

## SALVATION WITHOUT CULTIC MERIT: THE CHILD FIGURE IN MATTHEW 18-19 AS DECONSTRUCTION OF TEMPLE MERITOCRACY

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### Abstract

This study explores the significance of the "little child" figure in Matthew 18-19 as a radical soteriological statement that deconstructs the cultic meritocracy of the Temple. In first-century Judaism, although covenantal theology emphasized the grace of election, Temple practice had been corrupted into a system based on ritual and economic worthiness. Through socio-historical exegetical approaches and grammatical analysis, this study demonstrates that by placing the little child—a subject lacking both ritual and economic capacity—as the owner of the Kingdom of Heaven, Matthew performs a total subversion of the cultic hierarchy. Analysis of *προσέφερον* (*prosepheron*) and *ἐπιθῆ τὰς χεῖρας* (*epithē tas cheiras*) reveals Jesus as the new mediator who provides direct access without the mediation of the priestly system. The contrast with the rich man (Matt 19:16-30) reinforces that access to salvation does not depend on cultic performance or possession of wealth, but on radical dependence like that of a little child. These findings conclude that Matthew does not reject works, but rejects making cultic practices the exclusive basis for Kingdom access; the child figure shifts the *locus* of worthiness from ritual performance to a relationship of dependence on Christ as the sole mediator.

**Keywords:** Soteriology, Deconstruction of Cultic Meritocracy, Matthew 18-19, Temple, *Counter-Temple Discourse*, Post-70 CE

### INTRODUCTION

The disciples' question "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" (Matt 18:1) reflects the logic of first-century religious meritocracy, where status before God was determined by the accumulation of ritual merit, Eubank, N. (2013). Through the lens of meritocratic Temple practice, a little child (*παιδίον*, *paidion*) was a figure without bargaining power, having made no contribution whatsoever to the cultic system.

Yet Jesus radically places the little child as the owner of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 18:2-4; 19:14). France (2007) reads the child figure as an example of humility, France, R. T. (2007). but this argument is incomplete. Weaknesses in France's reading: (1) it fails to explain the context of Matthew's polemic against Jerusalem's religious authorities (Matt 21-23); (2) it fails to explain why the child is the *owner* of the Kingdom (*τῶν... τοιούτων ἐστίν*, Matt 19:14 uses *present tense*—intrinsic ownership, not transactional); (3) it fails to explain why the disciples hindered the children (Matt 19:13)—because the disciples still operated within the logic of cultic meritocracy that deemed children "not yet worthy."

Grimshaw (2018) reads the child as a model of *discipleship* through narrative-critical lens, but not radically enough: the child is not merely an "example of attitude," but a critique of

the system, Grimshaw, J. P. (2018). Beaumont (2012) comes closer to our reading, showing the child as "radical redefinition of the Kingdom community," but has not systematically connected it to anti-Temple polemic. We fill that gap.

This study argues that the child figure in Matt 18-19 functions as *counter-temple discourse*: an instrument to deconstruct cultic meritocracy and affirm that access to salvation no longer depends on ritual performance, but on total dependence on Jesus as the new mediator.

## Method and Historical Assumptions

This study employs historical-grammatical exegesis with lexical analysis of key Greek words in the socio-historical context of first-century Judaism. Synoptic comparison is used to identify Matthew's distinctive redaction.

This study adopts the majority scholarly consensus that the Gospel of Matthew was written around 80-90 CE, after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE (Luz 2001, Hagner 1993, France 2007, Carter 2000). Internal evidence supports this: (1) Jesus' prophecy about the Temple's destruction (Matt 24:2) is written with details suggesting the event had already occurred; (2) Polemic against Jerusalem's religious authorities (Matt 21-23) makes more sense in the post-destruction context, where Matthew's community was competing with the Rabbinic-Jewish movement; (3) Critique of the sacrificial system (Matt 9:13; 12:7) quotes Hosea 6:6 ("I desire mercy, not sacrifice"), indicating an alternative soteriology for a community no longer having physical access to the Temple.

Thus, the narrative about children in Matt 18-19 is not merely moral critique, but radical reinterpretation of soteriology for the post-Temple era: salvation no longer depends on sacrificial rituals, but on relationship with Jesus as the new mediator. The Temple's destruction was not a tragedy to be mourned, but historical confirmation that the old system was already irrelevant—Jesus himself had prophesied it (Matt 23:38; 24:2).

## CORRUPTION OF THE TEMPLE'S CULTIC MERIT SYSTEM

### From Covenantal Theology to Meritocratic Practice

Jewish covenantal theology emphasized *covenantal nomism*: obedience to Torah was a response to God's gracious election, not a means to obtain salvation (Sanders 1977, Dunn 1998). Torah was designed inclusively: the poor could offer doves (Lev 5:7) or flour (Lev 5:11). But in practice, the first-century Temple system had been corrupted into a machine of economic meritocracy. Evidence:

1. Burdensome Temple Tax: *Mishnah Shekalim* 1:3-4 shows the half-shekel tax (equivalent to two days' wages for a laborer) was imposed on all Jewish males, including the poor—not a "voluntary donation," but a strictly monitored obligation.
2. Monopoly of Sacrifice Trade: Jesus drove out merchants from the Temple (Matt 21:12-13) because the buying-and-selling system for sacrifices had become a family business of the high priest (the Annas family), which set high prices and rejected sacrificial animals from outside (Jeremias 1969, Sanders 1992).

3. Access Hierarchy Based on Purity: The Temple system divided people into a spatial hierarchy—the closer to the altar, the more "holy" and "worthy." Children under *bar mitzvah* age (13 years) could not pass the Court of Women—they were ritually considered "not yet worthy" to approach the sacrificial altar.
4. Transactional Concept of 'Treasure in Heaven': *4 Ezra 7:77* mentions *thesaurus bonorum operum* (treasury of good works), where almsgiving and sacrifices were viewed as "investments" accumulating merit before God. Eubank (2013) shows first-century Jewish thought was dominated by "wages and merit" logic.
5. This is what Jesus critiqued. Not Torah, but the system's corruption that transformed covenantal grace into economic transaction. The prophets had long critiqued this: Amos 5:21-24, Micah 6:6-8, Jeremiah 7:11—quotations literally used by Jesus in Matt 21:13. So when Jesus places the little child—a figure lacking economic capacity to participate in the sacrificial system—as owner of the Kingdom of Heaven, He is demolishing the entire foundation of corrupt cultic meritocracy.

## The Child's Position in Cultic Hierarchy

Children in Jewish tradition were part of the covenant people (circumcised on the eighth day, Gen 17:12; included in Passover, Exod 12:26-27). However, they had significant ritual limitations: they had not reached *bar mitzvah* age (13 years) and were not yet considered fully responsible for performing legal obligations (*mitzvot*). They could not participate independently in the sacrificial system because they had no economic assets. Bockmuehl (2000) argues that "little ones" (οἱ μικροί, *hoi mikroi*) in Matt 18 are not merely metaphorical, but references to concrete marginal groups—including literal children who lacked capacity to participate in the cultic merit system.

## THE CHILD AS COUNTER-TEMPLE DISCOURSE IN MATTHEW 18-19

### Subversion of Hierarchy: Inverting the Logic of "Greatest" (Matt 18:1-5)

When the disciples asked, "Who is the greatest?" (τίς ἄρα μείζων, Matt 18:1), they operated within a paradigm measuring greatness by accumulation of merit and position in the Temple cultic system. Jesus' response by placing a child in their midst (Matt 18:2) is a symbolic act demolishing that expectation.

By placing the child—a subject lacking social or religious status—at the center, Jesus is inverting the value hierarchy prevailing in Temple cultic practice. The word *τραφήτε* (*straphēte*, turn/repent, v. 3)—in this context, "turn" means leaving the logic of cultic meritocracy toward the logic of grace. "Humble yourself" (*ταπεινώσει*, *tapeinōsei*, v. 4) is not merely inner feeling, but sociological self-placement: relinquishing claims to "rights" based on status or merit.

If the Temple cultic system required one to climb the holiness hierarchy to become great, Jesus instead commands them to "descend" to the socially least ritually significant level. In the context of Matthew's overall narrative filled with conflict against Jerusalem's religious authorities (Matt 9:3, 11; 12:1-8, 38-42; 15:1-9), the polemical reading provides greater

coherence: Jesus is not merely teaching new ethics, but also deconstructing the old cultic hierarchy-based system.

## Access Without Sacrifice: Jesus as New Mediator (Matt 19:13-15)

The disciples tried to hinder the children (Matt 19:13), likely because they considered them lacking religious value to receive the Rabbi's time. However, Jesus' statement, "Let the little children come... for the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these" (v. 14), is direct critique of cultic performance-based exclusivity.

The verb προσέφερον (*prosepheron*, they brought, Matt 19:13) in *imperfect* form indicates repeated action. This word is often used in cultic contexts (bringing offerings), but here what is "offered" are children—not to be sacrificed, but to be blessed. Unlike Mark who uses ἐναγκαλιζόμενος (*enagkalizomenos*, embracing, Mark 10:16) which is more emotional, Matthew focuses on laying on of hands (ἐπιθῆ τὰς χεῖρας, *epithē tas cheiras*, Matt 19:13).

Synoptic Comparison Table: Child Blessing Pericope

Aspect	Matthew 19:13-15	Mark 10:13-16
Verb "bring"	προσηνέχθη (aorist passive—"were brought")	προσέφερον (imperfect—"kept bringing")
Disciples' reaction	ἐπετίμησαν (rebuked)	ἐπετίμων (imperfect—kept rebuking)
Jesus' response	ἄφετε τὰ παιδιά	ἠγανάκτησεν ("Jesus was indignant") + ἄφετε
Jesus' action	ἐπιθῆ τὰς χεῖρας (laying on hands)	ἐναγκαλιζόμενος (embracing) + κατευλόγει

Matthew's Redactional Observations: (1) Matthew omits "Jesus was indignant" (Mark 10:14)—focus on Jesus' authority, not emotion; (2) Matthew omits "embracing" but retains "laying on hands"—formal and authoritative action (like priestly ordination, Num 27:18-23, or healing, Matt 9:18). By retaining laying on of hands, Matthew emphasizes Jesus is giving blessing with formal authority—like priests in the Temple, but without requiring sacrifice; (3) Matthew uses aorist passive προσηνέχθη ("were brought")—children are passive recipients, not active agents. This reinforces the theme of total dependence.

Laying on of hands in Jewish tradition has three functions: ordination of authority (Numbers 27:18-23), formal blessing (Genesis 48:14), and identification with sacrifice (Lev 1:4; 3:2). In Matt 19:13, formal blessing function is closest. But there's additional

nuance: in the Temple system, only priests had authority to bless the people with laying on of hands (Lev 9:22; Num 6:22-27). By laying hands on children—without going through the priestly system's mediation—Jesus is claiming priestly authority without being a Levitical priest.

Evidence that Matthew sees Jesus as new "High Priest": (1) Matt 12:6—"Something greater than the Temple is here"—Jesus claims authority surpassing the Temple system; (2) Matt 26:63-64—implicit claim that Jesus is the Messianic High Priest (Psalm 110:4); (3) Matt 27:51—"The Temple curtain was torn in two"—access to God's presence no longer requires human High Priest mediation.

The ownership statement in verse 14 uses *present tense* ἐστίν (*estin*)—"The Kingdom of Heaven *belongs to* (τῶν... τοιούτων ἐστίν) people like these." Use of *possessive* genitive (τῶν τοιούτων) not recipient *dative* shows this is not "the Kingdom is given to them," but "the Kingdom *belongs to* them." Intrinsic ownership, not transactional. Their status as Kingdom owners is not because of future cultic achievement, but because of their current position of dependence.

### **Contrast with the Rich Man: The Paradox of Worthiness (Matt 19:16-30)**

Matthew deliberately places the child narrative (19:13-15) immediately before the rich man narrative (19:16-30) to create piercing contrast:

<b>CHILDREN (19:13-15)</b>	<b>RICH MAN (19:16-30)</b>
Have no possessions	Has many possessions (19:22)
Have no ritual merit	Has kept all Torah commandments (19:20)
Have no capacity to "do" anything	Asks "What must I do?" (19:16)
Kingdom belongs to them (19:14)	Hard to enter Kingdom (19:23)
Come with empty hands	Went away sad because unwilling to release possessions (19:22)

This is the Kingdom paradox that demolishes meritocratic logic: Those who have nothing to offer are Kingdom owners, while those who have everything struggle to enter. The rich man failed not because wealth itself is evil, but because he remained bound to "worthiness" logic based on possession. He had kept all Torah commandments (19:20), but still felt the need to "do something" to obtain eternal life (19:16)—this is cultic meritocratic mentality: salvation is something to be earned, not received.

Conversely, children enter the Kingdom not because of what they do or have, but because they have nothing to rely on except the King's goodness. They don't ask "What must I do?"—they simply come and receive (19:13-14). Evidence this contrast is intentional: (1) In all three Synoptic Gospels, the child pericope is always immediately followed by the rich man pericope—an established tradition to create contrast; (2) Both pericopes use "Kingdom of Heaven/God" (βασιλεία, *basileia*) as *theme word*; (3) After the rich man narrative, disciples ask "Then who can be saved?" (19:25)—a question that should have been answered by the child narrative: those like little children, who come without claiming merit.

Weber (2020) calls this "economy of salvation" based on accumulation. We are sharper: this is not merely "economy," but meritocratic ideology that transforms God's Kingdom into a commodity buyable with possessions or ritual merit. Jesus demolishes that ideology with one sentence: "The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those like little children."

## **SOTERIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS: REDEFINING ACCESS TO SALVATION IN POST-70 CE CONTEXT**

### **From Cultic Merit to Radical Dependence**

Matthew does not reject the concept of works or reward (μισθός, *misthos*)—even Matthew's Gospel is full of reward language (Matt 5:12; 6:1-6; 25:31-46). However, the context of Matt 18-19 shows fundamental shift: reward is no longer measured by cultic performance, but by dependence and faithfulness to Christ. Eubank (2013) shows that although Matthew emphasizes the importance of good works, those works are not "currency" to purchase salvation, but fruit of relationship with Jesus.

### **Reconciling "Grace Salvation" with "Works Requirements"**

Critics might ask: "If salvation is grace for children (Matt 19:14), what about Matthew 5:20 which says 'Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of Heaven'?"

**Answer:** Matt 5:20 is not about "doing more good works than Pharisees," but about a different kind of righteousness. Pharisees measured righteousness by accumulation of ritual merit—they "give a tenth of mint, dill and cumin" (Matt 23:23), but "neglect justice, mercy and faithfulness." They had cultic performance-based righteousness, but lacked the relational righteousness God desires.

What Jesus demands in Matt 5:20 is "wearing Christ's righteousness" through relationship with Him. This is what Paul meant by "righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith" (Phil 3:9)—not righteousness we earn ourselves through cultic performance, but righteousness we receive from Christ. Evidence: (1) Context of Matt 5:20 is immediately followed by series of "But I tell you" (Matt 5:21-48), where Jesus elevates Torah's standard until impossible to fulfill by human effort—who can fulfill this except by "wearing Christ's righteousness"?; (2) Parallel with rich man: though claiming "all these I have

kept" (Matt 19:20), he still lacked total relationship with Christ; (3) Parallel with children: they have no "righteousness" whatsoever to offer, yet are Kingdom owners because they receive righteousness as gift.

**Conclusion:** Matt 5:20 is not contradiction to Matt 19:14, but complementary. The righteousness Matthew demands is not result of cultic works accumulation, but Christ's righteousness received through faith relationship—just like the little child receiving the Kingdom with empty hands.

## Jesus Prophecies Total Destruction of the Old System

Some scholars try to "soften" Jesus' critique of the Temple by saying Jesus "only critiqued abuses, not the institution itself." This argument is not supported by Matthew's text. Evidence that Jesus prophesied total replacement of the Temple system: (1) Matt 12:6—"Something greater than the Temple is here." The word *μεῖζον* (*meizon*, greater) is not comparative of quality, but comparative of authority. Jesus is not saying "I am better than the Temple," but "I replace the Temple's function" (Hagner 1993); (2) Matt 21:12-13—Driving out merchants is not merely "cleansing," but symbolic act of judgment. By quoting Jeremiah 7:11 ("den of robbers"), Jesus is activating the context of Jeremiah 7 which ends with prophecy of Solomon's Temple destruction (Jer 7:14)—in other words, "This Temple will be destroyed like Shiloh, because it's totally corrupt"; (3) Matt 23:38—"Your house is left to you desolate." The word "left" (*ἀφίεται*, *aphietai*) refers to Ezekiel 10-11, where God's glory leaves the Temple before Babylon destroys it; (4) Matt 24:2—"Not one stone will be left on another." This is not metaphor, but literal prophecy fulfilled in 70 CE; (5) Matt 26:61—"I am able to destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days." John 2:19-21 clarifies the "Temple" Jesus meant was His own body—Jesus is the new Temple.

**Conclusion:** Jesus is not merely a "reformer" critiquing Temple abuses. Jesus is the replacement who prophesies total destruction of the old system and offers Himself as the new mediator. The child narrative in Matt 18-19 is part of this grand narrative: access to salvation no longer through Temple sacrifice, but through relationship with Jesus.

## Radical Inclusivity: Comfort for Post-70 CE Community

This new soteriology brings significant sociological impact for Matthew's post-70 CE community. In the old cultic merit system, disabled people, the poor, and children were often marginalized due to their limitations. Bockmuehl (2000) argues that "little ones" (*οἱ μικροί*, *hoi mikroï*) in Matt 18 represent concrete marginal groups lacking capacity to participate in the cultic merit system.

By making "little children" the Kingdom standard, Matthew affirms that salvation's door is wide open for those deemed lacking capacity by the religious system. Carter (2000) shows this is comfort for marginal communities who lost physical access to the Temple after its 70 CE destruction. However, this comfort is not about "mourning" the Temple's loss, but reorientation: Matthew's community no longer needs the Temple, because the requirement for salvation access is no longer possession of wealth or ritual status, but childlike dependent heart.

## THEOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY'S CHURCH

### Critique of Meritocracy in Contemporary Church

If the child figure is critique of cultic meritocracy, what are the implications for contemporary church? In many church contexts, leadership positions, ministry access, or social acceptance are often determined by educational background, economic status, or spiritual achievements. Matt 18-19's soteriology challenges this logic. God's Kingdom *belongs to* those "like little children"—meaning, those who have nothing to offer except total dependence on Christ's grace. This means the church must actively resist the tendency to measure "greatness" by achievements, status, or abilities.

### Radical Dependence in Achievement Culture

How does this "radical dependence" soteriology speak to Asian contexts where hard work and achievement culture is highly valued? In many Asian societies, a person's value is measured by achievements—GPA, position, income, social status. This culture often seeps into church, where "God's blessing" is measured by material success.

The child narrative in Matt 18-19 offers radical correction: a person's value before God is not from what they achieve, but from relationship of dependence on Christ. This is good news for those weary in the "achievement race"—those who feel never good enough, never successful enough, never spiritual enough. God's Kingdom *belongs to* those who acknowledge their insufficiency and come with empty hands, like little children.

This also means the church must be careful not to transform the Gospel into a new merit system. "Prosperity theology" teaching that God's blessing is measured by material wealth, or "spiritual legalism" measuring piety by amount of prayer, fasting, or ministry, are modern forms of cultic meritocracy that Matthew critiqued.

### Inclusivity as Praxis

Radical dependence soteriology also has practical implications for church inclusion. If God's Kingdom *belongs to* those like little children—marginal, powerless, lacking capacity—then the church must deliberately open space for marginal groups: children, the poor, disabled, elderly, refugees, abuse victims, and the socially marginalized. This is not merely "social service" done *for* them, but recognition that they are legitimate owners of God's Kingdom and have full place at God's table.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the little child figure in Matthew 18-19 is not merely a symbol of morality, but an instrument of critique against the Temple-centered cultic merit system. By placing the little child—a subject lacking ritual and legal capacity—as Kingdom owner, Matthew performs subversion of cultic performance-based salvation hierarchy.

Main findings: First, although Jewish covenantal theology emphasized gracious election, first-century Temple cultic practice was *de facto* meritocratic in its sociological function. Second, Matthew uses the little child narrative as *counter-temple discourse* to deconstruct claims that salvation access can be bought or earned through the sacrificial system. Grammatical analysis of προσέφερον and ἐπιθῆ τὰς χεῖρας shows Matthew positioning Jesus as new mediator providing direct access without priestly system mediation. Third, Matthew does not reject works, but rejects making cultic practices and social status the exclusive basis for Kingdom access. The child figure shifts the *locus* of worthiness from ritual performance to relationship of dependence on Jesus as new mediator. Fourth, implications for today's church are critique of all forms of meritocracy in church life—whether in form of elitism based on education, economic status, or "spiritual achievements."

Thus, becoming "like a little child" is both theological and sociological act: releasing trust in one's own merit in the cultic system and completely relying on God's grace in Christ. This study's contribution lies in identifying the child figure's role as soteriological paradigm that deconstructs cultic meritocracy and affirms the principle of radical dependence as essence of Christian salvation access—not only in post-Temple destruction polemical context, but also in today's church context continuing to struggle with the temptation to measure "greatness" by achievement, not by dependence on grace.

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