

(Premature) Death as a Good

An Introduction

Nimm, zarter Säugling, an den frühen Sensenschlag,
Und schlaf hernach vergnügt, bis an den jüngsten Tag.
Wohl dem, der zeitig fällt in meine dürren Hände;
So krönt den Anfang schon ein hochbeglücktes Ende.

Accept, tender infant, the scythe's blow,
And then sleep cheerfully until the end of days.
Blessed is he who falls into my bony hands in a timely
fashion.

That way, his very beginning is crowned with a most
happy ending.

—Death's address to the child in the "Totentanz"
freeze at the Marienkirche, Lübeck, Germany

There's a feeling that children aren't meant to die.

—*New Birth to Five: A Complete Guide to the
First Five Years of Being a Parent* (1994)

Here I lie at rest, a married woman, Veturia by name and descent, the wife of Fortunatus, the daughter of Veturius. I lived for thrice nine years—poor me—and I was married for twice eight. . . . I was married to one man. After having borne six children, one of whom survives me, I died.¹

The third-century tombstone in Pannonia, near modern-day Hungary, that bears this epitaph commemorates the life and death of the young wife of a Roman centurion. Veturia, the inscription claims, lived to be twenty-seven—thrice nine years—and was married for sixteen of these—twice eight. Those numbers were likely adjusted for purposes of symmetry and rhetorical drama: while Veturia may well have been betrothed to her husband at eleven, Roman law prohibited actual marriage until a girl had reached the age of twelve.² Nevertheless, Veturia no doubt spent the majority of her short life married—to one man (*uniuiga*), as the tombstone goes on to emphasize—and in that period gave birth to six children. By the time of her death, at just twenty-seven, she had lost five children, leaving her husband with one surviving offspring.

These figures are shocking to contemporary Western sensibilities; in fact, even for social historians accustomed to the brevity and exigencies of ancient life, an example like Veturia's tombstone throws into sharp relief otherwise abstract data concerning childhood mortality. Scholarly consensus concerning life expectancy in late antiquity remains frustratingly elusive—and this despite the concerted and erudite efforts of historians and demographers alike.³ Assessments of mortality rates for infants and children across the Roman Empire accordingly vary considerably, with estimates ranging from 35 to 50 percent.⁴ Yet whether half or a “mere” third of the Empire's population in late antiquity died before reaching maturity, childhood was a period of worry rather than wonder among Romans. The earliest moments of an

infant's life—the pregnancy and birth—were already fraught with peril. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, describes fourth-century households' experience of an impending childbirth as an exercise in anxious ambivalence: "Assume the moment of childbirth is at hand; it is not the birth of the child, but the presence of death that is thought of, and the death of the mother anticipated. Often, the sad prophecy is fulfilled and before the birth is celebrated, before any of the anticipated goods are tasted, joy is exchanged for lamentation."⁵

Gregory's vision was no doubt shaped by his treatise's grander literary project: the exultation of asceticism at the expense of married life. Yet his assessment echoes other, arguably more objective accounts of the dangers of childbirth in late antiquity for all parties involved.⁶ Even when both mother and child survived the birth, moreover, children's lives were filled with perils. Society's weakest members, they were most susceptible to the trials that all ancient Romans faced: warfare, starvation and malnutrition, and infectious diseases. Worse still, even the best informed and best intentioned of ancient experts frequently—and, no doubt, unwittingly—contributed to children's early demise. Soranus, renowned as the author of antiquity's only remaining treatise on "gynaecology," for example, advised against practices that have since been shown to dramatically increase the likelihood of a child's survival, including encouraging children to nurse immediately and for prolonged periods of time.⁷

Children's lives in antiquity, the evidence suggests, were thus nasty, brutish, and short to an even greater degree than those of the population at large. Still more troubling for historians, their lives and deaths have also been largely effaced from the historical record, whether literally so, as in the case of children's skeletal decomposition in Roman cemeteries, or metaphorically, by their

scant presence in the extant writings from this era. In the archaeological realm, recent decades have brought to light a considerable amount of data on children's lives and deaths throughout the Roman era, including the discovery and excavation of children's cemeteries. Yet the evidence remains both fragmentary in its publication and challenging in its interpretation.⁸ By contrast, what was preserved in the textual plane depends heavily on either the vagaries of climate or a scribe's willingness to painstakingly copy and recopy a text to preserve it for future generations.⁹ Household affairs, including those pertaining to children's lives, only rarely rose to this threshold.

The past few decades have nevertheless generated considerable scholarly interest in children in both the pre-Christian and the late ancient periods. Some of the highlights of this process include the work of Beryl Rawson, Maureen Carroll, David Bakke, Cornelia Horn and John W. Martens, and Ville Vuolanto.¹⁰ Along with the greater degree of attention children have elicited, their role in the ancient family has enjoyed a reappraisal of sorts. Nowhere is this more readily apparent than in studies of childhood mortality and parental responses thereto. Until quite recently the scholarly consensus pointed toward a largely disaffected attitude to children's deaths among ancient families. Family dynamics in antiquity were thought to have little in common with the warm affection parents and children are assumed to share today.¹¹ The death of children could be experienced as grievous inasmuch as it frustrated the family's reproductive aims and cheated parents out of the investment with which they had sought to ensure for themselves a comfortable old age. Genuine, disinterested parental love and concomitantly authentic grief, however, remained beyond the scope of these relationships.

Such assessments have considerable intuitive appeal in light of the precarious nature of children's lives in this period. Recent efforts to reconsider the available evidence, frequently with a helping hand from the social sciences, have nevertheless greatly complicated the notion that premodern parents were inured to their offspring's passing.¹² *Jephthah's Daughter, Sarah's Son* participates in these efforts to rethink the death of children in late antiquity, its impact on families, and the ways in which particularly Christian writers sought to assist families in thinking about its challenges; it does so by focusing on a group of children, unique among late antique writings on the subject, whose deaths were amply—one might even say excessively—documented and discussed. They are biblical characters—the children of patriarchs, prophets, and kings—whose passing or expected passing attracted extensive reflections in homilies, hymns, commentaries, and assorted other writings among ancient Christian communities.¹³ These include the deaths of Job's children in Job 1:18–19 and of the so-called Holy Innocents in Matthew 2:16–18; the violent deaths of Jephthah's daughter, narrated in Judges 11, and those of the Maccabean mother's seven sons in 2 Maccabees 7; and others.

As will have become apparent, these children, while in late ancient Christian sources frequently depicted as young, pitiful, and helpless, do not readily match up with modern notions of who qualifies as a child.¹⁴ Many, if not most, of the biblical characters whose deaths this book discusses are children first and foremost by virtue of being offspring. While their deaths place them in the category of the untimely departed, their stories attracted the attention of expositors largely by virtue of their impact on their biblical parents. In this sense, then, this is a book as much about parental bereavement as it is about children's death. And yet

the experience of a family's grief, dismay, relief, or even pious joy in the face of a child's passing is very nearly as inaccessible to contemporary historians as the children's own. On the one hand, sources narrating such experiences are scarce. There are, for example, no parallels to the diary of George Sphrantzes, a fifteenth-century Byzantine father who recorded the deaths of four of his five children, declaring himself "extremely affected" by their passings.¹⁵ On the other hand, where we do catch a glimpse of parents' self-described reaction to their children's death, as in the case of Paulinus of Nola's letter of consolation and commiseration to friends after the death of their sons, the witnesses reflect rhetorical constructions of socially, culturally, and religiously approved performances of emotions, rather than evidence of an author's authentic experience.¹⁶

In the expansive gaps between historians' apprehension of the historical realities of childhood mortality in late antiquity, and the smattering of witnesses to Christians' attitudes to such losses, echo liturgical sources: sermons, hymns, prayers, and commentaries are all replete with accounts of bereaved mothers and grieved fathers, including those narrated in the first person. Liturgists appropriated the voices of Eve and Sarah, Job and Jephthah, and other biblical parents to express lament and dismay at children's fates, or even to attempt to bargain with the divine by offering life for life. The resulting expositions frequently add dramatic narrative flourish to their scriptural bases, or even depart from them in striking, emotionally charged ways. Despite, or perhaps precisely because of their adaptation of biblical text to writers' or audiences' affective needs, many of these readings proved remarkably pervasive, circulating among communities and retaining their staying power well beyond antiquity itself, even to the present day.

These narratives are not ipso facto reliable accounts of what bereaved Christians experienced, or how mothers and fathers whose children had died sought to cope with their loss. They do, however, reflect one set of cultural scripts instructing Christians how they might order their emotions and actions in the face of a child's death. When homilists and hymnodists thus dwelled on and indeed exacerbated some of the Bible's most fraught passages, they deployed liturgy to create and re-create emotional landscapes for their audiences, and in the process sought to guide communities' experience and expression of their grief. In the words of Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "In stories such as the Holy Innocents, or the murder of Abel or the death of Jephthah's daughter, the congregation would hear affirmed the horror of unmitigated loss. Again, such narratives affirmed the starkness of grief in human life, even while set in liturgical frames that held up, always, the solace of eucharistic resolution, the promise of life to come."¹⁷

The Christian writers who crafted liturgical narratives surrounding parental bereavement made their audiences participants in performing visions of biblical selfhood that Christians could embrace, reject, or, perhaps most commonly, hybridize with other available models for experiencing and performing loss. Even in the context of late ancient Christianity, however, theirs were not the only, or even the most prominent, voices. Some of the most famous perspectives on childhood mortality and parental bereavement thus arise from a different literary context: that of the theological treatise.

PHILOSOPHIES OF LOSS

With regard to death, as in many other realms, early Christian authors shared the attitudes of their philosophical forebears; Plato

and his heirs might not have had access to the entire truth as found in the teachings of Jesus Christ, but what they did propound was frequently wholly admirable. The fifth-century bishop of Ravenna, Peter Chrysologus, for example, cites with approval “the old tomes which the ancients wrote about the benefits of death.”¹⁸ Those writings had “dried up tears, stopped sighs, put an end to groans, and hemmed in sorrows.”¹⁹ Lacking the ability to give humanity hope for life after death, they had succeeded only imperfectly; their wisdom could nevertheless be appropriated for Christian uses.

Those philosophical writings that addressed children’s lives and deaths at all treated them as occasions for forming oneself in virtue. “One man prays,” the emperor Marcus Aurelius wrote in his *Meditations*, “‘do not take my dear child from me,’ but you [ought to pray], ‘May I not fear the loss of my child.’ Turn your prayers in this direction, and see what comes of it.”²⁰ Yet even the most philosophically inclined were not always able to face the death of their children with such equanimity. A letter by the elder Seneca to his friend Marullus thus contains a sharp rebuke over the other man’s excessive grief at the death of his young son. Seneca was prepared to countenance a measure of mourning, especially at the times and places appropriate for indulging such natural sentiment.²¹ In Marullus’s case, however, embarrassing, “womanish” grief required correction rather than consolation, Seneca writes, especially since the one so mourned was still at an age where he was better acquainted with his nurse than his father. “Your son,” Seneca reminds his companion, “a little child of unknown promise, is dead, [and] a moment of time has been lost.”²² To die young, in Seneca’s view, was no greater boon or evil than to die in the fullness of one’s years; indeed, from the cosmic perspective both scenarios looked suspiciously

similar. Moreover, to live a long life was a risky venture, and children were more likely to disappoint than to delight their parents: "Hence this little boy has lost nothing except a hazard where loss was more assured than gain. He might have turned out temperate and prudent; he might, with your fostering care, have been moulded to a better standard; but (and this fear is more reasonable) he might have become just like the many."²³

Christian teaching on the death of children carried forward many of the philosophical strands noted above, emphasizing the unavoidability of death, the dangers life posed for the unwary, and the concomitant uselessness of grief, all the while coupling these with the assurance that each death was the product of God's will and, as such, a perfectly just and beneficent manifestation thereof. The most eloquent exemplar of such reflections comes from the pen of Gregory of Nyssa, the first and, for many centuries, the only Christian author to dedicate a treatise to the theological challenges presented by the death of infants. The work, titled "Concerning Infants Who Have Died Prematurely," therefore merits a more in-depth discussion.²⁴

Gregory's work takes its impetus only indirectly from the topic of infant mortality per se; his primary concern is rather the question of divine reward and retribution. The first two-thirds of the treatise accordingly addresses the question of whether it is not better to have died prior to committing any sins—and thus to approach the heavenly judgment as a clean slate—rather than at a later age. The question is not uncommon among late ancient Christians. Early Christian writers in both East and West readily assumed that children were in a state of primordial innocence, akin to that of Eve and Adam prior to the fall.²⁵ The question whether such innocence was *prima facie* deserving of divine reward was, by contrast, a point of contention.

Jacob of Serugh, writing in the sixth century, could celebrate the infant as purer and thus more pleasing to God than even monks or martyrs;²⁶ by contrast, Origen was prepared to praise childlikeness in the adult who had, in full command of reason, embraced the qualities that in children themselves sprang from ignorance as much as from innocence.²⁷

Gregory of Nyssa's elder contemporary, Gregory Nazianzen, perhaps alludes to a similar sentiment among certain Christians in his *Oration on Holy Baptism*; these misguided individuals, Nazianzen claims, speak of prematurely deceased infants as being "neither glorified nor punished by the righteous Judge, as unsealed and yet not wicked, but [as] persons who have suffered rather than done wrong."²⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, by contrast, finds the infant innocent—and as such meriting the enjoyment of eternal bliss—albeit without being in a privileged position vis-à-vis those who had enjoyed long and faithful lives.²⁹ To die young was surely preferable to having died a sinner, Gregory concedes, but so was never having been born at all. The mature Christian, by contrast, enjoyed an expanded appreciation of all that the afterlife had to offer, his natural and intellectual maturity enhancing and multiplying his potential for appreciating divine delights.

Such an assessment, however, raised the specter of theodicy: why would God permit the death of those who had yet to reach the fullness of human capacity? Nothing happens without divine approval, Gregory conceded; the death of infants was thus a manifestation of God's providence. By it, Gregory suggests, God preserves children from falling into sin: "It is a sign of the perfection of God's providence, that He not only heals maladies that have come into existence, but also provides that some should be never mixed up at all in the things which He has

forbidden.”³⁰ To illustrate the process of divine reasoning, Gregory here analogizes life to an elaborate banquet. All guests are invited by its host to partake, yet not all have equal ability to deal responsibly with the delicacies and temptations offered. Under these circumstances, the discerning host will remove in a timely fashion those who might otherwise fall into drunkenness and spoil the occasion for both themselves and others: “[T]o prevent one who has indulged in the carousals to an improper extent from lingering over so profusely furnished a table, he is early taken from the number of the banqueters, and thereby secures an escape out of those evils which unmeasured indulgence procures for gluttons.”³¹ In a similar vein, Gregory suggests, divine providence escorts from the banquet of life some in infancy, others in childhood, in order to preserve them and others from the ill effects of their falling into sin.

Gregory’s advice strikes contemporary readers—and, one suspects, many ancient ones—as at the very least tone-deaf with regard to the plight of grieving families. He is not, however, alone in his assessment; the suggestion that children stood only to benefit from death was widespread throughout antiquity, echoing throughout both Christian and non-Christian sources from across and beyond the Roman Empire. Parents ought to rejoice, Christian writers suggest, at surrendering their children back to God before they could cause them grief by their sinful actions and inclinations: far better to see the child dead in body but alive with Christ, than to witness the inverse scenario.

Indeed, children themselves could be said to prefer afterlife to life with their families. Gregory I’s *Dialogues*, for example, recount the story of a young girl who, when presented by the virgin Mary with the opportunity to join her heavenly attendants, had joyfully and with great determination embraced death,

leading Gregory to conclude, “Inasmuch as the human race is subject to many and innumerable vices, I think that the heavenly Jerusalem must be populated in large part with children and infants.”³² A similar account comes from a letter by Timothy II of Alexandria. According to Timothy, he had learned from his own *abba* of a young boy who had died from snakebite. When the saint resurrected him and he returned to his overjoyed father, the boy told of the paradisiacal garden where he had enjoyed play with companions while being watched over by angels in the guise of the deceased children’s parents.³³ His father, needless to say, permitted his son to return to his preferred state—death—rather than force his presence in this world or selfishly mourn his passing.³⁴

SCOPE AND STRUCTURE

These accounts, for all their diversity, share a common message: the death of children was a boon to both the deceased and to their families—an occasion for parental delight rather than grief. Against this backdrop stand the voices, provocative in their incongruity, of biblical characters’ unrestrained grief at the loss of their children: their lamentations, challenges to God, and efforts to bargain with the divine. They reflect counternarratives, less well attested among the sources traditionally considered by historical theologians, but nevertheless no less vital for their communities. Such narratives found favorable anchors in a select few biblical characters—a strategy this book pursues as well. Each chapter accordingly centers on one or two of the scriptural passages and *dramatis personae* in question, traces their interpretation in the context of childhood mortality and parental bereavement in late ancient writings, and, whenever

possible, explores the interpretive trajectories leading from text to interpretation to communal deployment beyond their original context.

Beforehand, chapter 1 provides readers with a brief outline of the social, religious, and ritual context surrounding children's deaths, burials, and commemoration in late antiquity. Evidence for the processes and mechanism by which Christian children during the fourth through sixth centuries moved from sickbed to grave and beyond is limited, and extant sources attest to a diverse range of practices, depending on families' geographic location, economic resources, and simple preferences. This chapter nevertheless provides a framework for locating the sources presented throughout the rest of the book in the life cycle of children and parents.

Chapter 2, "East of Eden," turns to one of the most significant intertexts for the discussion of childhood mortality: the opening chapters of Genesis and their portrayal of Adam and Eve as Scripture's first bereaved parents. Cain's killing of his brother, Abel, early Christian interpreters noted, introduced death into a previously deathless world. Abel's passing in early Christian literature became an occasion of dramatic grief for all of creation, but particularly for Eve, whose grief over her and Adam's expulsion from paradise was compounded by the loss of her children to death and banishment. The laments that writers of particularly the Syriac tradition scripted for her provided Christian parents with an opportunity to see their own losses refracted through the lens of that first, shocking bereavement. And yet, homilists and hymnodists reassured their audiences, they and their children could recoup paradise in due course: the prematurely deceased in particular would return to a new, improved Eden, one devoid of the threat of further death.

Chapter 3, “Mourning Sarah’s Son,” focuses on the Akedah, the “Binding of Isaac.” Perhaps the most common trope in late ancient writings on childhood mortality was that of children being sacrificed to God. Genesis 22’s account of Isaac’s survival, his father’s hand being stayed by angelic intervention, did not discourage interpreters from presenting Abraham as an exemplar for parental submission. His emotional restraint and ready accession to the divine command to kill his son presented homilists with an opportunity to exhort Christian parents to do likewise, by surrendering their offspring to martyrdom or a monastic vocation or, more commonly, by responding piously to a child’s death from illness or injury. At times, however, Christian exponents showed themselves dissatisfied with Abraham’s stoic response, instead introducing Sarah into the narrative as a compensatory figure. As such, she appears prominently in a number of late ancient reflections on the text, providing Christian audiences with models of motherly grief and protest against the divine—even at times saving her son’s life with her lament.

Given the Akedah’s impact on discourses of childhood mortality, it is perhaps not surprising that late ancient writers identified parallels to its main characters in other parts of the Hebrew Scriptures. Particularly significant among these are the account of Jephthah’s daughter in the book of Judges and that of the mother of the Maccabean martyrs in Second Maccabees. The former, despite the different (and entirely more gruesome) outcome, provided counterparts to both Abraham and Isaac in the guises of Jephthah and his daughter. The latter featured a mother who superseded even Abraham by suffering death and indeed martyrdom seven times over in her sons. Chapter 4, “Echoes of the Akedah,” explores the deployment of these passages by late ancient writers to address parental bereavement.

Christian exegetes struggled with both characters' divergences from late ancient masculine and feminine ideals. Jephthah drew as much criticism for expressing distress at the prospect of killing his daughter as for unwittingly vowing to do so. Most early Christian writers judged harshly Jephthah's grief; yet at least one author, the sixth-century Syriac homilist Jacob of Serugh, treats Jephthah as an exemplar of balanced affections, modeling for late ancient audiences appropriate allegiance both to the divine and to their families. In contrast to Jephthah's ambivalent emotional display, the Maccabean mother already in the biblical account appears as "manly," urging her sons toward martyrdom rather than lamenting their deaths. Christian interpreters both celebrated the character's fortitude and struggled to domesticate her, deploying the Maccabean mother as an example for Christian wives and mothers: like their biblical model, they, too, ought to show patience in the face of life's challenges, including the death of a child.

Chapter 5, "Death, Demons, and Divine Intervention," in turn, focuses on one of the most popular passages by which late ancient exponents sought to address parental bereavement: that of Job, the righteous gentile, who suffers a series of increasingly grave losses, including the violent and simultaneous death of his ten children. Job's status as a married, wealthy father recommended him to late ancient writers as a model for lay Christians. The latter shared his station and could expect to be tested in similar ways, including the death of one or more of their offspring. Given the dramatic nature of Job's bereavement, and its emergence from a contest between supernatural beings, the text also provided homilists with the opportunity to address questions of human agency, divine intervention, and demonic interference in children's lives, and the range of appropriate (and inappropriate) Christian responses. A number of homilists