

# Children of the Bible

## Week 5



### Children in the Christian Scriptures

When doing a survey piece about children in the New Testament, it quickly becomes apparent that none of these children have their own story - they are all related to someone else of significance instead. There seems a fairly equal divide between daughters and sons, and none of them have names.

Aside from two of the children we will cover, Herodias' daughter and the boy with the loaves and fishes, all of these children are sick, and all of these illnesses are the catalyst for both healing and teaching about faith to either their parents, or the disciples and followers of Jesus.

Often in Biblical studies it is seen as a failure of scripture to have so few women and even fewer children represented. However, the better reflection is to recognize in a society where men had the primary authority and authorship, the fact that we have any stories about women and children recognizes that the earliest Christian communities not only had this diversity in their ranks, but recognized that Jesus' ministry included everyone.

HERODIAS'  
DAUGHTER

JAIRUS'  
DAUGHTER

SYROPHOENICAN  
WOMAN'S  
DAUGHTER

BOY WITH THE  
LOAVES AND  
FISHES

OTHER  
CHILDREN WHO  
WERE HEALED

## Herodias' Daughter

Mark 6:21-28; Matthew 14:6-11

We can only assume that the daughter of Herodias was a teenager when she was part of the story of the execution of John the Baptist. Herodias wanted John dead because he challenged her divorce and marriage, but could not do it herself.

Mark and Matthew include the story of Herodias' daughter dancing for the king, while Luke only makes a passing reference to the death of John the Baptist and mentions nothing about the dancing or the daughter.

This daughter is unnamed in the Christian Scriptures, but early Jewish historian Josephus (c. 37-100 CE) wrote that her name was Salome, the only known daughter of Herodias. She was a tool for her mother to manipulate Herod Antipas, who was afraid of John the Baptist and did not want anything to happen to him. But a promise was a promise, as we saw with the story of Jephthah's daughter.

While the death of John the Baptist quickly became the focus, this story tells us something about life at court in the Herodian dynasty. We read that this story took place at a banquet for Herod's birthday, hosted by Herod himself.



Dancing was a common part of celebration in the Hebrew tradition. The first dancing we read about is with Miriam after her people are finally freed from Egyptian rule. It was not uncommon for dance to be spontaneous, often performed by women or a group of women. The dance performed by Herodias' daughter was most likely spontaneous, as it was unlikely the daughter of royalty would be employed as the entertainment for the court.

Aside from dance, the only other thing we know about this daughter was that she did her mother's bidding without question. She was the one who received the large plate with John the Baptist's head, and brought it to her mother.

### HERODIAS

Herodias is the only woman in the Christian Scriptures who is recognized through other historical sources. She lived c. 15 BCE - 39 CE, and was a princess in the Herodian dynasty, a dynasty that was not considered truly Hebrew in heritage by the Judeans, and was given the throne because they ingratiated themselves with Rome.

She played a role in the constant jockeying for position that was typical of all the Herods, and eventually found herself in exile with her final husband. They were sent to Gaul (modern France) and nothing is known of her past 39 CE.





## Jairus' Daughter

Mark 5:22-24, 35-43; Matthew 9:18-19, 23-25; Luke 8:41-42, 49-56

The first story almost every little girl wants to hear from the Christian Scriptures is the story of Jairus' daughter. Even though she does not say a word, here is the story of a little girl who interacted with Jesus.

As with many of the stories in the Christian Scriptures, the story is found in the three synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. All three tell of the synagogue leader, Jairus, who approached Jesus upset that his daughter was dead or about to die, and asking Jesus for help. All three gospels have different elements of the story.

In Matthew the girl has already died and Jairus is wanting Jesus to bring her back. In Luke we learn that she is 12 years old and his only child, while Mark says she is a 'little girl'.

In the middle of this story is another one of the woman with a haemorrhage that has lasted for years. This story is the delay for Jesus getting to Jairus' house in time, and adds to the frustration and impatience for those wanting Jesus to go directly to the girl.

An interesting distinction between the two is that Jesus tells the woman who touched his cloak that her faith had healed her, but we have no such declaration of Jairus for his daughter.

At Jairus' house the professional mourners had already arrived to do their job, and mocking the parents for holding out hope. Jesus assures the parents it will be fine, then he breaks one of the taboos in Hebrew culture and touches the body of one who is dead. This is significant because that act made him ritually unclean, but no mention of him needing to ritually clean himself is made.

In Matthew and Luke, Jesus tells the girl to get up and then tells her parents to tend to her needs.



## SYNAGOGUES IN THE TIME OF JESUS

To the modern ear the term 'synagogue' brings to mind a building for worship on par with Christian churches and Muslim mosques. That was not the case when Jesus was travelling.

Historians are not sure where synagogues first came from. They are not mentioned before the return from the Babylonian exile, and after when they are mentioned they are places of learning, meeting houses, perhaps prayer gatherings, public halls, and the place one might find an advocate or lawyer. However, before the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, they are not the primary place of worship.

## Syrophoenician woman's daughter

Mark 7:25-30; Matthew 15:22-28

Depending on which gospel we read, she is either Syrophoenician in Mark or Canaanite in Matthew, however they both agree that she was a gentile, that she was looking for Jesus to help her daughter get rid of a 'demon', and she was not going to be put off by an easy dismissal.

Once again the daughter is the reason but not a participant in the story, as is the case with Jairus' daughter. Unlike Jairus' daughter, however, this little girl never meets Jesus. Her healing is completely from a distance as her mother pushes Jesus on the matter.

This woman is one of only two to challenge Jesus to the point where he changes his mind. (The second one is his mother, Mary, at the feast of Cana when she tells Jesus he is ready even if he doesn't think so.)

Two of the continuous myths of modern Christianity are first: Jesus never sinned... which depends on how we define sin. The second is the Jesus was all knowing and thus always right. The story of the Syrophoenician's daughter challenges both assumptions.



First, sin... The deeper question really is 'what is sin'. If we define it as separation from God, then no, Jesus did not sin. However, if we define it by showing arrogance, then we need a deeper conversation, one we are not going to have in this Lenten Series.

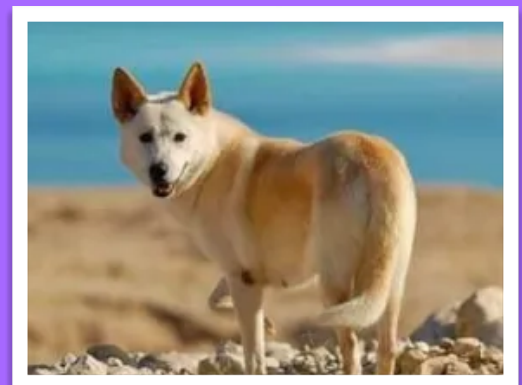
The second is Jesus as all knowing and always right. If we follow this myth, which many have done throughout Christian history, then we have to bend over backwards to justify Jesus' actions in this story. Many have, suggesting this was merely a test and that he wasn't serious.

That simply does not track with this story. Jesus was out with his pals, a woman comes by and he shows off. She calls him on it, and Jesus has to backtrack. It shows us Jesus' humanity. Once again a child is the catalyst to see God's love in the world.

## DOGS IN ANCIENT PALESTINE

It was long assumed that dogs held low standing in Hebrew society, underscored by this story of the Syrophoenician woman comparing gentiles faith to scraps for dogs. However more recent archeology has found that there was a close relationship with a particular breed, known as the Canaan dog.

One bit of evidence which challenges old assumptions was the discovery of a dog cemetery in Ashkelon, Israel, that had the bodies of over 700 dogs, the largest animal cemetery in the ancient world.





## Boy with the loaves and fishes

### John 6:9

Much like the story of Jairus' daughter, this is a beloved story from the Christian Scriptures about a child meeting with Jesus.

This story has the distinction of being one of the few that is in all four gospels, and the only miracle story in all four. The synoptics tell of someone with loaves and fishes in the crowd that had followed Jesus, but it is only in the Gospel of John, in one lone verse, that we are told it is the lunch of a boy who had been sitting in attendance.

And yet he has become the metaphor of generosity and kindness, even in the midst of Jesus' gathering. When the disciples are asked to feed everyone, it is this boy who ultimately presents the opportunity for that task to be realized.

Much ink has been spilled on this story over the years, with the most common suggestion that once one person started sharing, the crowd which up until this point had jealously guarded their own food, also started sharing. That the miracle was not the multiplying of food so much as it was the multiplying of compassion that encouraged everyone to share so there was more than enough for everyone.

Regardless of how we read this miracle story or where we put our emphasis, this one boy was again the catalyst to an entire lesson on faith in Jesus and providing for others.

He remains nameless, and perhaps that is the proper way to read this, because a name would define him, but leaving him nameless means he could be anyone, including the reader or hearer of this miracle story.

Unnamed does not mean unimportant, it simply means modern children can identify with these ancient children more easily. From there they can copy this generosity of spirit and possessions.



### FOOD IN JESUS' DAY

There was a wide variety of food available in Jesus' day. Bread was eaten with every meal, fruit was plentiful either fresh in season or dried, vegetables the same. Wine was part of every meal as well, and was one of the primary sources of vitamins and minerals, especially for those who were food poor. Meat was harder to come by, but they were known for their fish, and both would be eaten at special meals throughout the week.

When Jesus used the bread and wine for the Last Supper, he was using the food everyone had at their table, rich and poor alike, showing everyone had access to the gifts of God.

## Other children who were healed

### John 4:46-53,

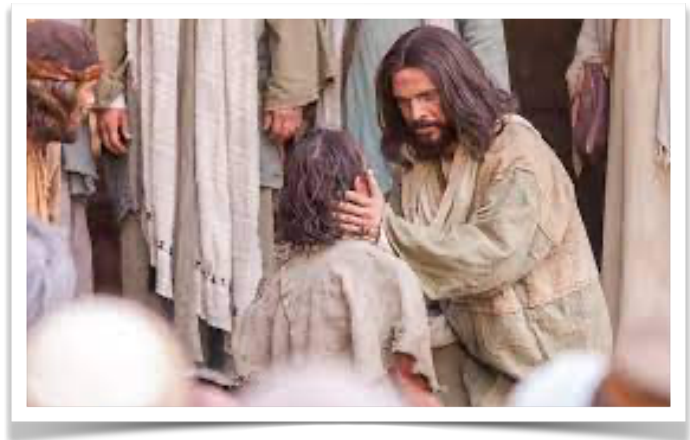
The healing of the court officials' son at Capernaum is very much like the story of the healing of the Syrophenician woman's daughter. The official is persistent and finally Jesus says the boy is healed even though the child never interacts with Jesus.

Jesus had challenged the man's faith, but healed the boy anyway. When the father returned home his servants told him the boy had been healed at the time when Jesus told him it had been done.

### Luke 7:12-15

This story is much like that of Jairus and his daughter. In this one the mother is following the litter carrying her dead son. To lose a son, especially the only son, was doubly traumatic. Not only the grief of losing a child, but the knowledge that there was now no son to take care of the mother as she aged.

Jesus had compassion for this woman and again touching a dead body, told the boy to get up.



### Matthew 17:15-18; Mark 9:17-28; Luke 9:38-42

The father of a boy with either epilepsy (Matthew) or a demon (Mark & Luke) approaches Jesus asking for his help since Jesus' disciples were unable to heal the man's son. Jesus asks that the boy be brought forward. Only Mark gets into the backstory, where the boy had been sick since birth, and the demon was frequently putting the boy in situations where he could be killed.

After the boy is healed, Jesus turns on his disciples demonstrating his frustration, and demands to know why their faith is so little and so stubborn that they could not heal the child.

## BEHAVIOUR OF CHILDREN IN THE EPISTLES

The only other references we have to children in the Christian scriptures comes in letters to the Ephesians (Eph. 6:1-4) and Colossians (Col. 3:20-21). Scholars disagree whether these letters were authentically written by Paul, or just ascribed to him, a practice common in ancient times.

In what is commonly referred to as the Household Code, children are told to obey their parents. The admonishment does not rest there however, parents are also instructed to treat their children fairly, and raise them in faith knowing Jesus as Lord.

