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*The Poet's Gift:
Toward the Renewal of Pastoral Care*

The Child's Song

The Religious Abuse
of Children

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The Child Jesus as Endangered Self

If Kierkegaard perceived Abraham as an idealized father—one who could meet emotional needs his natural father could or would not meet—I suggest that Jesus, too, engaged in a similar idealization, but that, in his case, the idealized father was God himself.

When I was a seminary student, my student colleagues and I were warned by our New Testament professors not to view the four Gospels as historical documents. We were especially cautioned against our natural but naïve inclination to use these texts to gain access to the historical Jesus. The Jesus of history, we were told, is inaccessible because the sources that attest to what he said, did, and intended were not written as history, much less biography, but for purposes of proselytizing in behalf of the early Christian movement.

Since the time that I was in seminary, there has been a dramatic resurgence of interest among New Testament scholars in the historical Jesus. This renewed interest has been prompted by the discovery and accessibility to scholars of extracanonical writings (notably, the Dead Sea Scrolls), and also by the emergence of new hermeneutical theories that are applicable to the Gospel texts, especially theories derived from literary criticism. There has also been renewed interest in the use of sociological theories that shed new light on the social and political context in which Jesus lived. Lagging far behind, and considered the most suspect of these new “secular” (or nontheological) approaches, is the use of psychological theory in the interpretation of the Gospels. While the sociological study of the early Christian movement has gained some acceptance within biblical studies, psychology remains quite suspect, and what little has been done to date has to some extent validated such suspicion.

It is noteworthy, however, that some very penetrating psychological interpretations of various biblical texts have been made by feminist biblical scholars, none of whom view themselves as psychologists per se, but who in fact engage in psychological interpretation by virtue of the topics they choose to address. The topic of women’s victimization is, for example, inherently psy-

chological. It is impossible not to engage in psychological interpretation when one addresses the theme of the victimization of women as revealed, directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, in selected biblical texts. This theme is inherently psychological.

When I was a graduate student at The University of Chicago in the late 1960s, I became familiar with the work of David Bakan (referred to in the previous chapter), who taught in the psychology department. In his writings, but especially in his lectures in his course on the psychology of religion, Bakan spoke with considerable passion and urgency about the theme of child abuse, and sought to demonstrate that this was a central, perhaps *the* central psychological theme in the Bible. His interpretations of the stories of Abraham and Isaac, of Job and his sons, and of Jesus, all in terms of the “infanticidal impulse” of parents toward their offspring were met with considerable skepticism by divinity students who attended his lectures, but, for reasons that I did not then understand, and now only imperfectly understand, I found them compelling and persuasive. I will never forget the evening when he pointed out that Freud’s oedipal theory is a half-truth. Yes, it is true that Oedipus wanted to kill his father, but this desire was not inherent in Oedipus. He was not born with murderous impulses, but was provoked by his parents’ prior action of exposing him in the forest, in the dead of winter, fully expecting him to die. Instead, he was found by a shepherd and reared as the shepherd’s own child. It is not, as Melanie Klein and her followers have suggested,¹ that children are innately hateful toward their parents. These attitudes have been provoked by their parents’ aggression against them. The same theme, according to Bakan, runs throughout the Bible, the most dramatic instance being the story of Abraham and Isaac, which Bakan, as we saw in chapter 5, interprets as the murderous impulses of Abraham against a child who was fathered by another man. This interpretation left my divinity school cohorts incredulous, and yet, the issue of illegitimacy is a very important theme in the Bible, reappearing (as briefly noted in chapter 3) in the case of Jesus, and I, for one, did not then or now find Bakan’s interpretation difficult to swallow. As feminist biblical scholars have now begun to open up the whole question of women’s victimization as a pervasive (or, should we say, evasive) theme in the Bible, Bakan’s interpretations of biblical texts as concerned with the victimization of children no longer seem so far-fetched. What I will explore in this chapter is the convergence of these two themes in the life of Jesus.

Looking back on my own work as a psychobiographer, I recognize a common theme in my studies of John Henry Newman, Orestes Brownson, Abraham Lincoln, and Saint Augustine, namely, the theme of the suffering of children due to parental mistreatment or to emotional neglect, sometimes but not always owing to tragedy and misfortune.² Newman was raised in his grandmother’s home during the first years of his life, prior to boarding

school, even though his parents were both living.³ Brownson was raised by foster parents because his mother, after his father's death, could not support her family. Lincoln's mother died when he was a child, and his father, himself emotionally incapable of providing care and nurture, became the object of lifelong resentment. And, as we saw in chapter 2, Augustine was beaten by his teachers at school, and when he complained about his mistreatment, his parents mocked him, siding with the teachers. My studies of these particular historical figures—religious personalities—have supported Erik Erikson's much-debated interpretation of Luther as a child who experienced considerable emotional trauma, the victim of his father's abusive behavior and of his mother's acquiescence.⁴

My exploration here on Jesus as a victimized child continues the same line of inquiry. In centering on Jesus, I am aware that I am undertaking an unusually perilous task, as we lack the usual sources of information that are commonly used to develop a psychobiography. There are no personal letters and diaries, no reminiscences from the pens of siblings, parents, and friends, and no contemporary accounts of what it was like to be a child growing up in Galilee at the time that Jesus lived. The lack of such evidence would probably be enough to dissuade any responsible historian from embarking on this particular project. Even if there were no paucity of evidence, there is also the fact that such an investigation comes up against strong taboos that are present with any revered historical figure, but are dramatically magnified in the case of Jesus.

When I was describing the general argument that I planned to develop in this chapter to a group of our summer school students at lunch, one of the students, a pastor, said, "I have a church in a small town near Peoria, and I can tell you that what you are saying would never play there." He went on to say that the circumstances of Jesus' childhood are of no interest to his parishioners, or to him personally, as these things simply do not matter. What matters is that Jesus brought a new message of hope and deliverance, one that is as relevant today as it was in his own day. I responded by noting that even if we today may not be concerned about the circumstances of Jesus' childhood, we can assume that he himself was keenly interested in them, and it is his own concern with his childhood that I am trying to understand. How did *he* feel about his experience as a child? How did *his* feelings about these experiences influence his adult life, including his desire to bring a new message of hope and deliverance? Could it be that this very message had its origins in his childhood experience?

While I was basically satisfied with my response, I came away from this conversation with a much greater appreciation for the fact that the psychobiographical study of Jesus is a terribly risky enterprise, because it flies in the face of some deeply established taboos within the Christian community against opening up the whole issue of the victimization of children. By con-

tinuing to assert that we should not even be curious about Jesus' childhood, we place a veil of secrecy over the experiences of all children, including our own childhoods, using our religion to legitimate such secrecy, and to support the suppression of our curiosity, as adults, about our experiences as children.

As we saw in chapter 1, Alice Miller argues that we have very strong taboos against wanting and seeking to know what we experienced as children.⁵ Such taboos serve mainly to spare the parents, to keep what they have done to their children a deep secret. Moreover, the theories we adults put forward to "explain" what occurs in childhood are typically designed to maintain the secrecy. She is especially critical of Freud's backpedaling on the issue of the sexual abuse of children, placing his own concerns for professional ostracism above his commitment to the truth as he knew it.

I am not primarily concerned here with Miller's criticism of Freud, as this whole issue has already been discussed. What concerns me instead, as I mentioned briefly in chapter 3, is the similar use of certain theological theories, particularly the theory that Jesus was born of a virgin. This theory serves a similar purpose, that of keeping what really happened in Jesus' case from coming to light, and thereby giving the practice of sparing the parents a religious legitimization. Once we as children learn how babies are actually conceived, we can then be introduced to the theory that Jesus was born of a virgin, the "father" being the Holy Spirit. Before the time that we know how children are conceived, this theory is not very relevant to us. After we know, it is incomprehensible to our natural thought processes ("Why should the conception of Jesus be any different from the conception of all the other children?"), but its very incomprehensibility enables the promoters of this theory to say that this is a matter of faith, and that we should not rely on our own powers of thought, but instead accept and believe what adults are telling us is so. How was he really conceived? What were the real circumstances of his conception? To ask such questions is to begin to lift the veil of secrecy which, in Miller's view, can only serve the purpose of sparing the parents. It does not serve the interests of the children, or of the adults who want to discover the origins of their present emotional distress in what happened to them as children.

Much contemporary biblical scholarship maintains this same prohibition against the desire to know about the circumstances of Jesus' conception, and their possible influence on his adult life. Today, however, the theories that are used to dissuade us from our natural curiosity about his childhood are less overtly theological and more related to historical method. While some biblical scholars today may actually believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, many probably do not believe this to be literally the case. Most believe that Joseph was his father. For them, the theory of the virgin birth is no longer a sufficient basis for maintaining the taboo against inquiring into the circumstances of Jesus' conception. Alternative grounds for suppressing our natural

desire to know become necessary, and the most common argument is now that as Jesus' childhood was not of primary concern to the Gospel writers, it should not be of great concern to us. As the Gospel writers have other more important issues they want to address (they are not, after all, biographers), we should take their cue and not pursue an issue that is tangential and ultimately unimportant. In support of this position, biblical scholars also note that there is very little evidence in the Gospels about Jesus' childhood, thus confirming that it was not of primary concern to the Gospel writers. They have reinforced this position by pointing out how unsuccessful have been the attempts of psychologists and others to create a psychological profile of Jesus, frequently citing Albert Schweitzer's conclusion, in his thesis written for his medical degree in 1913, that such efforts have been exercises in futility.⁶

I must admit that, throughout the years that I was engaged in psychobiographical studies of the figures noted above, I shared the same skepticism regarding a psychobiography of Jesus, and largely for the same reasons. I felt that the best one could do with a figure like Jesus would be to develop an interpretation similar to those frequently found in psychoanalytic and analytic psychology (Jungian) journals, which focus on a literary character in a novel or play. One would, for example, offer a psychological interpretation of Matthew's Jesus in much the same way that others have developed psychological interpretations of William Shakespeare's Hamlet or Herman Melville's Ahab. It would be understood that one was merely applying one or another psychological theory to a literary text, one that, in this case, happens to be of the genre of gospel rather than play or novel. A literary, not historical, Jesus would be the object of psychological interpretation.

I am now convinced, however, that to settle for half a loaf in this fashion is to accept uncritically the assumption by which biblical scholars have been able to dissuade us from our natural curiosity about Jesus' childhood, the assumption that his childhood was not of urgent concern to the Gospel writers themselves. I am persuaded that his childhood was of very great concern to the Gospel writers precisely because they were aware that the circumstances of his conception and birth were of great interest to prospective converts to the Christian movement. Even if the Gospel writers had not been curious themselves, and even if they had been personally disposed to the view that all that really matters is the fact that Jesus brought a message of hope and deliverance, the issue could not be ignored, and they knew this. Questions were being raised concerning the legitimacy of Jesus' conception, and two of the four Gospel writers—Matthew and Luke—were sufficiently concerned with these questions that they began their Gospels with these very questions in mind. While their manner of addressing these questions was partly influenced by the taboo against lifting the veil of secrecy, mainly in order to spare the parents (especially Mary, who was probably alive at the

time they wrote their Gospels), it was also influenced by their desire to show that Jesus' conception and birth were related to his message of hope and deliverance.

We might also ask: What is it that men and women, in their time and ours, seek deliverance from? And why is it that we are so much in need of the hope that Jesus' message offers? I believe that our desire for deliverance can be traced all the way back to childhood, when we experienced ourselves as captive and vulnerable selves, selves who were emotionally imprisoned and decidedly not the carefree individuals that adults imagined us to be. We were endangered selves. In fact, it is not too much to claim that childhood is the period in life when our selfhood is most endangered. This makes a certain kind of obvious sense, as it is in childhood (also in old age) that we are especially vulnerable, greatly dependent on others, mainly parents, for our very survival. But we need to go beyond the obvious, and beyond the issue of our physical survival, and to ask why it is that the *self*—the very core of our being and the locus of our self-reflective capacities—is most endangered in childhood.

Again, I find myself agreeing with Alice Miller that, for most of us, our endangerment as selves was not primarily because we felt physically threatened, but because we were learning to suppress our awareness of ourselves, of our own experiencing. We learned to deny our experiences, that which we most deeply felt within us, thus splitting off our conscious selves from much of what we felt. We did this, in Miller's view, largely from a need to spare our parents. Instead of expressing our deep grievances against them, we created excuses for them, rationalizing for them, and telling ourselves that our anger and hurt is immature, if not shameful, unbecoming of good children. After all, our parents deserve our gratitude, not our anger and accusations.

So we created a kind of fictive self, based on a romanticized or idealized view of our experience in the world, a self based on the assumption that we cannot bear to be aware. Once formed, this fictive self not only survives childhood, but its influence expands, as we find more and more reasons to be sparing: not only of other persons on whom we depend, but also of social institutions, on which we cannot but rely. We rationalize for them, finding plausible reasons for why they had no choice but to betray us and cause us to suffer.

On the other hand, childhood may also be a time when our sense of selfhood is *least* endangered, when we are still relatively free to be aware of what we are experiencing, and free to disclose such awareness to others. Miller's picture of childhood as a time when our true self is seriously endangered is undoubtedly one-sided, borne of her experience of being a therapist to adults who had miserable childhoods, and of the fact that her own awareness of her experience of being abused as a child emerged only after years of therapeutic practice and personal self-analysis. Childhood, then, may also be

a time when we may still exhibit a refreshing freedom to see things as they are, and to be unsparing in what we say about what we see. As Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay "Self-Reliance," notes:

The nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature. A boy is in the parlor what the pit is in the playhouse; independent, irresponsible, looking out from his corner on such people and facts as pass by, he tries and sentences them on their merits, in the swift summary way of boys, as good, bad, interesting, silly, eloquent, troublesome. He cumbers himself never about consequences, about interests: he gives an independent, genuine verdict. You must court him: he does not court you.⁷

In contrast, says Emerson, "the man is, as it were, clapped into jail by his consciousness. As soon as he has once acted or spoken with *éclat*, he is a committed person, watched by the sympathy or the hatred of hundreds whose affections must now enter into his account. There is no Lethe for this. Ah, that he could pass again into his neutrality!"⁸

Here Emerson, himself deprived as a boy of love and affection by Calvinistic parents whose austere child-rearing practices included depriving the children of food while the parents ate their fill (an instance of what Miller calls poisonous pedagogy), reveals another side of childhood, the freedom to say whatever one pleases and not to measure the consequences. It is this freedom—the freedom to be unsparing in his attack on those social forces and conventions that deplete the true self, leaving it feeling empty and powerless—that Emerson now evidences in his celebrated paean to self-reliance, and that I want to believe is the impetus behind my own decision to explore the childhood of Jesus. As Miller shows, children learn very early to imprison themselves in their consciousness by learning not to be aware. But, as she also insists, such self-imprisonment is not irrevocable, as one can just as surely learn to violate social taboos and prohibitions against being aware, and to reject the theories about ourselves that not only keep us in the dark but also undermine our confidence in our natural, God-given capacity to know what we see and feel. It is in the spirit of such freedom that I now invade the parlor long dominated by professional biblical scholars, and offer my own "independent, genuine verdict" about Jesus. This is a verdict that I have presented previously in oral form as a respondent to a paper by John W. Miller on Jesus' "age-thirty transition,"⁹ but am now emboldened to set down in writing because confirmation of my intuitions has recently been provided by a biblical scholar, Jane Schaberg, who, in spite of being a woman, has managed to gain entry to the parlor, as an adult!

Yet, from what I gather from the preface to her book on the illegitimacy of Jesus,¹⁰ her efforts have been criticized for being "too imaginative." In what I take to be a kind of Emersonian protest, possibly borne of noncha-

lance regarding from whence *her* next meal is coming, Schaberg says, "Now that this book is finished, one of my own criticisms of it is that it is not imaginative enough."¹¹ It goes without saying that one of the ways adults squelch the awareness of children is to suggest that these little ones may be allowing their imaginations to run away with them. Yet, as Miller points out in her essay on the emperor's new clothes: "The cry of the child in Andersen's fairy tale—'But [the emperor] doesn't have anything on!'—awakens people from a mass hypnosis, restores their powers of perception, frees them from the confusion caused by the authorities, and mercilessly exposes the emptiness to which rulers as well as masses have fallen victim. All of this happens suddenly, sparked by the single exclamation of a child."¹² So, my views on the child Jesus are those of an adult who has nonetheless tried to take the perspective of a child for whom the real self lives in the free exercise of the gift of true imagination.

The Illegitimacy Argument

The infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke are concerned to tell the reader that Jesus' conception and birth were very special, that these events, as interpreted by Matthew and Luke, establish that he was God's chosen son, the one whose coming was foretold by the prophets. In making this affirmation, these narratives also reveal that Matthew and Luke were very much aware of the fact that many people had serious difficulty with such a claim because Jesus' conception and birth could easily be viewed as disconfirming evidence for this very claim. As Schaberg points out, one of the most persistent arguments mounted against the Christian movement's claim that Jesus was the promised one was the allegation that he was illegitimate, fathered not by Joseph, the man to whom Mary was engaged at the time and whom she subsequently married, but by some other man. While biblical scholars have traditionally dismissed this allegation on the grounds that it was concocted by the movement's adversaries in order to discredit it, Schaberg wonders whether these allegations may have had a basis in fact, as the two Gospel writers do not discount or even try to refute these allegations. Instead, through carefully chosen language that, especially in Luke's case, almost obscures the fact that such allegations were extant, the Gospel writers show that there is another way to consider the allegation of Jesus' illegitimacy, viewing the circumstances to which these allegations point not as merely scandalous but as positive evidence that God was acting in Jesus' life from the very moment of his conception. For both Matthew and Luke, Mary was the culmination of a long succession of biblical women whose victimization was transformed from being merely a scandalous event to ushering in a new era of hope for those who longed for liberation from oppression and abuse.

Schaberg's argument is based on textual analyses, the details of which cannot be thoroughly discussed here. Her central argument, however, is that both Matthew and Luke assumed that Mary's early pregnancy was by another man, not Joseph. Joseph's actions on learning of Mary's pregnancy, especially his decision to end their engagement quietly, are ones that would be expected if another man was involved. If Joseph had been the real father, his reaction to news of Mary's pregnancy would have been to proceed with the marriage on schedule, for it was not considered scandalous for a woman to become pregnant by her fiancé during the traditional year of betrothal prior to marriage. In one of the two traditional options available to Joseph and Mary, the man and woman would live together during the second half of their engagement year, and it was not unusual for conception to occur during this period. Matthew states, however, that Joseph and Mary had not yet "come together," which would suggest that they were either following the alternative traditional option of remaining apart for the entire betrothal period or that her pregnancy occurred during the first six months of their engagement. The scandal, then, was that another man was involved, and Schaberg suggests that apparent confusions in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus are actually indirect clues to this fact (e.g., only thirteen men are mentioned by name in a list which is supposed to include fourteen; the missing name is that of the natural father). So also is Luke's reference to Jesus as the "supposed" son of Joseph, which has traditionally been interpreted as Luke's way of saying Jesus had no "natural" father, an interpretation that Schaberg disputes on the grounds that neither Luke nor Matthew could have believed in the possibility of a conception without the involvement of a human father.

Assuming the involvement of another man, there were several options available to Joseph. One would be to take legal action on the grounds that the man took Mary by force. However, to bring charges of rape against the man, Joseph would have needed to be able to demonstrate that the episode occurred where Mary's screams for help could not have been heard (e.g., in an isolated location), or if it did occur where her screams for help could have been heard by others, that she in fact cried out and someone was prepared to testify to this fact. We have no way of knowing whether Joseph's initial decision to pursue another option, terminating their engagement quietly, was because he felt he could not prevail in court, or whether he wanted to avoid adverse publicity for himself and/or for Mary. We assume that he knew the circumstances of what had happened, that is, whether Mary was raped or whether she was a willing participant in an illicit sexual act (that she was twelve years old, the traditional age for a woman to marry, would be *prima facie* evidence for us today that she was not a consenting participant in the sexual act, but this may not have been the prevailing view in Joseph's day). We do not, in any case, know how Joseph felt about what he knew, and, therefore, we do not know why he had decided to end the engagement

quietly. Was it because he knew that Mary had been the victim of rape, but that he had no stomach for a legal battle against the man who did this to Mary, even though this would exonerate Mary and bring the offender to justice? Or was it because he understood that Mary had willingly entered into a liaison with another man, and therefore he decided to end their engagement out of personal hurt, anger, and self-pride?

Admitting that we cannot use the Gospel texts to get at what was in Joseph's mind at the time, Schaberg is nonetheless of the view that the Gospel writers themselves believed that Mary was a victim of rape, and that Joseph, while knowing this to be the case, had chosen to end their engagement quietly instead of seeking to bring the offender to justice. Presumably, he believed that it would involve a legal battle that he could not win. While Schaberg only mentions the rabbinical tradition that Jesus' natural father was a Roman (named Panthera), using it to support her argument that allegations of Jesus' illegitimacy were widespread, it is worth noting that this could be a reason Joseph would not have dared to seek legal remedies, as it would have been dangerous for a Jewish man to make a charge of rape against any Roman in a court of law, especially when it is notoriously difficult to get a conviction for rape.

Still this does not explain why Joseph would change his mind and agree to honor his prior commitment to Mary after all, in spite of the fact that she was pregnant with the child of another man. Joseph's change of heart is viewed by the Gospel writers as evidence of God's intervention, comparable, we might say, to the divine intervention that occurred on the mountain in the land of Moriah, when Abraham was about to murder the child he believed to be the son of another man. A child had been conceived, and this child, in the absence of the natural father, needed a father. Like Abraham, Joseph set aside his feelings of anger and resentment and agreed to adopt the child as his own. The very fact that he did so testifies to the uniqueness of this child, to the fact that God had protected him because he had important plans for his life. While the Gospel writers here offer a theological rationale for Joseph's decision, this rationale incorporates within it an assumption concerning Joseph's moral obligation to set aside his own feelings in the matter and accept Jesus as his own child. Given the strong emphasis within Judaism on adults' obligation to care for the children (including the children that others have callously abandoned), we have here a plausible explanation for why Joseph, after his initial reaction of anger, would agree to raise Mary's son as his own.

As far as Mary herself is concerned, Schaberg believes that her pregnancy was a result of forced rape, though she acknowledges that this is what Matthew and Luke expect the reader to assume, as they are both concerned to present Mary as blameless. The fact that Joseph chose to stand by Mary, and that she was likely only twelve years old, supports the view that she was

taken by force. Also, mistranslations have created the impression that Mary was inwardly thrilled with the realization that she was pregnant, when, in fact, the two writers want to convey the idea that it was in great fear, anxiety, and confusion that she went to her cousin Elizabeth for help and advice. This *could* imply that she was experiencing fear and remorse over the fact that the liaison would now be revealed, but in Schaberg's view, the emotional atmosphere created by the writers is more akin to that of the rape victim whose pain and suffering is compounded by the fact that she discovers, to her horror, that she is also pregnant. Schaberg also notes that, as Jesus' family, including Mary, were deeply involved in the Christian movement following his death, it is likely that family members, and probably Mary herself, were the source of the Gospel writers' information about these terribly personal events. It is certainly possible, therefore, that Mary disguised her willing involvement in the liaison and represented this as an act of rape, but Schaberg's point is that this is not the Gospel writers' own view of what happened, and that they would not be likely to present Mary as an innocent victim if they did not themselves believe this to be the case. After all, they had a personal stake in what they were claiming to be true, as they had committed their own lives to the Christian movement. It was important to them that they were communicating the truth, presenting it, of course, as delicately as possible, out of respect for the family's, and especially Mary's privacy.

Admittedly, an entirely different construction of the infancy narratives is possible, and, among biblical scholars with whom I have talked about these narratives, it is by far the most common: This is to argue that Matthew and Luke wanted to present Jesus as having been conceived without human insemination, and therefore attributed Mary's conception to the Spirit of God. Those New Testament scholars who take this position suggest or imply that it is likely that Joseph was Jesus' natural father, that in order for the Gospel writers to make the case that Jesus was "fathered" by the Spirit of God, Joseph had to be relegated to a secondary position, that of Jesus' adoptive father.¹³

Thus, in *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, John Dominic Crossan states, "Both Matthew and Luke agree on the virginal conception of Jesus."¹⁴ In his view, they both use Isaiah 7:14, "The young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel," to support this idea, in spite of the fact that the "prophecy in Isaiah says nothing whatsoever about a virginal conception." Because it doesn't, Crossan believes that "somebody went seeking in the Old Testament for a text that could be interpreted as prophesying a virginal conception, even if such was never its original meaning. Somebody had already decided on the transcendental importance of the adult Jesus and sought to retroject that significance onto the conception and birth itself" (18). As for the widespread charge of illegitimacy, Crossan believes that these

allegations did not precede the writing of the infancy narratives (Schaberg's argument) but were instead the consequence of Christians' claims for the virginal conception:

Once opponents of Christianity heard claims of virginal conceptions and divine generation for Jesus, they would reply with instant and obvious rebuttal: his having no known human father means he was a bastard! The pagan philosopher Celsus, writing in the last quarter of the second century, declares, in the name of both Judaism and paganism, that a cover-up for bastardy must have been the real reason for such claims. The illegitimate father was, he claims, a Roman soldier named Panthera, in whose name we catch a mocking and reversed allusion to *parthenos*, the Greek word for the young woman from Isaiah 7:14. (18)

Crossan also notes that the infancy narratives are the only basis we have for assuming that Jesus was Mary's first child. What if one or more of his siblings were actually older? Would this not cast doubt on the illegitimacy claim?

But Schaberg argues that neither Matthew nor Luke would have entertained the idea that Jesus did not have a natural father, nor would this have been conceivable to their original readers. The idea of a nonnatural conception could only have come later, after asceticism with its renunciation of sexuality had gained significant inroads in Christian thought and practice (though she acknowledges that such an idea is already evident in the Gospel of John). Thus, if a natural conception was assumed, there would be no need for the Gospel writers to relegate Joseph to the status of adoptive father. Rather, for Schaberg, Joseph is represented as Jesus' adoptive father because this is what he actually was. When Luke refers to Jesus as the "supposed" son of Joseph (Luke 3:23), he is not making a theological point (i.e., that Jesus was conceived in an unnatural manner), but is noting that Joseph was not Jesus' natural father. As Schaberg points out, such alternative theories fail to "take seriously the claim of both evangelists that Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus."¹⁵

The identity of the man who fathered Jesus is not disclosed by either Gospel writer. As Schaberg notes, to have done so would have been to give him recognition that he assuredly did not deserve. As noted, an early rabbinical tradition held that he was a Roman, and some rabbinical writers further alleged that he was a member of the Roman army occupying Palestine at the time. While this view would support her thesis that Mary was the victim of rape, as it is consistent with the universal human experience of soldiers' sexual abuse of the women who live in the towns over which they have military control, Schaberg is understandably reluctant to speculate on the man's identity. Her concern is with Mary's victimization, and with the Gospel writers' view that God was able to reverse the effects of her victimization, and to use this horrible experience to usher in a new era in God's

own struggle against oppression and innocent suffering. Yet, unlike the vast majority of biblical scholars, she does not dismiss these early rabbinical writings as mere polemics, but believes that they address, certainly from a partisan, even hostile perspective, a widespread assumption that Jesus was illegitimately conceived. In fact, there is the suggestion in another Gospel, that of John's, that the charge of illegitimacy figured prominently in Jesus' own controversies with those among the Jewish establishment who opposed his movement. When critics of Jesus say that they are descendants of Abraham and imply that Jesus cannot make the same claim, that he was born of fornication, he responds by saying that they are just as liable to the charge of illegitimacy as he is, because they behave as though the devil is their father (John 8:41-47). Says Schaberg, "The Jews meet Jesus' challenge to their religious or spiritual legitimacy by a challenge to his physical legitimacy. The suggestion of Jesus' illegitimacy here is subtle and is drawn from pre-gospel tradition."¹⁶

While this interchange between Jesus and his adversaries implies that wherever Jesus went he was vulnerable to attack as illegitimate, and, quite possibly, as the son of a non-Jewish father, what Schaberg does not address is the effect that awareness of his illegitimacy would have had on Jesus himself. While it is impossible to know at what age Jesus would have become aware of the circumstances surrounding his birth, we may assume that he would have learned of them as a young child, and that he would view his illegitimacy as a personal tragedy, and himself as the innocent victim of a situation he could do nothing to alter or change. The questions that beg to be asked, therefore, are: How, then, would knowledge of his illegitimacy affect him personally as a child? How would it influence his self-understanding? What measures would he take as a child to shield himself from the fact that he was perceived by those around him as deeply and irrevocably flawed?

Some scholars would argue that knowledge of the circumstances of Jesus' conception would have little impact on his self-understanding. The church historian, Roland Bainton, once observed that Martin Luther's adult life and theology would have been precisely the same had he been raised in an orphanage.¹⁷ Against the tendency to minimize the impact of childhood experience, I want to offer the very opposite thesis, that virtually everything that Jesus said and did as an adult is traceable, in one way or another, to his awareness of being an illegitimate child. His illegitimacy would be profoundly self-defining, and his career as a prophet would not have taken the form that it did were it not for his illegitimacy. Especially noteworthy would be the relationship between his knowledge of his illegitimacy and what is commonly judged to be the core of his own religious experience and public message, his unusually close and personal relationship to God, whom he called "my father." His awareness of his illegitimacy and his deeply personal experience of God as father would be deeply related, for his experience of

God as father would enable him to transform the self-endangerment caused by his illegitimacy into a new sense of self-empowerment and inner freedom, one that challenged the negative self-image resulting from awareness of his illegitimacy.

Jesus' View of God as Father

Joachim Jeremias is widely credited with having noted the fact that Jesus not only spoke of God exclusively as father but also used a very informal, colloquial Aramaic word for father ("Abba"), one roughly equivalent to the English word "Daddy" or German word "Papa."¹⁸ On the other hand, this English equivalent may be somewhat misleading as Jeremias emphasizes that the use of Abba was not limited to children, for adults in Jesus' time also addressed their fathers as Abba. (While adults in the Southern states of America often continue to call their fathers Daddy, this practice is not very common elsewhere.) Noting that there are no instances in the Hebrew Bible where God is directly addressed as father, Jeremias suggests that "the use of the everyday word 'abba' as a form of address to God is the most important linguistic innovation on the part of Jesus" (36). Not only is it most unusual that Jesus "should have addressed God as 'my father'; it is even more so that he should have used the Aramaic form 'Abba,' as 'Abba' was a most intimate form of address." Also, "the complete novelty and uniqueness of 'Abba' as an address to God in the prayers of Jesus shows that it expresses the heart of Jesus' relationship to God." Thus, his use of Abba for God was not merely a linguistic innovation, but also, and more profoundly, it was an expression of his own personal experience of God (64-67). (If it seems odd to speak of Jesus' "experience of God" when Christians affirm that Jesus *is* God, we need to remind ourselves that the Trinitarian formulation came about after his death, and that, as far as Jesus himself was concerned, God was Abba, or Father.)

Jeremias acknowledges that we "are not told when and where Jesus received the revelation in which God disclosed himself to him like a father to his son" (61). He guesses that this may have happened at the time of Jesus' baptism by John, a view, however, that I find quite unconvincing, as it discounts Jesus' childhood experiences, and flies in the face of overwhelming evidence that prayer—direct address to God—usually originates in childhood, particularly when such prayer takes the form, as it did in Jesus' case, of petition for help and protection. This view also dismisses the episode portrayed by Luke (2:41-51) where the twelve-year-old Jesus remained behind in the temple at Jerusalem to sit among the teachers, responding to his mother's complaint that he had treated her and Joseph badly with the question: "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" This earlier reference to "my Father" suggests that the

baptism, with its affirmation of Jesus as the son with whom his Father is well pleased, was a culminating event in a long-standing relationship that went very far back into childhood. The idea that a relationship as deeply personal as this would suddenly be revealed, out of the blue, is simply not supported by what developmental psychology teaches us, that is, that a relationship this profound would have its roots in Jesus' childhood experiences, especially his awareness of being an illegitimate child and his struggle to come to terms with the implications of this fact for his personal self-understanding. Moreover, it is Luke's own view, portrayed through the temple episode, that the "disclosure" of God's identity as personal father to Jesus occurred during Jesus' early childhood. Perhaps there is a compelling reason to disagree with Luke on this point, but, if so, I cannot claim to know what it would be.

While some might contend that Jeremias overemphasizes the centrality of God's fatherliness to Jesus' teachings and self-understanding, it is notable that recent scholarship on the book of Q, the common source on which Matthew and Luke both rely, indicates that references to the "father above" attributed to Jesus are found in the earliest of the three strata that make up the book of Q. Also noteworthy is the fact that there is no other image of God than that of father in these early materials.¹⁹

Jeremias's recognition of the uniqueness of Jesus' view of God as his personal father, one of the few universally accepted "facts" relating to the historical Jesus, prompts us to ask this fundamental question: Would it be merely happenstance that an illegitimately conceived child, a child raised by an adoptive father, not only addressed God as father, but did so in an unusually intimate manner? As one who believes that religious innovations—especially profoundly imaginative ones—have deep psychological significance for those who are responsible for them, I find it implausible that this would all be a mere coincidence. Rather, the circumstances of Jesus' conception and his relationship to God as personal father would be profoundly related. The questions we must try to answer are: How would they be related? What would be the psychological connection between them? How would the experience of God as personal father be a reflection of Jesus' struggle with his endangerment as a child illegitimately conceived?

I can think of at least three ways to interpret this relationship, three readily imaginable scenarios. One is that his image of God as personal father would be a projection of his image of his natural father, the father he never really knew. In spite of the fact that this man would have been guilty of a terrible crime against Jesus' mother, Jesus, as a child, might not have given the actual circumstances of his conception—including Mary's terrorization—much thought, but instead, he might have idealized the man in his mind, viewing him as his secret protector whenever he found himself in difficulty or trouble. If his childhood as the adopted son of Joseph were less than happy, if his relations with Joseph were strained, or if he felt that Joseph

avored his own children over Jesus, he might well have longed for his natural father, and thought of how his life would be different, for the better, if he were being raised by the man who fathered him. Or perhaps he had real grievances against his mother and therefore found himself aligned with his natural father against her. The physical inaccessibility of this man would prompt Jesus to direct this longing toward a heavenly father, one very much like the image he held of his natural father. Against those who viewed his illegitimacy as a stigma, Jesus, in this scenario, would be rather defiant, claiming that he was actually special by virtue of the qualities he shared with his natural father. His image of his father above would support his repudiation of that which he despised in his mother and adoptive father, whatever this might be.

A second scenario is that Jesus' image of God as father was largely a projection of Joseph, his adoptive father, and had roots in his awareness that Joseph had chosen to remain faithful to Mary, to be her and her unborn child's protector, in spite of the circumstances of the child's conception. Here, as in the first scenario, there is a direct projection, but of the father whom Jesus experienced on a daily basis, toward whom he felt profound gratitude for saving his mother and him from the usual fate that befell unmarried women with children. His image of God as father would then be based on his experience of his adoptive father, the one who assumed the responsibilities of fatherhood at the critical moment when Mary and her unborn child's future were in serious jeopardy. This is a father who sets aside his own personal feelings, placing himself and his own future at risk for the sake of an innocent woman and her unborn child.

A third scenario would be that Jesus' image of God, while that of a father, was diametrically opposite to his perception of his natural father, that the operative dynamic was not one of direct projection but of image-splitting. In this scenario, he would view the natural father as an immoral, reprehensible man, as the one who sexually violated his mother, a twelve-year-old virgin, and who was directly responsible for his own spoiled identity. If this man were also a Roman, and therefore talked about in Joseph's household with great hatred and disgust, Jesus would be intensely motivated to envision himself as the son of a very different father, one to whom he could always turn for help, and who, unlike his real father, would never act treacherously, or take advantage of the vulnerability of another, but would always consider the consequences of his actions for his son's own life and future. Such a father would be caring and protective, and, above all, he would be the source of a much-needed positive identity ("You are my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased"). In this scenario, the heavenly Father counteracts the negative self-image that Jesus cannot otherwise overcome as the son of a man who is viewed by everyone in his family and community as despicable and subhuman. While this scenario does not require that we take Jesus' natural

father to be a Roman—he could also be Jewish—this view has a certain internal logic. As Paul Hollenbach has pointed out in his interpretation of Jesus' healing of the Gerasene demoniac, mental illness among young Jewish men was a political act—the demons' cry "We are Legion" is an allusion to the Roman army—an act of defiance against the Roman occupation of Jewish communities and against the Jewish leaders who were cooperating with the Roman colonial government.²⁰ In this scenario, Jesus, aware of the fact that his mother was sexually assaulted by a Roman soldier, had a natural affinity for these young Jewish men who were defiant toward Rome. His "pathology" is that he has the genes of a Roman, and is therefore occupied by a foreign element that can only be exorcized by replacing this inner demon with a new internalized father, the one he affectionately calls "my father."

The Desire to Be Another Man's Son

Which of these interpretive schemas or scenarios is the most persuasive? Which one rings most true? I have not found this an easy question to answer, as there is much more involved here than simply assembling Jesus' recorded allusions to his heavenly Father and reading back to their probable antecedents in the perceptions and emotions of the child Jesus. Assuming, however, that Jesus' experience of God as father is rooted in his struggle against his own endangerment as a child, what is involved for one who seeks to get inside Jesus' own experience as a child is a kind of self-abandonment, that is, an imaginative entry into Jesus' own situation where I personally take the view of a child who is aware of his illegitimacy, and who has already begun to reflect on the fateful implications of this inexorable fact for his life. If this were my situation, how would I receive it? How would I experience it? How would I respond? This has proved to be a difficult, even painful exercise,²¹ as it has necessarily involved recalling experiences in my own childhood which most nearly approximate his experience, realizing, of course, that Jesus' sense of being a child with a deep sense of personal tragedy was always with him, whereas my personal grievances against my own life fate were more episodic and less integral to my ontological sense of myself, my core identity.

Still, what I discovered in myself was something of the desire, reflected in the first interpretive schema, to have experienced my own father more forcefully than I did, and to have had a greater sense of his palpable presence and support, counteracting my mother's commanding, if not controlling presence. I also discovered in myself something of the profound gratitude reflected in the second scenario for my father's dependability and personal sacrifices for me. He was, indeed, a kind of Joseph to me, hovering in the background, rather self-preoccupied and not very talkative, but stable and

steady, and, above all, a man who was moral without making a special point of it. Yet the more I pursued this exercise in introspection, a rather darker atmosphere emerged, as I became aware in myself of the feelings associated with the third scenario. Surely not the sense that my father was evil or despicable, or that he had violated or abused my mother. No, not that. But the sense, nevertheless, that it may have been better for this child to have had a different man for his father. Such feelings, long repressed, came to my awareness, and I reexperienced what must be one of the most painful experiences of childhood and possibly the strongest impetus for repressing our childhood experiences, that of feeling shame not for myself but for a parent whom I also deeply loved. As Helen Merrell Lynd points out, the shame we feel for others is often deeper and more painful for us than the shame we feel for ourselves.

Of course I immediately found myself reliving my guilt for entertaining thoughts like this, for my father had done nothing explicitly to warrant these feelings of mine, this sense of being inexplicably ashamed to be his son. I also found myself reliving the blame I had placed on my mother for her role in activating this desire to be another man's son, as she frequently belittled her husband in the presence of her children and revealed through her behavior toward the men her sisters had married that she deserved better. Yet I believe this desire in me to be another man's son was the beginning of my own religious consciousness, as this longing was not directed toward one of my uncles—for unlike my own father these men openly violated my mother's own prohibition against the use of alcohol, even in her presence—but toward the one whom Jesus called Father. He, the Father of Jesus, was the answer to my prayers to be a beloved son, the object of a father's affection and love. This father was not just anyone's father. He was Jesus' Father, accessible to me because Jesus shared him with me. My favorite Bible verse throughout childhood—one proudly but reverently borne—was John 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me."

After engaging in this exercise in introspection, I was startled to find that Freud's introspections—his reliving of long-repressed childhood perceptions—led to a similar discovery. Puzzled by the fact that, in the writing of his great classic, *the Interpretation of Dreams*, he substituted the name of the general Hannibal's brother Hasdrubal for his father's name of Hamilcar, he relates his experience of visiting his half brother in England and discovering that he and his half brother's oldest son were exactly the same age. On recalling this incident in connection with his confusion of the names of Hannibal's father and brother, he became aware of a deeper recollection, the fact that he had wished at the time that he was not the son of his father (who was much older than his mother). As he writes in *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* of his correction of the original error in subsequent editions of *The*

Interpretation of Dreams, "I could have continued and recounted [there] how my attitude toward my father was changed by a visit to England. . . . How much pleasanter it would be had I been born the son of my brother instead of the son of my father!"²²

The desire to be another man's son: I think this is a far more powerful and potent emotion for a child than the desire for a father whose presence is more palpable and protective, or the sense of gratitude one feels for his father's steady dependability. And I think this is precisely what the child Jesus would feel and experience with special keenness, as he had unusually powerful and urgent grounds for wishing he was not the son of the man who impregnated his mother. This strong wish to be another man's son is the deep inspiration for his view of God as a personal father, a father who effectively replaces human fathers in his understanding of himself as someone's son. He would know himself as the son of Abba, and thus, as no longer illegitimate or adopted. He was the true son of Abba and thus of no other.

As son of Abba, Jesus would thereby successfully challenge his fate, the stigma of his illegitimate birth, and insist on his right to an alternative identity, one that was more authentic, more true, because it was not based on social judgments and expectations, but on one's inherent, God-given freedom to be the self that one truly is. Here is an alternative identity whose essential core is one in which his self-affirmation is itself affirmed ("You are my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased"). Perhaps it would take a man who was considered to be illegitimate to point out that it was not himself, but the social order on which others were depending and feeding that was illegitimate. Social institutions and conventions are powerful because we treat them as though they are real, as though they have the right and privilege to define us. We transfer our power to them, thus allowing them to drain us of our own power, leaving our spirits empty, weak, depleted, and degraded.

As a healer, Jesus would understand how this transfer of power works. A woman who had been rendered powerless by the loss of her own lifeblood for twelve years could take hold of his garment and regain power as the strength in his body was transferred into hers (Mark 5:25-34). Or a man who was rendered powerless because there was a "legion" of demons in his body, his life energy dispersed among them, would have his power restored when the demons left his body and took residence, instead, in a herd of swine (Mark 5:1-13). Such healings, such new infusions of power and strength, would occur because Jesus affirmed the self-affirmations of others, even as his heavenly Father did for him, while simultaneously disaffirming their negative self-judgments imposed by social convention and labeling. When a woman came and anointed his feet—an act of self-affirmation that Jesus named her "faith"—he ignored the obvious fact that she was a "bad woman," prompting the man in whose house this disruptive episode is said

to have taken place to observe, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner" (Luke 7:36-50). As Jesus would understand from his childhood struggles with his own inexorable fate, dramatic changes occur when we view ourselves and others as persons of inherent worth, celebrating one another's expressions of self-affirmation as a most "beautiful thing" (Matt. 26:10).

Of all selves, children are surely the most endangered, as they have few resources to defend their emerging selves against the institutions and forces that would cheat them of their unique individuality, and would label them instead. Moreover, children, as they become adults, are prone to rationalize in behalf of these institutions and forces, to spare them as they once spared their parents. This is their way of apologizing for the feelings of shame they felt for their fathers and mothers, feelings reflected in their desire to be the offspring of someone else. Against such conventional labeling and rationalization in behalf of the myriad social institutions that have no feelings for us, Jesus' own self-affirmation is itself a very beautiful thing to behold: "See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 18:10).

The Garden of Gethsemane

A further question that my own exercise in introspection prompts me to ask, however, is this: For those of us for whom Jesus' solution to his own identity problems was key to our own self-survival as children, what is the meaning of this solution as we live out our adult lives? Just as Kierkegaard struggled to understand his responses to the Mount Moriah story, I have struggled in my adult years to understand the Garden of Gethsemane story, where Jesus' alternative identity met its deepest test. What meaning has it for me?—one for whom Jesus' Father satisfied the desire to be another man's son?

This story, like the story of Abraham and Isaac, aptly fits Phyllis Trible's beautifully suggestive phrase, "text of terror," as it concerns the terror of a young man facing almost certain death. I doubt that this story is historical, for it is likely that a Galilean who caused public commotion in Jerusalem would immediately be arrested and crucified that very day. Yet in a sense it does not matter, for, whether historical or not, it addresses my dilemma as one for whom Jesus' solution to his identity problem was also my own. The story tells us that Jesus went to the garden to pray on his own behalf ("My Father, I pray that this cup be removed; nonetheless, not my, but thy will be done") and that his Father sent an angel to minister to him. The detail about the angel would suggest that the Abraham and Isaac story was somewhere in

the consciousness of the author of this story. Against this background, the story has a truth for us, a dark but ultimately liberating truth.

Key to this story is the fact that, unlike the Mount Moriah tale, God, not Abraham, is the father in the story (the God-role and the father-role are conflated),²³ and, unlike Isaac, the son is able to speak freely to his father. Not only does he make his desire known to his father—his desire that his life be spared—but, even after accepting that his father's will should prevail, we are told that he "entreated some more," as if to indicate that, having accepted that his father's will would be enacted, it became all the more imperative that he try to change his father's mind. In effect, Jesus does what Alice Miller recommends that Isaac do: Speak freely to the father, and ask questions about why it is necessary for the son to die.

If this were only a story about parent-child relationships, we would conclude that it offers a better model for the settling of parent-child disputes than the Abraham and Isaac story, as Jesus is able to speak freely to his father, without restraint, in the hope that his father may reverse his earlier decision. It also suggests that, where a good parent-child relationship exists (as it does in the case of Jesus and his heavenly Father), the child can come to know the parent's mind, and to anticipate what the parent feels about an issue even before being asked or questioned about it; furthermore, even if the child is not in fundamental agreement with what the parent thinks or feels, the child can be sympathetically disposed to it, accepting that the parent has a valid point of view that is worthy of the child's respect. Conversely, it suggests that the parent need not become angry or feel threatened if the child asks the parent to reconsider the issue at hand, knowing from the child's tone of voice and demeanor that the parent's authority is not being challenged or contested. Thus, whereas this story has been used throughout the generations to support the superiority of the parent's will over that of the child, and of the need for parents to curb or break the child's will, often by means of harsh childrearing practices, it may be understood instead as a story that supports free and unrestrained, though respectful, communication between child and parent over their differences in viewpoint, perspective, and desires.

However, this is much more than a story about how parents and children may respectfully disagree. It is a story in which a son pleads with his father to be spared the death that almost certainly awaits him, and who believes that his father has the power to intervene in his behalf but chooses not to. Unlike the Abraham and Isaac story, it is not about how a human father's loyalty to God was tested by the threat of the loss of his son, but is, instead, the story of a son's unflinching loyalty to his father—even unto death—and of a father who, while deeply sympathizing with his son and moved by his ordeal, remains unyielding, and does not accede to his beloved son's request that he be spared the death that awaits him. It is not a story about how God spoke to a human father at the critical moment, charging him to stay his hand, but a

story in which God the father chooses not to intervene in his son's behalf, and instead sends an angel of mercy to comfort his son as he endures his lonely ordeal, abandoned even by his friends.

What kind of story is this? What does it mean to tell us? Many have viewed it as a story about a father's painful yet courageous sacrifice of his son for a "higher cause," the son being a "ransom" for many (as the Gospel of Mark puts it). Others, like Paul Tillich, have said that Jesus had to be sacrificed so that there could be the Christ.²⁴ Still others have considered this a father's act of "self-sacrifice," since, in giving up his son, he gave up that which meant more to him than any other. These interpretations focus on a similarity between this and the Abraham and Isaac story, that of the sacrifice of the son for a higher purpose: the ransoming of sinners who are otherwise without hope, the sacrifice of the historical Jesus so that we may know the Christ who triumphs over sin and death, and the new self-disclosure of God as the one who does make the ultimate sacrifice.

I confess that I find these interpretations unconvincing for, as René Girard points out, Jesus himself opposed the very logic of sacrifice, including self-sacrifice, on the grounds that sacrifice is a self-perpetuating social dynamic, each sacrifice demanding another, and another. This is what the author of the letter to the Hebrews has to acknowledge, for Jesus' "sacrifice" does not in fact end the process once and for all, it merely raises the stakes. Instead of sacrifice, Jesus' whole message, as Crossan points out, was based on egalitarian commensality, meaning that the rules of simple table fellowship were for him the model for human association and socialization.²⁵ Commensality, not sacrifice, was the central theme of his life and message.

These interpretations are also unconvincing because they provide justifications for the failure of God the Father to protect his Son, and thus, in Alice Miller's words, they *spare the parent*. The very fact that Christians have given so much attention to providing an explanation for the death of Jesus is itself an indication of how powerful is this need to spare the parent. We do not presume to ask God why he did not put his Son's life above all other considerations, nor do we even consider the enormous implications this would have had for humankind: If God the Father had intervened in behalf of his Son, as God the voice intervened in behalf of Abraham's son Isaac, this would have served as a powerful impetus for Jesus' followers to place the highest value on the protection of children against poverty, disease, war, and death. Instead, we have the sorry record of Christians, who, no less than their pagan neighbors, exposed their children to physical death and to a living hell as the victims of exploitation. What we have witnessed since the time of Jesus' death are theological attempts to provide an explanation for why God the Father was unyielding when his Son pleaded with him to be spared the fate of death. Thus, the history of Christian theology is replete with efforts to do precisely what Miller says the Freudian tradition has done,

that is, to spare the parents by offering one explanation after another for why God the Father, fully conscious of the fact that his beloved Son was in mortal danger, did nothing about it.

To attempt to explain Jesus' death as a redemptive act of God is to shift responsibility for human treachery onto God. Girard instead attributes his death to the need of those in power to find scapegoats for their failure to govern effectively and wisely.²⁶ As Crossan points out, crucifixion had the purpose of depriving the accused of any identity he might otherwise claim: the body was left for animals and birds to devour as the ultimate shame, the culprit literally reduced to a nobody, leaving no trace behind.²⁷ The meaning of Jesus' death is that his murderers could not deprive him of his identity because it was based on his realized desire to be his Father's son, an identity they were powerless to take away.

The Meaning Is in the Setting

But, if so, where does this leave Jesus' understanding of God as father? And where does this leave us with respect to the story of the Garden of Gethsemane? In chapter 4, I suggested that Jesus, with his attestation to a nonviolent God, is an "enlightened witness" in the child's behalf against those who support the abuse of children.²⁸ While not an actual witness to the events that occurred in childhood, the enlightened witness is nonetheless able to affirm the likelihood of their occurrence, and thus to lend her strong support to the adult who is struggling to call these events to mind and to reinterpret them in the light of subsequent adult experiences. I would suggest that *each of us* needs to approach the Garden of Gethsemane story as an enlightened witness, and thus to provide a perspective on the story that is unequivocally on the side of the suffering one against those who acted violently against him, rejecting such violence as willed by God and proclaiming it unable to destroy his identity as son of the Father above.

For those who have been taught to view the death of our Lord as a ransom or even as a father's act of self-sacrifice, this may not be an easy position to take, and we are likely to be attacked as Alice Miller has been attacked, for her view that there can be no redemptive value in any violent act against any child. By challenging the idea that Jesus' death was willed by his Father above, and therefore has redemptive value for others, we challenge the idea that acts of violence against children, whatever form they may take, may also have redemptive value. One often hears adults proclaim, "Yes, I was beaten as a child, but it didn't do any lasting harm, for look at me now. I survived and, in fact, I'm a better person for it." Miller says, "No, this cannot be, for, as long as you believe this, you will inflict the suffering you endured on someone else. The problem is that you are not aware of this simple but tragic fact, for you have not been encouraged to make the con-

nection between the sufferings you experienced as a child and the sufferings that you, as an adult, are inflicting on innocent others." Therefore, the real lesson of the suffering and death of Jesus is that as long as children are suffering abuse, we will continue to have innocent sufferers, both children and adults, who are paying for the abuse that was inflicted on them as children.

The fate of Jesus is a powerful, continual reminder to us of innocent suffering, wherever it may be occurring, for he did not deserve the death that was inflicted upon him. To say that God "willed" his death is to betray Jesus and his own attestation to the Father who abhors violence, and who therefore will have no complicity whatsoever in any sacrificial system, especially the sacrifice of the one who knew him as his Father. If Jesus died because he dared to attack the temple in Jerusalem—the broad consensus of biblical scholars—then it would be a betrayal of Jesus himself to suggest that he is God's sacrifice in our behalf. In this act of public defiance, Jesus proclaimed that God abhors sacrifice, for sacrifice begets sacrifice in a never-ending cycle of violence and bloodshed. Why then would the God to whom Jesus attests turn around and sacrifice his own beloved Son? In the form in which it occurs in the gospels, the Garden of Gethsemane story takes a fateful step toward the sacrificial theology of the letter to the Hebrews.

What, then, remains of the story of the Garden of Gethsemane when its sacrificial implications are removed? Following Kierkegaard's approach in *Fear and Trembling* of envisioning alternative scenarios to the Abraham and Isaac story, I suggest something like the following recounting of the event (a composite of Matthew, Luke and my own reflections on the story):

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go yonder and pray. And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, "Strengthen me, father, for the ordeal that I am about to undergo." And as he lay there, alone and exhausted, he heard his father speak as he had heard him before as he bathed in the River Jordan, "You are my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him.

So fortunate is the one who knows whose son he is, and fortunate is the one who, in his darkest hour, has a place of safety, where his enemies cannot touch him, and an angel of mercy is there to strengthen him.

When the sacrificial dynamic is removed from the story, a figure-ground reversal occurs, and we become more cognizant of the protections and solaces provided by the setting in which the story is placed—the garden itself. When I was a very small child, my father and my paternal grandfather devoted many summer evenings to the cultivation of a victory garden, one of

various ways in which they could serve their country during wartime while my uncles were overseas. My childhood experience of being allowed to make furrows with a garden trowel and to place the seeds in the furrows at prescribed intervals has engendered in me a natural sympathy for understandings of God—and of God's world—based on the image of the garden. Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays have been especially important for me in recent years because they employ garden images to speak about the human soul: the inner landscape of the self. Rollo May's autobiography, *My Quest for Beauty*, has also been of great influence, as he writes about the serenity that he has experienced in the world of nature, adding:

I knew that the flowers and the spring verdure were not in themselves God. But are we not given a glimpse of the beauty of God by these gay trumpetings of brilliant pink of the flowering Judas tree, and by the lemon blossoms with their magical odor and by the heavily scented lavender of the wisteria hanging from every branch?²⁹

May also recounts a counseling session with a woman who began by saying she was very weary, fatigued from entertaining visitors for the past week, and didn't have much to say. May suggested that she might then simply free-associate, briefly explaining to her how it works. She expressed doubts about the procedure but began: "The first thing that comes to me, I stopped my car on the way here to look at the twilight. It was just beautiful, the purple hues with the green hills behind them. . . ." She then proceeded through the hour to speak about beauty, about how her mother always wanted her to notice the beauty of the world; about God, because the beauty in the world could not be there by accident; and about the relationship of beauty to death. When the session came to a close, she apologized to Rollo May because it was all such "superficial talk." He responded that he felt it was the most profound hour the two of them had ever shared, and then writes: "This person is like the majority of people in our western culture; we suppress our feelings of beauty; we are shy about them, they are too personal. . . . It is too soul-baring."³⁰ He might well have added that we learn to suppress our feelings of beauty in childhood, and that we often do so, as children, because our religion tells us that our sense perceptions are unreliable guides to ultimate truth, a view that is forcefully challenged by Joan Erikson in her book *Wisdom and the Senses*.³¹

Of all the authors who have employed the garden metaphor to speak of beauty and death, and of the presence of God, the poet Louise Glück is my personal favorite. Her book *The Wild Iris*³² follows an earlier collection of poems titled *Ararat*, in which she explores her childhood against the backdrop of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac.³³ In *The Wild Iris*, her husband's garden becomes the setting for her reflections on the meaning of life in the face of death, and on our perception of the presence of God in the

world. As the book jacket puts it, she has created "an impassioned polyphonic exchange among the god who 'discloses virtually nothing,' human beings who 'leave signs of feeling everywhere,' and a garden where 'whatever returns from oblivion returns to find a voice.'" The poem in which occurs her statement about the God who discloses virtually nothing is titled "Matins":³⁴

What is my heart to you
that you must break it over and over
like a plantsman testing
his new species? Practice
on something else: how can I live
in colonies, as you prefer, if you impose
a quarantine of affliction, dividing me
from healthy members of
my own tribe: you do not do this
in the garden, segregate
the sick rose; you let it wave its sociable
infested leaves in
the faces of the other roses, and the tiny aphids
leap from plant to plant, proving yet again
I am the lowest of your creatures, following
the thriving aphid and the trailing rose—Father,
as agent of my solitude, alleviate
at least my guilt; lift
the stigma of isolation, unless
it is your plan to make me
sound forever again, as I was
sound and whole in my mistaken childhood,
or if not then, under the light weight
of my mother's heart, or if not then,
in dream, first
being that would never die.

Later, in "Vespers,"³⁵ she notes that God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, and may, in a similar way, be appearing to her now, if not in her husband's garden, then in the surrounding pasture blazing with color:

Even as you appeared to Moses, because
I need you, you appear to me, not
often, however. I live essentially
in darkness. You are perhaps training me to be
responsive to the slightest brightening. Or, like the poets,
are you stimulated by despair, does grief
move you to reveal your nature? This afternoon,
in the physical world to which you commonly
contribute your silence, I climbed

the small hill above the wild blueberries, metaphysically descending, as on all my walks: did I go deep enough for you to pity me, as you have sometimes pitied others who suffer, favoring those with theological gifts? As you anticipated, I did not look up. So you came down to me: at my feet, not the wax leaves of the wild blueberry but your fiery self, a whole pasture of fire, and beyond, the red sun neither falling nor rising—
I was not a child; I could take advantage of illusions.

Finally, in another poem also titled "Vespers,"³⁶ she concludes that God is in the garden, yet notes that the presence of God is more like her husband's way with the garden than her own:

I don't wonder where you are anymore.
You're in the garden; you're where John is,
in the dirt, abstracted, holding his green trowel.
This is how he gardens: fifteen minutes of intense effort,
fifteen minutes of ecstatic contemplation. Sometimes
I work beside him, doing the shade chores,
weeding, thinning the lettuces; sometimes I watch
from the porch near the upper garden until twilight makes
lamps of the first lilies: all this time,
peace never leaves him. But it rushes through me,
not as sustenance the flower holds
but like bright light through the bare tree.

My purpose in citing these poems by Louise Glück is to make the simple point that a powerful key to the meaning of the Gethsemane story is the setting in which it occurred. Unlike Mount Moriah, with its exaggerated sense of sacrifice and duty, its confident spirit ("God will provide . . . , my son"), its histrionics ("and he took the knife to slay his son"), the garden is a place for soul-searching and soul-baring, and soul-mending, a place where God is agent of our solitude. It is a place where sorrow and grief, longing and desire, serenity and pleasure mingle, like plants of many species, together. It is not a place of high stakes, of challenging tests of courage and will, but a setting in which we find our own kind of peace: whether the peace that holds and sustains, or the peace that rushes in and through, like a bright and searching light.

I have often found myself praying in garden settings like the one in which the Gospel writers envisioned Jesus in his last hours on earth. I feel his presence about me in such moments. What makes this possible is the freedom that I have as an adult to take advantage of illusions. When I think of him in his profound loneliness, having no witnesses to watch and to wait

with him in his agony and terror, I sense that he was not alone. Angels from heaven may appear in many places, including mountains where spirits are tested to the limit, but they are most palpably present in those garden places where souls are searched and bared and mended.

"Supposing Him to Be the Gardener"

The Gospel of John has another garden scene: Mary Magdalene was standing weeping outside the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid to rest, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. She saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her why she was weeping, and she replied, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Saying this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, though she did not know that it was he. He asked, "Why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." He spoke her name, "Mary," and she answered, "Teacher." Then he said to her, "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (John 20:11–18).

It was a brief conversation, the kind that not infrequently takes place between the one who has been bereaved and the one who has been taken away in death. Did this postdeath encounter really happen? Or was it a dream? For the bereaved, there is no distinction, for the encounter itself, however and whenever it occurs, is as real as real can be. What matters more is the fact that it occurred in a garden, and that Mary initially mistook Jesus for the gardener, supposing that he was the one responsible for removing the body from the grave. A case of mistaken identity. Or was it?

Could it be that Jesus is the one who continues to maintain and nurture the gardens of our lives, tending the fragile shoots until they are able to flower of their own accord? Perhaps Mary Magdalene was more right than she knew. The resurrected Jesus ascended into heaven where his Father received him, but his spirit took the form of a simple gardener who does the work of a thousand angels.

Alternative Scenarios

In this chapter, I have taken up Jane Schaberg's effort to bring a fresh perspective to bear on the infancy narratives. I am not a trained biblical scholar, and I have no professional stake in the controversy that her book has generated among these scholars. But I am a Christian, as are Schaberg and her critics, and I have a personal stake in the issue of whether the Christian

faith we pass on to our children and children's children is a religion of abuse or a religion of love.

It troubles me, therefore, that some of the reactions of Schaberg's colleagues to her book are themselves illustrative of the problem that I have been addressing in this book: the abuse that is committed in the name of religion. I have not read all of the scholarly reviews of her book, but I have read several of them, and have been surprised at their dismissive, even sarcastic tone. Leander E. Keck, professor of Biblical Theology at Yale Divinity School, writes in his book *The Church Confident*: "Almost any idea gains credence today if its advocates claim to be motivated by identification with the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed. Even the long-discredited legend that Jesus was the illegitimate offspring of a vulnerable Jewish girl who, during her betrothal, was seduced or raped, perhaps by a Roman officer (whom the Nazis identified as an Aryan), has been rehabilitated because it is said to show God's concern for the marginalized and the subversion of patriarchy."³⁷ He cites the Schaberg book. Likewise, Luke Timothy Johnson, professor of New Testament at Candler School of Theology, in a review in *Christian Century* on John Shelby Spong's *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus*, says that books like this one "belong on the 'Religion' shelf of the ever-proliferating self-help literature produced by those recovering from every imaginable form of dysfunction and addiction," and then summarizes Spong's "therapeutic rereading" of the infancy narratives: "Mary [according to Spong] was in reality a teenaged girl who was raped and became pregnant with an illegitimate child and was taken under the protection of Joseph. Spong offers no evidence for this speculation beyond Schaberg's already highly tendentious appropriation of anti-Christian slanders (apparently deriving from Jewish sources) peddled in the second century by Celsus."³⁸

Keck's comments are puzzling to me. I was taught in a seminary course in New Testament that the Gospel of Luke, in which we find one of the infancy narratives explored by Schaberg, was written by an author who identified "with the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed." In Schaberg's view, the infancy narrative in Luke sets this very tone for the gospel as a whole, for it is one more in a sordid series of biblical "texts of terror" in which women (including young girls) were sexually abused. Keck's comment about what the Nazis believed is heavy-handed, as it implies that one should not even discuss the issues and questions raised by the infancy narratives because of the way the Nazis exploited such discussions. In his summary dismissal of Schaberg's work as nothing but a revival of a "long-discredited legend," Keck comes across like a parent declaring to an irksome child: "As far as I'm concerned, the matter is closed. You and I have nothing further to talk about."

If Keck raises the specter of Naziism, Johnson raises the specter of therapeutism. He worries that the gospels are being read from a "therapeutic" point of view, and are therefore in danger of falling into the hands of those

who are recovering "from every imaginable form of dysfunction and addiction." This, too, is puzzling to me. One of the reasons I chose the field of pastoral care was that it seemed to have direct connections to the healing ministry of Jesus. If Crossan is right that "egalitarian commensality" was the central theme of Jesus' own ministry, then this instruction from the earliest strata of the book of Q is especially apropos: "And if you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you. Pay attention to the sick and say to them, 'God's kingdom has come near to you.'"³⁹ Paying attention to the sick is a critical link between commensality and kingdom. Yet here, Spong is dismissed because he reads the infancy narratives with "therapeutic" eyes, and Schaberg, on whom Spong relies, is also dismissed for her "tendentious" argumentation (which is to say that she exhibits a definite point of view).

What I believe is occurring here is a not-so-subtle form of verbal shaming. Schaberg is being told by her colleagues in the field of New Testament that she crossed a line that she ought not to have crossed, that, in effect, she has committed a shameful act. Her critics undoubtedly miss the irony here, for this is precisely what her book is about: the shaming of a woman and the power of a patriarchal system to protect its own interests. I worry that such public shamings may have their desired effect. They may cause the woman to have doubts, to wonder if she should have kept her views to herself, or even to doubt her own perceptions and judgments. This is not an unfamiliar scene, for it is one in which you and I have found ourselves before, on many occasions: In a seminar, a committee meeting, a public forum, we may have expressed what we considered an important insight, a different angle on an issue that others assumed to be clear-cut and unambiguous, only to have our insight dismissed or ridiculed by someone who could not see the ambiguity, or who simply had a more persuasive way of speaking. We fell silent, left to ruminate about whether what we said was even worth saying, and why it is our lot in life to have insights that are so readily discountable.

So let me request this of those biblical scholars who find Schaberg's argument unpersuasive: Give those of us who are not biblical scholars an alternative scenario, one based on your view that Jesus was reared by his natural parents, Mary and Joseph. Imagine for us what his childhood was like. Explain to us the relationship between his experience of his father Joseph and his message about his Father above. To my knowledge, John W. Miller is the only biblical scholar who has offered such a scenario in anything near the depth and complexity with which Schaberg has formulated hers, focusing on the decisive role that Joseph's death may have played in Jesus' life and in the shaping of his message.⁴⁰

In the meantime, what is certain is that the ridicule that Schaberg's work has received is uncomfortably close to the ways that abusive parents treat their children, and to the ways that ruling elites create scapegoats for their own failures to govern effectively and wisely.