ca. three centuries before and after the beginning of the Common Era will be in our focus, with a brief look into even earlier centuries in the case of the Greek sources. The pre-history of our theme in the Jewish world – for which our primary source is the Old Testament – will not be dealt with in a separate chapter, but it will be discussed in the chapter on the Jewish “environment” and in the chapters on the New Testament.

It has to be emphasised that an all-encompassing history of the child-parent relationship cannot be expected from the first part of this monograph. The aim of studying the environment is not that of writing a history of literature or a social history of childhood. The modest aim is to contribute to our knowledge in one particular branch of the scholarly study of classical antiquity: how children honoured their parents in the ancient world. It is necessary to point out in advance that the first part of this monograph does not want to give the impression that the texts mentioned would be familiar to the authors or to the addressees of the New Testament writings. The aim of this part is to summarise the main characteristics of the expectations with re-

gard to honouring one's parents in the Jewish and pagan environment in which the early Christian movement lived its daily life. If the term "background" is used in this context, it should be understood as a reference to the social *milieu* of – various groups of – the early Christians. A brief description of that context helps to highlight how the early Christian movement may have appeared to its environment as representing a radically anti-family ethos; or, on the other hand, what aspects of the ethos of the child-parent relationship were – perhaps even in a natural, non-reflective way – shared by the early Christian communities and their Jewish and pagan neighbourhood.

In the second part, the New Testament texts are discussed in three groups: relevant passages in the Gospels will be discussed first, then the Pauline Corpus (with a special emphasis on the Household Codes), then a selection of other texts in the remaining parts of the New Testament that shed light on our theme. In this part, references to the findings of the first part will establish the link between the "environment" and the world of the early Christians, in order to see what was common to both and in what they differed.

Part I

The Environment of the New Testament

Chapter One

From Homer to the End of the Greek Classical Period

1. Introduction

The child-parent relationship is reflected in writings from the earliest periods of literary activity down to the turn of the era. It is difficult to trace particular thoughts about family relations, because we often have only the fragments that have survived. In general terms, there are cases where one can suppose that the ideas contained in earlier writings had an impact upon later authors, because we do know that the earlier writings were transmitted and discussed even centuries later. For example, the writings attributed to Homer were studied by later generations throughout the centuries.¹ In many cases, from later references we only know the fact that earlier writings were known, but the actual discussions are no longer extant. However, we also have some works that have survived to the present, for example, commentaries on Plato and Aristotle.²

The very fact that there were libraries established in the Hellenistic period – beginning with the *Museion* in Alexandria in the third century B.C. and the library at the royal court in Pergamum – can be seen as a proof that many writings from the earlier centuries were deliberately preserved. While these libraries were not open to the public, but only researched by a few experts, the libraries in Rome became open to the public from the end of the Republic.³ The latter ones regularly included also a room for Greek books. It is also significant that catalogues were prepared in which the books of the libraries were listed. For example, the list of Kallimachos in Alexandria covered 120 volumes from many diverse authors, including references to the orator Demosthenes, to a poem which was – in his opinion – falsely attributed to Pythagoras, and to Euripides.⁴

¹ See the examples given by Nigel Wilson in Heinz-Günther Nesselrath 1997, 87–88, 91, 98, 101. I note that I confine my study to written sources. For a good introduction to the theme of children in ancient Greek art see, for example, the works of Hilde Rühfel (1984 a, 1984 b).

² See e.g. N. Wilson's examples in H-G. Nesselrath 1997, 101–102.

³ See e.g. Tiziano Dorandi in H-G. Nesselrath 1997, 12–13.

⁴ N. Wilson in H-G. Nesselrath 1997, 92. Wilson has marshalled many examples of how

In order to be able to understand our pagan sources around the time of the New Testament in a more appropriate way, it is helpful first to discuss the periods that preceded the Hellenistic period. The aim of this inquiry is to look for ideas that remained influential in the centuries around the time of the New Testament. In this brief survey there is no attempt to describe child-parent relationships in the pre-Hellenistic period in an all-encompassing way; rather, the main question to be answered is: What norms were shared by the authors of later times, i.e. in the period ca. third century B.C. to the third century A.D.?

It is appropriate to reaffirm that whenever I mention “children”, I use the term to express a relationship, and I do not refer to the age of children, unless it is specifically needed in a given context. It will be seen in many instances that the duties of children to their parents applied to them even when they were grown-ups. To give but one example, Plato thought that even adults had to be punished if they neglected their parents. In his *Laws* XI.932B–C,⁵ he proposes that the wrongdoers have to be punished “with stripes and imprisonment if they are still strong – up to the age of thirty if they are men, while if they are women they shall suffer similar punishment up to the age of forty”. Then, Plato gives no upper limit of age when he adds (*ibid.*, 932C):

And if, when they have passed these limits of age, they do not desist from the same acts of neglect towards their parents, but in some cases maltreat them, they shall be summoned before a court of 101 citizens, who shall be the oldest citizens of all; and if a man be convicted, the court shall assess what his fine or punishment must be, regarding no penalty as excluded which man can suffer or pay.

Most likely, this rule extended to men and women just as the earlier one did, because the Greek original does not speak about “men” only, as the translation would suggest. In the Greek text we can find the terms *τις* and *ἀνθρώπος*, both of which can refer to both sexes. Here we may note that the punishment is more severe if the “children” had passed the age of thirty in the case of men and forty in the case of women. On the one hand, this might imply that common sense can be expected from ever older grown-ups; on the other hand, it is likely that the growing age of the children is paired with an advance in the age of their parents. The older the parents are, the more it can be expected that their children do not neglect them. Perhaps it is presupposed that aged parents lose their power and children are tempted to neglect

later authors were engaged in a “philological” critical activity concerning works of earlier writers; see his section entitled “Griechische Philologie im Altertum” (in H-G. Nesselrath 1997, 87–103).

⁵ In Loeb: vol. II., p. 453 (= II/453).

them. The more severe punishment over the age of thirty and forty implies that the moral obligation of the grown-up children toward their parents gets even stronger with the passing of time. Although the regulation is formulated from a negative perspective (“they do not desist from the same acts of neglect towards their parents”, τῶν αὐτῶν ἀμελειῶν περὶ γονέας μὴ ἀφιστῶνται), this clearly implies the expectation that children should care for their aged parents. The immediate context contains also an affirmative statement as regards the duty of honour: πᾶς δὴ τιμάτω ... τοὺς αὐτοῦ γεννήτορας (932A). We further note that the punishment is to be decided by a human court. The oldest citizens have the right and duty to make sure that children do not maltreat (κακῶσι) their old parents. Thus in this passage an expectation is expressed together with the consequence of not fulfilling the duty expected. This consequence can also be seen as reason why the duty should not be neglected.

It is important to emphasise, as another introductory remark, that society in the Hellenistic as well as in the preceding period was largely influenced by patriarchal structures. This widely known phenomenon is of interest to us in as much as – together with other aspects of social life – the child-parent relationship, too, was influenced by male dominance. The role of women in society must have been reflected in the relationship between parents and their daughters, mothers and their children etc. Let us consider some examples as a general reminder; then we shall discuss the social role of fathers and mothers in the next chapter in more detail.

In his *Laws*, Plato lists in pairs the relationships which are not based on equality (XI.917A):⁶

... the better are the superiors of the worse, and the older in general of the younger; wherefore also parents are superior to their offspring, men to women and children, rulers to ruled. And it will be proper for all to revere all these classes of superiors, whether they be in other positions of authority or in offices of State above all ...

We note the double criterion, “better” and “older”, as a basis for deciding who are the “superiors”. One of the reasons why children owe reverence (αἰδεῖσθαι ... πρόπον)⁷ to their parents is that parents are older than their offspring. Significantly, the pairs are extended in one case to a “triplet”: men are superior to women and children. This structure of the statement indicates that women and children were in a similar position in this regard: they were subordinated to men.

⁶ In Loeb: II/401.

⁷ For αἰδεῖσθαι, cf. Prov 24:23; 4 Macc 5:7. In the latter, revering means respecting old age.

We can find another example of the qualification “better”, in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. In a section where he discusses φιλία in various kinds of relationships, he affirms (1161a):⁸

The friendship between husband and wife again is the same as that which prevails between rulers and subjects in an aristocracy; for it is in proportion to excellence, and the better party receives the larger share, ... whilst each party receives what is appropriate to each ...

Both Plato and Aristotle use the same expression for “better” (Plato: οἱ ἀμείνους, Aristotle: τῷ ἀμείνονι). It is worth pointing out in what an un-reflected way they both affirm that somebody is “better” than another. This may be an expression of thinking in terms of a patriarchal society. I note that both Plato and Aristotle refer to “nature” as a reason for a distinction among human beings. In the same context, Aristotle applies the notion of friendship between unequal partners also to the relationship between a father and his sons. A reference to “nature” is the only justification for the hierarchically structured relation (1161a):⁹ φύσει τε γὰρ ἀρχικὸν πατὴρ υἱῶν. Plato uses the expression φύσει διατεταγμένων as a reason why children should fear and honour the prayers of parents (Πᾶς δὴ νοῦν ἔχων φοβεῖται καὶ τιμᾷ γονέων εὐχάς; *Laws* XI.932A).¹⁰

Thus, when in the following we shall consider the more specific relationship between children and parents, we also have to bear in mind this general background of a patriarchal society in antiquity.

In what follows, I shall discuss texts grouped under three headings: the duties of children towards their parents, the reasons or grounds for those duties, and the limits within which those duties were to be fulfilled. We have already met some examples on the occasion of the introductory remarks. As the passages will appear in full under one heading only, they will be referred to only briefly under the other headings, if they relate to more than one of these three areas. For the sake of clarity, all the important elements to be found will be listed in a summary at the end of the chapter.

The following texts are gathered as examples covering the centuries from Homer up to the Hellenistic period. Although they are taken from a wide range of genres, they are meant to be only representative of their authors and genres, without the claim that all the relevant texts are referred to.

⁸ In Loeb: VIII.xi.4, p. 495.

⁹ In Loeb: VIII.xi.2, p. 494.

¹⁰ In Loeb: II/450.

2. Traditional expectations concerning the duties of children towards their parents

The expectation that children should honour their parents is expressed in numerous texts many centuries before the Christian era. A. Lumpe even risked the following generalising statement (1957, col. 1192): “Durch die gesamte griechische Literatur zieht sich die Forderung, den Eltern Ehrfurcht und Gehorsam zu erweisen”.

Before we turn to some Greek examples, it is worth pointing out that although Jews were spread over most parts of the known world from the time of the Babylonian exile on, pagan texts do not betray any direct influence of the Mosaic commandment to honour one’s father and mother. Rather, we may regard it as a general ethical norm that was widespread in the non-Jewish and pre-Christian world. We can agree with O. Larry Yarbrough’s conclusion concerning the “requirement that children honor their parents found in Exodus and in Plato” that (1993, 56): “Neither is dependent on the other. They were both concerned with creating an ‘ideal’ legal system, but in this particular case we probably have to do with nothing more than what must be an almost universal component of morality and culture”. The authors in antiquity were aware of this. In the same context Yarbrough points to a passage where Plato “refers to the claim of parents to rule over their children as ‘universally just’ (*Laws* 627A)”.¹¹ This expression – like the appeal to “nature” noted above – can be seen as a reason or ground why parents should be honoured.

We shall see in the third chapter that many authors in Judaism in the Hellenistic period shared ideas and practices with their pagan contemporaries. In that period Hellenistic influence upon Judaism can be observed. Before we turn to texts from that age, let us consider briefly some examples from previous centuries where such close interrelation cannot be seen. When we look at examples of how the expectation of honouring one’s parents appears in Greek literature, we shall find it expressed in very different genres of writings. We follow them roughly in their historical sequence. We can say that “honour” or “reverence” can be seen as an overarching duty. Many other duties are related to it in such a close way that we can regard them as concrete realizations of the duty of “honour”.

We find examples already in early literary texts. In Homer’s *Iliad* we read the following about a young man, Simoeisius, who was killed in a battle: “...yet paid he not back to his dear parents the recompense of his upbringing-

¹¹ O.L. Yarbrough 1993, 56.

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