

# Child-Parent Imagery in the Catholic Epistles

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In the Catholic Epistles the theme of the “real” child-parent relationship is not addressed. The figurative sense of the term “children” is often applied to the recipients in two ways: as the children of the writer and at the same time as God’s children. When discussing these texts we focus on two questions: “What kind of views on the child-parent relationship do they presuppose?,” and, “What do the authors want to achieve by using familial imagery?”

## James

The Epistle of James does not address the child-parent relationship directly. Since the letter refers to two commandments from the second table of the Ten Commandments (2:11), and in 2:8 the author quotes from Leviticus 19:18 the commandment to love one’s neighbor, it may be surprising that the commandment to honor father and mother does not surface in the letter. However, we can argue the other way round as well: the social interest of the letter, and its appeal to the Ten Commandments may raise the possibility that honor toward parents may be presupposed in some passages.

Abraham appears together with his son in James 2:21; here he is not only the father of Isaac, but the author calls him “our father” (*ho patēr hēmōn*). Franz Mussner argues that this expression was originally a claim made by Jewish people (cf. e.g., Isa 51:2; 4 Macc 16:20; Matt 3:9; John 8:39), but in early Christianity it included Gentile Christians as well (cf.

Rom 4:12).<sup>1</sup> Thus Mussner argues that James’s reference to Abraham as “our father” does not imply that only Jewish Christians are addressed by the letter.<sup>2</sup>

Abraham is called “our father” in James, but this must be understood in the sense of a “forefather” (cf. Rom 4:1, where in many MSS he is referred to as “father,” but there is also a textual tradition, adopted also by NA27 as the main text, that has *ton propatora hēmōn*). Honor toward the forefathers implies honor to one’s parents as well. This is paralleled in honor toward older people. In James 5:14 the readers are told that ill people should “call for the elders of the church” (*proskalesasthē tous presbuterous tēs ekklēsiās*). It is probable that the term “elders” refers to “officials” here.<sup>3</sup> However, the model of the Jewish leadership of villages and of synagogues probably influenced the author of the letter just as it influenced the early Christian church in Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup> If so, then it is likely that some of the elders were also “old” in age. The “office” of eldership, at least in its origins, is probably connected with the view that old people should be honored. This duty is related to the duty of honoring parents, as we can see in the environment of the NT.<sup>5</sup>

The author repeatedly addresses his readers as “brethren,” most often as “my brethren” or “my beloved brethren” (see e.g., 1:2,19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1; 4:11; 5:7, 19). This usage can imply that the Christians belong to the family of God; they are brothers and sisters because they are children of God.

Perhaps this idea is reflected in James 1:17-18. Here God is referred to as the “father of lights” (*tou patros tōn phōtōn*). Wolfgang Schrage points to Genesis 1:14 and Psalm 135:7 (LXX) as examples where “lights” mean “stars.”<sup>6</sup> This must be its meaning in James 1:17 as well.<sup>7</sup>

However, we may add that the expression also fits the familial imagery, since v. 17 speaks about “gifts” coming from this father “from above”: “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (RSV). The gift is not specified; it may be “wisdom” (cf. Jas 3:15,17).<sup>8</sup> Whatever it may include, it implies the father’s provision for his children. The “slightly imperfectly quantified hexameter” in 1:17 contains a word-play; thus *pasa dosis* and *pan dōrēma* are either synonymous, or *dosis* may be translated as a verbal noun, “so that it is ‘all good giving and every perfect gift’ (NEB) that may be attributed to God.”<sup>9</sup>

Verse 18 continues the parental imagery, since the expression “bringing forth” is used: “Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.” The expression “brought us forth” (*apekuēsen*) “denotes the female’s part in giving birth,”<sup>10</sup> but it is probably used here as a continuation of the picture in v. 15, where the same verb occurs: “Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death.” As Davids puts it: “Sin produces death, but God produces life.”<sup>11</sup>

In James 1:18 we further observe the presence of the idea of creation, which is expressed in the term “his creatures” (and in the variant reading in some MSS which have *epoīesen* instead of *apekuēsen*). In

Philo, the creative activity of God and the procreative activity of parents are regarded as being closely related (e.g., *Decal.* 107). The idea of “God as the creator” and “God as father” belong together. Sophie Laws argues that v. 18 continues describing “God as Father,” in spite of the use of *apekuēō*.<sup>12</sup> The verse refers to one particular gift of God, “that of birth.”<sup>13</sup> God’s gift of new life has an ethical implication: the addressees are expected to lead a way of life that is in accordance with the word of God (cf. also the next verse, 1:19, which begins a paraenetic section: “Know this, my beloved brethren. Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger . . .”).

We may put it this way: Christians are the “children” of God. One implication of the parental imagery is the expectation that Christians will obey him. This imagery may be in the background in the Epistle of James, since this letter is full of ethical advice.

## 1 Peter

Although 1 Peter has a long passage dealing with duties in the realm of family relationships and in wider circles of the society (1 Pet 2:13-3:7), one can argue that this text is not a Household Code. On the one hand, its concern includes also the leaders of the “state”; on the other hand, it omits the child-parent relationship. However, there is a passage affirming the duty of children to honor their parents. In 1 Peter 1:14 we read: “As obedient children (*hōs tekna hupkoēs*), do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance.”<sup>14</sup>

The expression “obedient children” has a similar genitival structure in the Greek to the phrase “the sons of disobedience” (*tois huiois tēs apeitheias*) in Ephesians 2:2.

Thus it may be that it is idiomatic, describing the readers as an “obedient people.”<sup>15</sup> However, the term *tekna* in 1 Peter 1:14 may be a conscious choice of the author in order to anticipate the reference to “father” in v. 17. The only other occurrence of *tekna* in 1 Peter is in 3:6, where the idea of obedience plays a role as well; though here Christian wives are addressed as the “children of Sarah,” and Sarah’s obedience to her husband is emphasized. The choice of the word *tekna* may be due to its association with “obedience.”<sup>16</sup> Although 1 Peter 1:14 does not say explicitly whose children are addressed, the following verses may imply that the readers of the letter are referred to as God’s children.

The author goes on to exhort the addressees to be holy, since he who has called them is holy (v. 15). Although in the NT 1 John 2:20 may be the only other reference to God the father as “the Holy One” (*ho hagios*),<sup>17</sup> the expression is widely attested in the Septuagint in the form of “the Holy One of Israel” (e.g., Ps 70:22 LXX; Isa 1:4). In verse 16, the author makes clear that he refers to God’s call when he quotes from Leviticus 19:2 (LXX): “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (cf. also Lev 11:44, with minor differences). The reference to being “holy” (*hagioi*) can stand in a context where a believing parent’s child shares the parent’s holiness (1 Cor 7:14; cf. also Heb 2:11). Apart from the “priestly” connotations of the quotation from Leviticus,<sup>18</sup> this further aspect may lie behind the use of *hagioi* in this context.

The reference to holiness in 1 Peter 1:15-16 is immediately followed by a reference to God as “father” in v. 17, where we read: “And if you invoke as Father him who judges each one impartially . . .” (*kai ei patera epikaleisthe*).<sup>19</sup> We note the natural way in which the reference to “father”

occurs: it is not a point to be proved, but something presupposed. The paternal imagery applied to God is significant for the author of the letter, since God as father appeared already at the beginning, in vv. 2-3. The reappearance of the motif in v. 17 (after it was implied in v. 14) must have a purpose. The metaphor is used in order to motivate the addressees,<sup>20</sup> as v. 17b clearly says: “. . . conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.” Thus I suggest that we have here an argument similar to that in 1 Corinthians: a parent’s holiness is passed on to the children; this time God himself is the “holy parent.”

The imagery of the child-parent relationship between the addressees and God is continued in v. 23, where a verb related to *gennaō* is used: “You have been born anew (*anagegennēmenoi*), not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.” As the same verb is used in v. 3, the two occurrences form an *inclusio*. The picture is carried over to chapter two, where in v. 2 the addressees are called to long for “milk” (*gala*; cf. 1 Cor 3:2), “like newborn babes” (*hōs artigennēta brephē*). The metaphor has its limits, since real infants do not need to be told “to long for” milk. The author uses the picture to imply that the recipients should acknowledge their need for growth.<sup>21</sup> This does not mean that they have only recently become Christians. Rather, it emphasizes that they cannot make themselves perfect; they receive salvation from God through the “spiritual” milk (*logikon* here may refer back to *dialogou* in 1:23).<sup>22</sup> The picture of being nourished serves to show the addressees how much they have to rely on God.

First Peter 1:22 belongs to the familial imagery, too: “Having purified your souls

by your obedience to the truth (*hēgnikotes en tē hupakoē tēs alētheias*) for a sincere love of the brethren, love one another earnestly from the heart." We observe that "love of the brethren" (*philadelphia*) is mentioned here together with another Greek expression for the idea of "loving" (*agapēsate*), and together with "heart" (*ek kardias*). "Heart" has an adjective in some MSS, "clean" (*katharas*), which is put in brackets in the main text of NA27. If we adopt the shorter reading, then the text is a confirmation of the familial imagery. Michaels rightly notes: "The latter picks up the emphasis on 'genuine brotherly love' in the preceding clause, while the longer reading accents the reference to purification with which the verse begins."<sup>23</sup> We may add that the reference to "obedience" in the same verse may confirm our view that the verse uses familial imagery.

We observe that the whole passage, 1:14-2:2, has a paraenetic character: the author calls the readers to a life-style worthy of those who have been "ransomed" (v. 18) "with the precious blood of Christ" (v. 19).<sup>24</sup> The call to obedience to God is expressed by words belonging to the imagery of the child-parent relationship.

It is against this background that a reference to earthly fathers appears in this longer passage. In verse 18 we read: "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers . . ." (*elutrōthēte ek tēs mataias humōn anastrophēs patroparadotou*).<sup>25</sup> The adjective *patroparadotos* ("transmitted by the fathers") is found neither in the LXX, nor elsewhere in the NT. In non-Christian sources it is a positive term praising the old traditions.<sup>26</sup> The author of 1 Peter seems to be the first Christian to apply it to the old, pagan way of life from which Christians are freed.<sup>27</sup>

Thus it is striking that earthly fathers are mentioned in a negative context: they pass on a "futile" lifestyle to their children. There are two possible lines of interpretation. On the one hand, it may be argued that the negative picture about earthly fathers serves as a contrast to highlight the greatness of the gifts of God the Father. In this case there is a tension between real earthly fathers and God the heavenly Father (the term being used in a figurative sense): our heavenly Father has to save us from the futile lifestyle inherited from our earthly fathers. On the other hand, it is also possible to argue that the reference to earthly fathers is introduced in order to point to human fallenness; forefathers throughout many generations are included.<sup>28</sup>

If we adopt the latter argument, then the context may shed a new light on v. 18. It becomes significant that the reference to earthly fathers appears in a context that is characterized by the familial imagery calling for obedience to God as Father. Earthly fathers are assumed to be honored, in spite of the fact that they participate in the process by which human fallenness is passed on to new generations. Thus it is possible to interpret this passage in such a way that it is not taken to imply dishonoring one's parents. Rather, since God is to be obeyed as "father," earthly fathers are supposed to receive due honor, in spite of their fallen nature.<sup>29</sup>

We briefly note that at the end of the letter the author refers to Mark as his "son" (5:13-14a): "She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark. Greet one another with the kiss of love." The structure of the letter-ending is similar to those of the Pauline letters.<sup>30</sup> The use of the

familial imagery in this verse is similar to the reference to Timothy and Titus as Paul's children. Though 1 Peter 5:13 uses the expression "son" (*Markos ho huios mou*) instead of "child," which is used in the Pauline Corpus, it too points to a spiritual relationship. Because of the word "son," Schrage rightly uses the term "spiritual fatherhood."<sup>31</sup> There may be a difference, however, when compared with the Pauline Corpus: in the case of Peter and Mark this may not imply that Mark has become a Christian through Peter.<sup>32</sup> There is a tradition attributed to a certain "elder" by Papias that Mark was the "interpreter" of Peter (recorded in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.15), and another tradition referring to Mark as a "follower" of Peter (*Hist. eccl.* 2.15.1). Michaels argues that the term "son" here "should be understood as 'convert' or 'disciple' (BGD, 833.1c) in the same way that Timothy is referred to as Paul's 'child.'"<sup>33</sup> Whether or not the latter interpretation is right, Michaels may be right at least in his other suggestion that "Peter seems to have adopted it here to give to his concluding words the ring of a family greeting (cf. his emphasis on the Christian community as a 'brotherhood' in 2:17; 5:9)."<sup>34</sup>

The reference to a "kiss" in v. 14 fits the familial imagery. We note that a few MSS add "holy" (*hagiō*) to the expression "kiss," instead of the reference to "love" (*agapēs*; the latter being adopted as the main text of NA27). "With the holy kiss" may be an assimilation to Pauline letter-endings (cf. e.g., Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20). "Peter's distinctive 'kiss of love' picks up the admonitions to mutual love in 1:22 and 4:8, and love for the whole Christian brotherhood in 2:17."<sup>35</sup> Schrage suggests that this "kiss" may have been part of early Christian worship, "als Zeichen

gegenseitiger Bruderliebe."<sup>36</sup> Thus the Christian congregation is depicted here as an extended family where "brethren" greet each other in this way.

To sum up, 1 Peter uses household imagery in the following ways: the author can refer to God as the "father" of the Christians (implying also their brotherhood to one another), and the author can refer to an individual as his own "son" (implying a close spiritual bond). In the NT only 1 Peter applies a reference to the traditions of the forefathers to the former pagan way of life of the addresses. However, this use does not negate the injunction to honor one's parents.

### Jude and 2 Peter

I do not discuss 2 Peter and Jude in detail, since they use familial imagery only in passing. The author of Jude uses family language only in v. 1: he refers to himself as the "brother of James," and he makes use of the expression "God the Father." The reference to being the brother of James is probably a claim to be the brother of the Lord as well.<sup>37</sup> Otherwise Jude calls his addressees "beloved" (vv. 3, 17, 20: *agapētoi*). The reference to "God the Father" (v. 1) must imply that the author shares the view found in other NT writings that Christians are the "children" of God, but he does not make more use of this imagery in the letter.

The author of 2 Peter calls his addressees "brethren" once (1:10). He refers to "God the Father" in 1:17; this occurrence belongs to the child-parent imagery concerning the relationship of Jesus to God. 2 Peter 1:17-18 refers to the scene of the "transfiguration": "For when he received honor and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, 'This is my beloved Son, with

whom I am well pleased,' we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain."

In 2 Peter 3:4 we find a reference to the "fathers"<sup>38</sup> who "fell asleep" (*hoi pateres ekoimēthēsan*), meaning the forefathers (2 Pet 3:3-4): "First of all you must understand this, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own passions and saying, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation.'" These "fathers" are either the Jewish patriarchs, or earlier Christian generations.<sup>39</sup> In either case, the expression is not used here to refer to people in their role as fathers of children. We note, however, that the very fact that forefathers are mentioned implies reverence toward them.

We have already mentioned that there is an idiomatic use of the term "children" in 2 Peter. In 2 Peter 2:14, at the end of a long list of vicious actions of false teachers, we find the expression: "Accursed children!" (*kataras tekna*). Richard Bauckham paraphrases the idiom in this way: "They are under God's curse."<sup>40</sup> He notes that literally the idiom means, "children of a curse," and calls it a Hebraism.<sup>41</sup>

Thus the few uses of familial imagery in Jude and 2 Peter are close parallels to the uses we meet in the NT elsewhere, though they are not elaborated in any detail in these letters.

### The Johannine Epistles

In the Epistles of John, the recipients are addressed frequently as "children." The author calls them his own children; and he also refers to them as God's children.<sup>42</sup> In 1 John 2:1 the author names the purpose of his writing. It is significant that this is the first time in 1 John when the

author calls his readers "children" (with a diminutive form, "my little children," *teknia mou*): "My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." By addressing his recipients in this way, the author implies that he has a loving relationship to them and that he writes with the expectation that they will obey him.

We note that in the same verse the author refers also to God as "Father" (he already did so in 1:2-3, and implied it in 1:7 by a reference to Jesus as "Son"). Thus the author uses the child-father imagery in a twofold way. First, he himself is the "father" of his addressees in a spiritual sense. We observe that he does not refer to himself as "father," but refers to his addressees as his "children." Second, Christians are regarded as the children of God. This is implied in the first two chapters and is expressed explicitly in 3:1a, 2: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. . . . Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."<sup>43</sup>

We can find further examples of these two uses, i.e., that both the author and God are seen in the role of the father. We name but a few texts. First John 2:12-14 is a well-structured passage: it has two triplets of addresses. The author begins the first part with the address: "little children" (v. 12). The readers may think it is the same usage as in 2:1.<sup>44</sup>

The author goes on to address "fathers" as a second group (v. 13a). A third group, "young men" (*neaniskoi*), are addressed in v. 13b; then each of the three groups is

addressed a second time (v. 14). On the second occasion, “children” are referred to with another word, *paidia*.<sup>45</sup> The Greek word is ambiguous, it can also mean “servants,” but it probably means “children” in this context, as they are praised because they “know the father.”

1 John 2:12-14 reads (RSV):

I am writing to you (*graphō humin*), little children, because your sins are forgiven for his sake (*dia to onoma autou*).

I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.

I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one.

I write to you (*egrapsa humin*), children, because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.

I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

Hans-Joseph Klauck summarises the “most favored” exposition of our days in the following way: The first items of both triplets concern Christians in general, i.e., all the members of the congregation (“als Anrede an die Gesamtgemeinde”). The second and the third items of the parallel structure are addressed to two “age groups” in the sense of the length of their being Christians.<sup>46</sup> Thus this section is probably addressing various groups among the recipients. Klauck himself suggests that it is worth considering that all three addresses refer to the whole congregation, but under different aspects.<sup>47</sup> An alternative view would be to understand the three addresses as referring to age groups. Klauck argues that this is unlikely because of the sequence, children-fathers-young men, and because of the content of

what is said to the different groups.<sup>48</sup>

If we accept that *teknia* and *paidia* (in this case as synonyms) refer to the whole congregation, then we have an ambiguity (perhaps intended by the author). On the one hand, they may be used to refer to the “children” of the author.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, the terms may refer to the “children” of God. Klauck argues that in v. 12 the expression “forgiveness of sins” and the reference to the “name” (*to onoma*) remind the recipients of their becoming Christians: “Kinder sind jene, die in Taufe und Sündenvergebung das neue Leben als Geschenk aus der Hand des Vaters empfangen.”<sup>50</sup>

In v. 13, “Father” must refer to God, because it stands in the singular, and also because children would not have to be reminded that they “know” their own earthly fathers. “Knowing” here probably refers to knowing God as someone who calls his children to love each other (cf. the immediate context: vv. 9-10).

We observe that this passage addresses children and fathers. We further note that God as Father appears in a context where earthly fathers are mentioned as well. This implies that various groups, including fathers, in a Christian household (and house church) should carry out their duties as God’s children.

In 1 John 3:9-10, the author uses the verb *gennaō* in the perfect tense when referring to the Christians being “born of God”: “No one born of God commits sin; for God’s nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God. By this it may be seen who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother.”<sup>51</sup> The imagery includes associations both to the family and to creation.

Christians thank God for their new life; that is why they follow his instructions.<sup>52</sup>

The author argues that because God loves the recipients (cf. 4:7-8), they ought to love one another as “brethren” (3:10b; cf. also 4:19-21, where, though not mentioned explicitly, God can be seen as “Father,” and this can serve as the ground for Christians to love one another). Rusam emphasizes that God’s fatherhood involves caring love.<sup>53</sup>

With these examples in the background, we cautiously raise the possibility that in 1 John 4:4 and in 5:21 there may be a conscious ambiguity in the use of *tekna*. On the one hand, it is probable that in both cases the term addresses the recipients as the “children” of the author, though the possessive pronoun “my” is not added in these cases. On the other hand, it may be that the author left out “my” on purpose: the addressees should think of themselves also as the children of God. In 4:4 this second possible meaning is implied by the beginning of the verse: “you are of God” (*humeis ek tou theou este*, the Greek preposition possibly implying being “born” of God, as in 3:9). The final verse of the letter, 5:21, is preceded by a reference to Jesus, the “Son” of God (5:20). Perhaps, then, the addressees are not only referred to as the author’s “children,” but also as the brethren of the Son, as God’s children.

To sum up, the author uses the imagery of the child-father relationship because he expects obedience to his ethical advice. The recipients are called the “children” of the author and of God, because they are expected to obey the teaching of the author, and to fulfil the will of God. This implies a child-parent relationship in which children honor and obey their parents.

Whereas 1 John does not begin like a typical letter, 2 John does contain the sender and the addressees (v. 1a): “The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth”. “Elder” (*ho presbuteros*) can be a reference to an office in the early church, but at the same time it can retain its original meaning: it can refer to an old person.<sup>54</sup> Klauck suggests that the grammatical form of the comparative, “older,” does not have to be stressed in the Greek, so the term can be translated as “der Alte” (“the Old One”).<sup>55</sup> The “elect lady” (*eklektē kuria*) is probably a metaphor for the congregation.<sup>56</sup> This view is strengthened by the last verse of the letter (v. 13), which refers to the “sister” of this lady: “The children of your elect sister greet you.”<sup>57</sup>

By the way of an *inclusio*, both the beginning and the end of the letter mention “children”: the addressees as well as those sending greetings are called *tekna*. Klauck rightly affirms that the letter is like correspondence within a family, but family in this context is understood as *familia Dei*.<sup>58</sup> It is worth noting that in v. 1 the “children” belong to the congregation: they are the children of the “elect lady.” This implies that the congregation can be thought of as a “mother.”<sup>59</sup> Verse 4a continues this usage: “I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children (*ek tōn teknōn sou*) following the truth.” Here we note that an exhortation is closely connected to praise: the author probably met some members of the congregation,<sup>60</sup> and by expressing his joy over them he implies that all of them should live like those he met. In v. 5 the author turns to the whole congregation (addressed as the “lady” again) in order to exhort them to fulfil the commandment of love.

We observe, however, that in v. 4b



another metaphor appears when God is referred to as "Father": "just as we have been commanded by the Father" (4b). In v. 3 we find a reference to peace from "God the Father" and Jesus is also mentioned together with an addition naming him as the "Son of the Father."<sup>61</sup> Thus it seems that the children of the congregation are at the same time the children of God.

The author of 3 John refers to himself as an elder; thus the letter begins by the same expression as 2 John does: *ho presbuteros*. However, there is a difference in the usage of the term "children": whereas in 2 John 4 the children of the "lady" were mentioned, in 3 John the author speaks about his own "children." In 3 John 3-4 we read: "For I greatly rejoiced when some of the brethren arrived and testified to the truth of your life, as indeed you do follow the truth. No greater joy can I have than this, to hear that my children (*ta ema tekna*) follow the truth."

The plural form, "my children," implies a general truth, but the immediate context, v. 3, makes it probable that the addressee of the letter, Gaius, is also included.<sup>62</sup> This is a further example of using the familial imagery to express the relationship between the author and his addressees. Our interpretation that Gaius is included in the circle of the "children" of the author is strengthened by the frequent reference to him as "the loved one" (vv. 1, 2, 5, 11). Gaius is praised for his services to the "brethren" (v. 5).<sup>63</sup> The reference to the "brethren" in vv. 3 and 5 implies that they are all "children" of God the Father.

Thus this letter supposes the child-parent imagery as regards the relationship between the addressees and God. At the same time, the idea that they are the "chil-

dren" of the author is more dominant in 3 John than in 2 John.

We observe that both 2 John and 3 John are concerned with a way of life in accordance with God's will (see e.g., 2 John 4; 3 John 11). The addressees are praised, but at the same time they are warned against the bad examples of others (see e.g., 2 John 7-11; 3 John 9-10). Thus we may see here a use of the familial imagery similar to that in the Pauline Corpus: congregational members are expected to follow the advice of the letter-writer and to live in accordance with the will of God; that is why they are referred to as the children of the writer and the children of God.

### Conclusion

To sum up, Christians are referred to as "children" in their relationship to the senders of letters (1 John, 3 John). "Son" can refer in a figurative sense to the spiritual bond between Christians (1 Peter). The figurative imagery may even refer to people as the "children" of the church (2 John).

God is referred to metaphorically as "Father" extensively in these writings. God is the "Father" of Jesus (2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John); and he is also the Father of the Christians (James, 1 Peter, 1 John). The parental imagery is used in these writings in order to imply a strong bond and loving feelings in the relationships to which it is applied. One particular consequence of the Christians being regarded as the children of God is that they are "brethren" to one another. This use is widely attested in early Christianity (here also in 1 Peter, 1 John, 3 John). Because Christians are loved by God, their "father," they ought to love one another as "brethren."

In general terms, in our sources it is

expected from the recipients of parental care that they will return such by their obedience to their teachers and to God's will. This implies a view of the child-parent relationship in which it is assumed that children honor and obey their parents.

Finally, we note the absence of references to tensions in the family that would be similar to those envisaged by some radical sayings of Jesus in the Gospel tradition. In an indirect way, this may confirm a thesis that Jesus' radical call to some disciples was not understood by the early church as a breach of the expectation of their pagan and Jewish environment that children owe honor to their parents.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Franz Mussner, *Der Jakobusbrief* (Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament XIII, Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1987) 141. See also Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (Black's New Testament Commentary; London: A. & C. Black, 1980) 133.

<sup>2</sup>Mussner, 141.

<sup>3</sup>So e.g., Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Exeter: Paternoster, 1982) 193; and Mussner, 219.

<sup>4</sup>So Hubert Frankemölle, *Der Brief des Jakobus* (Ökumenischer Taschenbuch-Kommentar 17/1-2; Gütersloh: Gütersloher/Würzburg: Echter, 1994) 2:710.

<sup>5</sup>See my *Habilitationsschrift*, entitled *The Child-Parent Relationship in the New Testament and its Environment*, accepted by the Lutheran Theological University in Budapest in October 2001.

<sup>6</sup>Host Balz and Wolfgang Schrage, *Die "Katholischen Briefe"* (Das Neuen Testament Deutsch 10; Göttingen/Zürich: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993) 20. In

this volume, James, 1-2 Peter, Jude are by Schrage (henceforth cited only as Schrage); 1-3 John are by Balz (henceforth cited only as Balz).

<sup>7</sup>See e.g., Frankemölle, 1:291, 295; and Mussner, 91. Concerning the use of the expression in James, Schrage, 20, affirms: "damit wird der Vaterbegriff in sonst im Neuen Testament unüblicher Weise kosmologisch verstanden und mit den Gestirnen verbunden."

<sup>8</sup>So Davids, 88.

<sup>9</sup>Laws, 72.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 75.

<sup>11</sup>Davids, 89.

<sup>12</sup>Laws, 75.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>"Of your ignorance" is partly or wholly missing in some MSS; in the Greek it is parenthetical, interrupting the expression "to former passions."

<sup>15</sup>See J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter* (Word Biblical Commentary 49; Waco, TX: Word, 1988) 56. Although the idiomatic use of "son(s) of . . ." is not discussed in this article, we note that since the idiom points to a strong, inseparable relationship, it is based on a family imagery in which sons imitate their fathers to such an extent that they become one with them. The idiomatic use in Eph 2:2 can be paralleled by the following expressions (using *huios/huioi*): "son of peace" (Luke 10:6); "sons of the resurrection" (Luke 20:36); "sons of light" (Luke 16:8; John 12:36; 1 Thess 5:5); "the son of perdition" (John 17:12); "sons of the day" (1 Thess 5:5). We note that the idiomatic usage appears with *tekna* in Eph 2:3 ("children of wrath"), Eph 5:8 ("children of light"), and in 2 Pet 2:14 (though here in reversed order, *kataras tekna*, "accursed children" [RSV]).

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 57.

<sup>17</sup>Though even this occurrence is open to discussion, see Michaels, 58.

<sup>18</sup>So *ibid.*, 60, pointing also to 1 Pet 2:9.

<sup>19</sup>With minor variants regarding the verb.

<sup>20</sup>So also Norbert Brox, *Der erste Petrusbrief* (Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 21; Zürich: Benziger/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1979) 79.

<sup>21</sup>Eduard Schweizer, *Der erste Petrusbrief* (Zürcher Bibelkommentare 15; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1998) 42.

<sup>22</sup>So Schweizer, *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>Michaels, 72.

<sup>24</sup>Schweizer, 31, affirms concerning 1 Pet 1:13-21: "In dem langen Abschnitt finden sich nur drei Tätigkeitswörter in der direkten Aussageform: 'hofft!—werdet!—wandert!' Es sind alles Aufforderungen, im Griechischen in der Zeitform, die den Neueinsatz betont."

<sup>25</sup>The order of the last two words is reversed in some MSS.

<sup>26</sup>See examples in Michaels, 64; e.g., a letter of King Attalus III to the people of Pergamum in 135 B.C.

<sup>27</sup>So Brox, 81.

<sup>28</sup>So e.g., *ibid.*, 80.

<sup>29</sup>Schweizer, 34-35, can point also to some good deeds of the forefathers: "Dabei haben diese [i.e., die 'Väter'] gewiss nicht nur Verbrechen und Perversitäten ausgeübt, sondern auch Kinder grossgezogen, Felder bestellt und für ihr Vaterland gekämpft, schöne Gottesdienste gefeiert und Opfer gebracht. 'Nichtig' war ihr Leben nicht, weil

es im Vergleich zu anderen Völkern inhaltlos oder besonders böse gewesen wäre, sondern weil Gott anderes mit ihnen wollte."

<sup>30</sup>See *ibid.*, 97.

<sup>31</sup>"geistliche Vaterschaft" (Schrage, 121).

<sup>32</sup>So Schweizer, 98, with a reference to Acts 12:12.

<sup>33</sup>Michaels, 312.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 313.

<sup>36</sup>Schrage, 121.

<sup>37</sup>So Udo Schnelle, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 2d ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1996) 475-76, who holds that this is a pseudepigraphical writing. For a monograph on this problem, see Richard Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990).

<sup>38</sup>Some MSS add *hēmōn*, thus referring to "our fathers."

<sup>39</sup>For the view that they are Jewish patriarchs, see, D. A. Carson *et al.*, who argue that "nowhere else in the New Testament is the expression 'the fathers' used of the early Christians" (D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* [Leicester: Apollos, 1992] 436). For the view that they are earlier Christian generations, see e.g., Schnelle, 485, who counts the historical Peter among the fathers already fallen asleep.

<sup>40</sup>Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Word Biblical Commentary 50; Waco, TX: Word, 1983) 258.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 267. So also Anton Vögtle, *Der Judasbrief, Der 2. Petrusbrief*. (Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 22; Zürich:

Benziger/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1994) 204; and Schrage, 144.

<sup>42</sup>When referring to the "author," I leave open the question whether the three letters were written by one author or 2-3 John were written by a different person. Similarly, I do not address the question of the historical order of the letters and their relationship to the Fourth Gospel. For a discussion of the issues involved, see Hans-Josef Klauck, *Der erste Johannesbrief* (Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 23/1; Zürich und Braunschweig: Benziger/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1991 (arguing for one author of the three letters who is not the same as the Fourth Evangelist; see esp. p. 126); and Schnelle (arguing for the priority of 2-3 John; see pp. 495-533, esp. 500-504, 516-18, 522). Dietrich Rusam holds that the Johannine Epistles follow the Gospel of John (*Die Gemeinschaft der Kinder Gottes: Das Motiv der Gotteskindschaft und die Gemeinden der johanneischen Briefe* [Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament 133; Stuttgart/Berlin/Köln: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1993]). He observes that 1 John has a larger number of examples of the terms "children of God" and "born of God" than John's Gospel has (11).

<sup>43</sup>Although in v. 1 some MSS have "has given *you*", it is clear that the author includes himself, because the verb stands in the first person plural form (*klēthōmen*), and because the author uses "we are" (*esmen*) in v. 2 (we note that *kai esmen* at the end

of v. 1 is omitted in some MSS). We may add that v. 2b may belong to this familial imagery as well; if so, then it echoes the similarity between children and their fathers (“we shall be like him”).

<sup>44</sup>Minuscule 630 even adds “my,” to make explicit that the author speaks about his own children.

<sup>45</sup>Some MSS wanted to have an exact parallel, so they have *paidia* also in v. 12 in the place of *teknia*.

<sup>46</sup>Klauck, *Der erste Johannesbrief*, 132.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>The hypothesis of John O’Neill is worth mentioning (1989, 282): “1 John, with its fierce command not to love the world nor the things in the world and to flee the lust of the flesh . . . (1 John 2:15f.) might well have first been written for a monastic community. Note that the community is male, and consists perhaps of three grades, children, men and fathers (2:12-14)” (“The Origins of Monasticism,” in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honor of Henry Chadwick*, ed. R. Williams [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989] 270-287). “Father” was the Abbot, i.e., the head of the house (see O’Neill, “New Testament Monasteries,” in *Common Life in the Early Church: Essays Honoring Graydon F. Snyder*, ed. J. V. Hills et al. [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998] 126-132).

<sup>49</sup>See e.g., Klauck *Der erste Johannesbrief*, 133, who speaks of the “role of the fatherly teacher,” known from Wisdom literature.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Concerning the use of the expression “born of God,” Rusam, 111,

affirms that: “Die Vaterschaft Gottes erfährt im 1Joh eine logische Begründung: Gott ist Vater der Glaubenden, weil sie aus ihm geboren sind.”

<sup>52</sup>Horst Balz also emphasizes the implication that God as father enables his children to withstand evil. Concerning this passage he (Balz, 190) affirms: “Konkret angespielt wird damit auf die Neugeburt der Glaubenden durch den Geist Gottes (vgl. Joh. 3,6-8). Die Möglichkeit eines Lebens im Widerspruch zur Sünde geht allein von Gott aus.”

<sup>53</sup>Rusam, 111, states: “So wird im 1Joh das Gebot der Gottes—und Bruderliebe weniger auf Gottes väterliche Macht zurückgeführt, durch die er die Möglichkeit hat zu gebieten, sondern auf seine väterliche Liebe.”

<sup>54</sup>See e.g., Balz, 213.

<sup>55</sup>Hans-Josef Klauck, *Der zweite und dritte Johannesbrief* (Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 23/2; Zürich: Benziger / Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1992) 28.

<sup>56</sup>So e.g., Balz, 213; see also S. S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (Word Biblical Commentary 51; Dallas, TX: Word, 1984) 318-319.

<sup>57</sup>The term “elect,” *eklektēs*, is replaced in a few MSS by *ekklēsias*, making the implied meaning explicit; see also Klauck, *Der zweite und dritte Johannesbrief*, 34 against the view that the addressee would be an individual, a real lady.

<sup>58</sup>Klauck, *Der zweite und dritte Johannesbrief*, 74.

<sup>59</sup>So also Balz, 213.

<sup>60</sup>So Klauck, *Der zweite und dritte Johannesbrief*, 45.

<sup>61</sup>Though some MSS omit this second occurrence of “Father,” while other MSS replace it by a reference to “God.”

<sup>62</sup>So also Klauck, *Der zweite und dritte Johannesbrief*, 85.

<sup>63</sup>Rusam, 212, has pointed out that the situation in 3 John fits the general picture we have of early Christianity inasmuch as there are probably house churches implied in this letter as well: Diotrophes probably did not receive some people into the congregation that met at his house (vv. 9-10); whereas Gaius is probably praised for his hospitality in receiving people into the congregation at his house (vv. 5-6). The letter mentioned in v. 9 must have been directed to the whole church in the community, and not just to one house church in it.