Objecting to objectification of children: some help from the writings of Paul

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1Cor. 3:1  Καγώ, ἀδελφοί, οὐκ ἠδυνήθην λαλῆσαι ὑμῖν ὡς πνευματικοίς ἀλλ’ ὡς σαρκίνοις, ὡς νηπίοις ἐν Χριστῷ.
2 γάλα ὑμᾶς ἐπότισα, οὐ βρώματα οὕτω γὰρ ἐδύνασθε. ἀλλ’ οὐδὲ ἔτι νῦν δύνασθε.
3 ἐτί γὰρ σαρκικοὶ ἐστε, ὅπου γὰρ ἐν ὑμῖν ξῆλος καὶ ἔρις, οὐχὶ σαρκικοὶ ἐστε καὶ κατὰ ἄνθρωπον περιπατεῖτε;

and yet, brothers and sisters, I was not able to speak to you as ‘spiritual-people’, but as flesh-people.
As infants in Christ I fed you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet able. Even now you are still not able.
For still now you are flesh-people, for when among you is jealousy and strife, aren’t you flesh-people and walking according to humanness?

This paper addresses objectification of children in relation to biblical texts and theological conversation. Children are ‘objectified’ commonly in our culture; they are placed under the gaze, both physically, in image, and in language, to be interpreted and evaluated by others, and potentially thereby instrumentalised and exploited.

The objectification of children in our social discourse occupies a broad spectrum of forms:
- from the scandalous, triggering outrage and judgement (for example the use of children in pornography, the sex industry and as cheap labour in off shore manufacturing)

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1 Objectification Theory, as first outlined by Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts (1997), initially addresses the (essentially gendered) experiences of women and girls as a central concern. However, the theory’s key process analysis, that is ‘acculturation to internalize an observer’s perspective as a primary view of the physical [self], serves as a theoretical referent for the present discussion. Here our investigation considers the impact of scholarly ‘objectification’ of children in texts. In this case, the
- through to the aspirational (for example the use of children in entertainment, as prodigies, and as symbols of success and possession in the birth and parenting industry) which are met with celebration and celebrity.

All along this spectrum, children are objectified in ways we consider benign – for example: the sign of a healthy church which proudly claims “we have a large children’s ministry program”; in ways which we consider to esteem – for example: the way children are touchstone for differentiating evil in the media which decries, yet publicises the exhibited beheading of children; in ways which we consider to protect – as children are spoken over as the seemingly neutral, passive recipients of education in our debates about accreditation, standardization and religious content.

While all of these conversations are important, we need to recognize the ways in which children are objectified in the process of public, social, political, moral and not these least, religious and theological discourse.

If we accept that objectification occurs on this kind of continuum – the far end of which – for example sexual exploitation of the child in image or bodily presence is to be vigorously opposed and avoided, what about the end of the spectrum that is perhaps closer to home (making an assumption about the audience here) to us, as child advocates, educators, pastors, counselors, parents, community alongsiders, and to include some personal roles here, as biblical scholars and theologians? What processes do we have for evaluating the place of children in our theological discourse and readings of biblical texts?

In 2013 I witnessed a classic ‘textbook’ case of this issue, in the presentation of a paper on the flagship text Matthew 18:1-5 at the International meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in St Andrews. During the 25-minute presentation, I lost count of the number of times the author said ‘Jesus used the child to…’ or ‘Matthew uses the child as…’ Perhaps you think I am being harsh in objecting to a commonplace turn of phrase. Maybe, but this scholarship is performed before a backdrop in which officers and theological gatekeepers of the church are under Royal Commissions of inquiry for multiple, systemic widespread long-term abuse and mis-use of children. Is the language of ‘using children’ rolling freely from the lips of exegetes worth challenging?
Well, I think it must be so, if texts and words are important in forming actions and culture in the community of faith (and as a biblical scholar, I hope they are.)

So, where might we find some alternative approaches to reading texts and honouring the place and agency of children within them, and within our midst? Could the writings of Paul offer any help? The persona of Paul hasn’t always been the natural first place for advocates of social justice to look for support – he has a poor reputation as a champion of patriarchal systems. I consider this reputation to be unmerited, and although it is not the focus of my task here today to address this directly, I hope that after our exegetical exercise together, a little of this patriarchal smear may have be erased.

I turn to a text in which the image of children is central, as a sample for reading against the grain of the objectification of children. 1 Corinthians 3:1-3

But we must proceed with caution. Our text has not been entirely immune from objectifying children in the commentary tradition. Time today permits exploration of just three ways in which common exegetical processes may objectify children.

1) Children are taken in the text to represent a comparative literary trope, in which they are seen only in shadow or negative contrast to the desirable opposite (the mature). Their positive presence, their personhood and the actual content of ‘child’ is suppressed, as ‘child’ is taken only in ‘utility’ as a contrast to the idealized quality of maturity. This is the typical objectification under the comparative gaze.

2) External literary traditions from ancient Hellenistic culture are imposed as an obvious and overruling hermeneutical key to the author’s – in this case Paul’s – meaning. In this instance, attention is fixed on the imagery of milk and solid food. In the process of redirection under the orientation of other authors use of these terms, new systems and measures of value govern the narrative and reinscribe an ‘observers perception’.
3) The focus of Paul’s discourse is taken to relate primarily to concerns of development, progress or education. Reading in the light of our contemporary association of ‘childhood’ with education and schooling, along with the ancient literary allusions above, combines to create the impression that the text itself functions as an object lesson, designed by Paul to teach, reprove and correct the errant Corinthians suffering perhaps from arrested spiritual development. Children, then appear to us packaged as an object lesson about progress. (As an aside, plenty of exegetical ink has similarly cast the child in the midst of Matthew 18 as an ‘object lesson’ on the kingdom.)

Hopefully, inexhaustive as these examples are, they will serve to alert our attention and arouse our sensitivities to further ruses of objectification in theological discourse and biblical interpretation. All of these approaches set the reader, the author Paul and the ideological goal outside of the reference of the child. The child is left exposed and fixed under the scrutiny and judgement of the reader, an implied author and the audience. Although it is the Corinthians who are (allegedly) being chastised for being like infants, the direction of this kind of reading assumes that the Corinthian audience (and we as wider readers, too) will in response to such a charge distance themselves/ourselves from the negatively objectified child and embrace the desired maturity.

Having outlined briefly these three ways in which children may be objectified in readings of 1 Corinthians 3, some more detailed examination of the texts and the possibilities for repositioning ourselves in relation to children in the text, may yield possibilities for a redemptive reading of 1 Corinthians 3:1-3.

“As infants in Christ I fed you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet able.”

Firstly, just to be clear, we recognize that grammatically the writer of the letter, Paul, is the subject of the sentence and the Corinthians are grammatically, an object – however this does not entail conceptual ‘objectification’.

In fact, while Paul placing himself as the subject of the sentence may seem to compromise our chances of finding a reading that resists the objectification of children,
I will argue that in fact Paul’s own unusually positioned selfhood here is part of the key to a ‘safe’ reading in relation to children.

1) Contrastive pairing of infants (νηπίοις) with the mature (τελείοις)

Exegetes point out that an image of infants (νηπίοις) in the writing of Paul often appears alongside reference to the mature (τελείοις), with the clear imperative to abandon the former state and progress to the latter. This would prove a clear and useful hermeneutical key, if only it were actually true.

We observe that in 1 Corinthians 3, it is πνευματικοίς ‘spirituals’ that is the contrasting term. τελείοις ‘the mature’ or ‘the perfect’ is found in a previous section in Chapter 2. A number of features – interjection of plural voice, uncharacteristic or distinctive vocabulary, a high proportion of quotations, absence of common Pauline theological themes and direct contradiction of ideas - raises suspicions that both τελείοις ‘the mature’ or ‘the perfect’ and πνευματικοίς ‘spirituals’ are terms that Paul is contending with, rather than his own terms.

Similarly in 1 Corinthians 13, where again Paul speaks of himself as a child (νηπίος) there is no direct reference to an alternative ‘mature’ identity. The closest reference is in the previous verse in which τὸ τέλειον ‘the perfect’ or ‘the complete’ comes. This is not a personification in parallel to Paul’s child-self but an inanimate conceptual ‘completion’ or ‘perfection’, an eschatological term, which might be as readily identified as ‘the fulfillment of the age’ or perhaps as a pseudonym for the return of Christ as ‘the perfect one’.

A third example also frequently cited as an example of the infant/mature (νηπίος/τελείοις) figure occurs in 1 Corinthians 14:20, but again the terms do not appear in a straightforward manner.

μὴ παιδία γίνεσθε ταῖς φρεσίν ἄλλα τῇ κακίᾳ νηπιάζετε, ταῖς δὲ φρεσίν τέλειοι γίνεσθε.

*do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults.*

Here the term for child is the alternative παιδία
and it is a verbal form νηπιώζετε that is contrasted with the adjectival τέλειοι.

Though the variety of grammatical forms then makes association indirect and complex, still, this instance would still be the most convincing of the three examples in terms of implicating a conventional pairing of the terms. However, in this one brief apothegmatic sentence, three of its main terms, παιδία, φρέσιν and νηπιώζετε are all making their debut and final appearance in the Pauline corpus, and τῆ κακία, occurs only in two other places, one of which (1 Corinthians 5:8) is a strongly stylized literary figure, possibly a quote from another source. On the whole, appearing adjacent to a quote from Isaiah 28:11, the phrase becomes less convincingly a formulation of Paul’s own original expression. This doesn’t discount its place in the letter, but weakens the argument for straightforward identifications of ‘infants’ and ‘mature’ as a direct literary pairing indicating a negative or pejorative state (infant) and an aspirational or idealized state (mature) as native to the thinking of Paul.

In reviewing these examples, we further note that the personhood of the child is curiously obscured by this (somewhat contrived) association with ‘the mature’ or ‘the perfect’, which is a qualitative aspiration, but not a personal one. Clear attention to the actual image given in the text ‘infants in Christ being fed milk’ restores an engaged and connected narrative, in which children are not objectified under the ‘gaze’ of comparison and judgement against an idealized standard.

2) Metaphor of milk and solid food.

The educated scholar immediately identifies the key terms: ‘milk’ and ‘solid food’ and recalls that these two terms are linked metaphorically in other writers of the ancient Mediterranean world. It is regularly said that this is a ‘commonplace’ or a ‘classic’ image, in the Hellenistic philosophical and literary tradition. Additionally this is argued to substantiate the claim that Paul is of some considerable education and adept in the rhetorical arts of the philosophers. I am not convinced that this is so apparent from the evidence.

Less frequently considered is the Jewish tradition of milk and/or breastfeeding imagery in prophetic literature. In general, the imagery is positive, and most often linked with divine provision and blessing. Gen 49:25, Isaiah 11:28, Isaiah 49:15, 23, 66:11-12
Commentators routinely cite three Hellenistic authors who employ the milk-solid food metaphor. Philo, the first century C.E. Jewish author develops the idea across 5 of his works; Epictetus makes two references and Quintilian offers us one passage. These correlations may suggest that Paul was indeed familiar with of the hellenistic philosophical tradition, though their very close contemporaneity makes it unlikely that there is any direct knowledge and certainly not strong evidence for any text based educational connection. More feasible is that the metaphor was not a high literature trope but a phrase of the common tongue.

In pursuing this idea, it is noteworthy that Paul makes distinct use of the image of breast-feeding in a way that the other authors don’t. Philo, Quintilian and Epictetus write of the pedagogical process in terms of feeding a child and the contrast to adult food in the third person as a set of advisory practices for others to follow. They write as consulting experts, giving wise principles. Paul, rather writes extremely personally. He does not stand aloof, writing imperatives for other’s improvement. Paul places himself in the picture with the Corinthians, and he does so with quite stunning vulnerability, taking on the physical compromise of gender and limited liberty as he images himself as the wet-nurse feeding the infants in Christ. Wet-nurses were typically slaves or urban poor, sometimes predictably those women whose bodies were also or had already been objectified in prostitution as slaves, and now were redeployed following pregnancy for their sustenance. Both the intimacy and the indecency of the image, as well as Paul’s first person involvement in the collaborative, connective act of breast feeding works against ‘objectification’ of the child in this text. Furthermore, Paul dignifies the infant with the condition of being ‘in Christ’. This term is always a positive marker in the writings of Paul.

In similar fashion the appearance of Paul’s child-self in 1 Corinthians 13:11 follows this personal pattern.

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3 Philo, *That every good person is free* 160; *On the Preliminary studies* 19; *On Agriculture* 9; *On the Migration of Abraham* 29; *On Dreams* 2.10.
4 Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.16.39; *Discourses* 3.24.9
5 Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 2.4
6 It should be noted that in emerging Christian literature of the subsequent centuries among the patristics, the milk/meat imagery grew in popularity and elaboration as more formalized catechesis and layers of hierarchical offices became important features of a more organized and standardized Christianity. Eg. Jerome, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Prologue 1; Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer and Selected Works*, p. 41, 139,141, 245-6.
‘When I was a child (νηπίος), I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.’

Here, the child appears in the first person - Paul as the child subject himself. Paul’s content is poetic, reflective and if we are sensitive to his tone, we might catch him grieving the loss of childhood as the puzzles of manhood’s selfward gaze in the mirror leave him longing for something to come, face to face – another image of vulnerability, and intimacy not unbefitting a child.

3) Objections to Object Lessons and Objectifications

This paper has attempted to offer a re-orientation to the interpretative tradition for reading Paul’s childhood imagery. The literary and scholarly bias of both contemporary authors to Paul, the early catechetical and theological Christian authors, and the mainstream of biblical scholarship to the present time has favoured the comfortably elevating image of a teacher-pastor Paul making an object lesson of his fledgling disciple students; objectifying the image of children as the model to move beyond and to supersede.

This image leaves our children always something to be kept at a distance, objectified, and assessed under the comparative gaze and observatory evaluation of others.

An objection to objectification requires us as participants to locate ourselves somewhere in the narrative and visual world of the text and its performance amongst us.

I wonder if we perhaps came to the text today thinking of ourselves as teachers, pastors, perhaps disciples, learners who have made a little progress?

I wonder if we came to the text thinking of it as a potential object lesson?

Unlike the moral Philosophers and Patristics, Paul doesn’t engage in an object lesson using milk and meat metaphors to motivate spiritual progress. Paul’s voice is narrative. Paul narrates a compelling identity of intimacy and indecency for himself and the ultimate identity for the infants: in Christ. To objectify the children in this text would be to objectify those in Christ.