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The World of the Child in the Hebrew Bible by Naomi
Steinberg (review)

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(Review)

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gender issue that she regards as based on misreading or sheer misrepresentation, or otherwise flawed—sometimes, in Walter Hooper’s words, by readers “determined to use C. S. Lewis instead of receive from him” (quoted in *Dance* 6). Negative readings of Lewis’s character Jane Studdock, Hilder argues, often stem from both male and female critics’ own culture-based sexism. To Lewis’s accusers she feels a need to return at every opportunity. (Note, however, that even the most extreme antagonists frequently draw Hilder’s praise for their insights.) Perhaps less needful are the extensive quotations from like-thinking critics, sometimes strung together for more than a page, using their authority to bolster her position. A more positive way of viewing those citations is that she wants to give due credit to predecessors who helped develop her thinking. In any case, her own argument is strong enough to do without quite so much backup, and her study might have greater impact if presented in fewer than its 635 pages. Along the way, Hilder also adds to our general understanding of Lewis’s fiction with many interpretive insights not strictly related to the issue of gender. There are a few slips, however, both factual and interpretive—not many, but enough to warrant reading alertly. One of these needs mention, lest it prove misleading. She says more than once that Lewis believed in “the essentially masculine nature of angels” (*Dance* 173 n. 2; cf. 179 n. 27; *Ethos* 13), but Lewis explicitly denies it (as I read him) in the place referenced, where he uses the term “masculine” in a purely technical sense as one of the grammatical genders.

Hilder also draws connections between Lewis’s feminist leanings and those of older writers such as George MacDonald, Spenser, Wordsworth, and, most often, Milton (who was the subject of her 1983 MA thesis). In the closing chapter of *Surprised*, “Eve’s Last, Best Word,” she finds in the last speech in *Paradise Lost* a “paradox” of feminine “surrender” joined with “life-giving . . . authority” that epitomizes Lewis’s stance as “a radical theological feminist” (157).

Note

1. Owners of *The C. S. Lewis Readers’ Encyclopedia*, especially librarians, are hereby asked to write in on p. 405 the name of Peter J. Schakel as author of the entry on *Till We Have Faces*. In a published letter (*Mythlore* 23.1 [Spring 2001]: 95) I tried to correct this error when the book first came out, but the point bears repeating.

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The World of the Child in the Hebrew Bible. By Naomi Steinberg. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013. ISBN 978-1-907534-76-8. Pp. xxv + 146. \$80.00 (list price). \$40.00 (scholar’s price).

Since Philippe Ariès controversially argued in *Centuries of Childhood* (1960) that not until the 17th century are children understood as anything other than miniature

adults, scholars working in childhood studies have sought to understand the construction of the young across premodern cultures. *The Word of the Child in the Hebrew Bible* is an important part of this revisionist approach, as it determines how ancient Israel understood childhood and how it differed from adulthood. Steinberg utilizes linguistic analysis and narrative data to recognize childhood in ancient Israel as depicted in the Hebrew bible and Septuagint, and despite some limitations, her contribution enhances our understanding of the literary depiction and historical definition of Hebrew childhood.

Many readers will be surprised by the book's introduction, a lengthy, idiosyncratic discussion of how Steinberg spent her 2007 summer in Guatemala City. She details her experiences volunteering at a *hogar* (orphanage), and concludes not only that "the duality of life for all children did not necessarily conform to romantic myths" but also "that there are multiple understandings of childhood and [such] perspectives are often narrowly culture-bound" (xiii, xiv). Such conventional remarks continue throughout her first two chapters, "Children and Childhood as Categories of Analysis" and "What is a Child?" So much so that while some readers may find her literature review informative, most scholars in childhood studies will find this introduction a rehearsal of long-accepted ideas.

However, such rudimentary overview disappears when Steinberg begins answering the central question raised by her research: "What is a child in biblical Israel?" Starting in chapter 3, "Words for Children in the Hebrew Bible," Steinberg begins filling in an important gap in the history of childhood. She first considers the range of semantic meanings in Hebrew terms for children by providing a table of 13 terms and their number of occurrences in the Hebrew Bible, especially those terms often translated into English as *child*: *na'ar* and *yeled* (27). Whereas similar Hebrew words "are primarily confined to limited phases of a child's life," these two words provide a clearer understanding of how biblical Israel conceptualizes the child (27). With an interest more in literary context than etymology, Steinberg focuses on the patterns that surface when these two words are used. Curiously, she never analyses the word "childhood" itself, but by noting the range for these words and the difficulty in translating them into modern English, Steinberg begins defining the biblical child.

Starting in chapter 4, Steinberg turns to textual examples of children in the Hebrew Bible, and it is here and the ensuing four chapters that her discussion breaks new ground. "The Israelite Family as an Economic Unit and Children's Roles" begins carving out specific definitions of the ancient Hebrew family, marriage, and child. Steinberg considers three levels of kinship-based biblical family life: the *bêt 'āb* (the family household comprised of a married couple and their unmarried children), the *mišpāhā* (the kinship circle that included lineages related by marriage), and the *šēbēt* (the tribal level of organization based on families descended from a common ancestor) (46–50). The child, therefore, was not defined by its sentimental or emotional ties to a family, but by its ability to perpetuate the family lineage.

In chapter 5, "The Israelite Life Cycle: Are There Any Children Here?" Steinberg is interested in whether or not there is any textual evidence in the Hebrew Bible that suggests childhood was a distinct phase of life in biblical

Israel or it was merely a period of transition between infancy and adulthood. Put another way, does the Hebrew Bible suggest or even confirm when childhood began and ended in ancient Israel? To address these concerns, Steinberg turns to Leviticus and Jeremiah to discuss the construction of the biblical life cycle and suggests that the Israelite life cycle is based more on social responsibility than age. For males, circumcision, not birth, signaled when and how a male infant became a social person, since the act “functioned to incorporate him into the patrilineage of his father” (68). Then, only after both marriage and fatherhood did a boy transition from childhood into adulthood (70). For females, “social personhood may have been signified through the blood of menstruation, just as the blood of circumcision incorporated a male at eight days into the patrilineage of his father” (71). Therefore, male and female children became social persons through events—circumcision and menstruation—that constructed their childhood as a “transitional stage toward full incorporation into the family household” (73). In contrast to contemporary Western childhood, biblical childhood “was not about developing one’s individuality and learning to speak one’s mind; instead it was about learning to think like the group and to put group interests before individual ones” (73). Childhood represented a progression toward a group—not individual—identity, and it steadfastly reflects a family culture invested in economic production and generational reproduction (76).

The literary case studies in chapters 6, 7, and 8 will be of most interest to readers of this journal. Steinberg builds on the socio-historical context by turning to literary analysis in order to understand the world of the child in biblical Israel. Steinberg’s strong linguistic and narrative analysis of specific children strengthens the argument that chronological age did not determine the boundaries of biblical childhood as much as the young person’s patrilineage relationship and economic contribution. For instance, chapter 6, “Monogamy, Polygamy, and Childhood Experiences,” turns to Genesis 21 to consider how the construction of childhood in ancient Israelite society varied within the same family. The childhoods of half-brothers Ishmael and Isaac are linked to the social location of their mothers, Hagar and Sarah respectively, and the difference between a polygamous and a monogamous household is significant for biblical childhood (85). With the birth of Isaac by Sarah, “the emphasis of family dynamics shifts from fertility to inheritance” while the construction of Ishmael and Isaac’s childhoods is linked to the social location of their mothers (84, 85). To prove this idea, Steinberg studies “the application of the nouns *na’ar*, *yeled*, and *bēn* to Abraham’s two sons” and this linguistic approach provides further insight into the childhoods within a polygamous household (87). Indeed, Steinberg is most convincing and original when she weaves semantics together with literary analysis.

Chapter 7, “1 Samuel 1: Child Abandonment and the Best Interests of the Child,” continues to elucidate the notion of the Israelite family as an economic unit rather than one organized by emotional bonds by addressing the birth of Samuel to Hannah. Further arguing that parenthood, not marriage or age, marks the dividing line between childhood and adulthood, Steinberg offers a

close reading of the circumstances surrounding child abandonment in 1 Samuel. Steinberg's child-centered methodology for exploring the birth of Samuel reveals how adult-centered perspectives on the texts obscure the child's perspective. Such an approach allows us better to understand how "unless we examine the early life of Samuel and explore the assumptions of the adults who control his life, we fail to grasp the different dynamics working against each other in 1 Samuel" (99).

Chapter 8, "Exodus 21.22–25: Is the Fetus a Life?," explores whether or how cultural constructions of unborn children in biblical Israel acknowledged personhood (106). Steinberg turns to examples from the legal corpus, Exodus, where the law assesses injury done to a pregnant woman, since so doing helps us to recognize the boundaries between nonlife and life in biblical Israel. Steinberg questions if a miscarried fetus was understood to be the termination of a nonlife and whether or not the accidental death of a fetus would have been ruled a murder (106). Once again, Steinberg's close reading and linguistic analysis, particularly of the noun *yēlādeyhā*, "a masculine plural form of the noun *yeled* with a feminine possessive suffix, 'her children,'" is revealing (110). She carefully considers what is protected under law—the pregnant woman, her fetus, or both—in order to conclude that the father will not be compensated for the lost fetus and that Exodus 21.22 does not understand the fetus as life: "birth is not the boundary of life and therefore a miscarriage does not mean loss of life and can be compensated by money . . . The fetus is a *yeled* but not a social person; it is property but not a legal person because it has yet to develop to the point of being able to contribute to the economics of the family" (116). Therefore, along with chapters 6 and 7, chapter 8 helps Steinberg enunciate on how family, religion, and economics contribute to the varieties of childhoods within biblical Israel, the central idea briefly summarized again in chapter 9, "Socially Constructed Categories of Childhood."

The World of the Child in the Hebrew Bible meticulously demonstrates how "ancient Israel recognized childhood as a stage of life separate from adulthood and assigned culture-bound social meanings to this phase in the human life-cycle," and the text is especially valuable in its unpacking the relationship between linguistics, narrative analysis, and biblical childhood (122). Yet the text is not without blemishes. At times, Steinberg's prose is somewhat repetitive. That the sentence "Genesis 21 exposes the status discrepancy between children in a polygamous household based on the statuses of their mothers" appears in one form or another four times on a single page evidences the repetition found throughout the book (85–86). Further, statements such as American childhood has become "an overly sentimentalized and romanticized time of life" and "boundaries separating the stages of child development are culturally constructed" are truisms in childhood studies, though they are not presented as such here (14, 72). For those whom *The World of the Child in the Hebrew Bible* is their first venture into the field of childhood studies, such statements may be illuminating, but for readers at least somewhat acquainted with this field, these statements will be laborious. Finally, the length of the text—only 141 pages from introduction to conclusion—may leave some specialists wanting more.

Nevertheless, by considering the diversity of biblical material, the lack of previous scholarship on this topic, and the inconsistent use of terms pertaining to young people in the Bible, Steinberg convinces future scholars to take seriously biblical childhood. *The World of the Childhood in the Hebrew Bible* will be of particular interest to scholars of biblical criticism, Hebrew cultural studies, linguistic analysis, and literary depictions of childhood.

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