

EXCERPT

ivp
Academic

Mothers, Children, and the Body Politic
Ancient Christianity and the Recovery of Human Dignity

October 15, 2024 | \$26, 240 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0912-3

Today humans are often seen as commodities rather than image bearers. Classics scholar Nadya Williams brings insight from the beliefs and practices of the early church about motherhood, raising children, and human life, suggesting there is a way to recapture a vision that affirms the imago Dei in each person above our economic production.

The Baby on a Hillside

Once upon a time, the king and queen of a powerful city-state, Thebes, had a baby boy. He was healthy and hearty. This should have been an occasion to celebrate and rejoice. At last, here was a son and heir to the throne! But there was a problem. The royal couple had received a prophecy earlier that a son born to them would kill his father and marry his mother. So, the parents decided, the boy had to die to avoid such a horrific curse. Not willing to kill their son outright, the parents ordered that he be exposed on a hillside somewhere in the wild, outside the town. His feet were pierced prior to exposure, mangling them in a way that perhaps would have made the baby especially undesirable for rescue and adoption, should anyone come across him. This horrific mutilation of their own perfectly healthy baby was the final act of cruelty and rejection of this child by his parents.

A night outside in the wild would have meant the death of the defenseless newborn, whether from the elements or from wild animals. His body was also bleeding from the cruel wounds inflicted on him by a palace lackey carrying out his orders. We can imagine the baby crying for a while in pain, until hunger and utter shock set in. Then he was silent, at which point a herdsman—a reality of many a seemingly isolated Greek hillside even today—found him. The herdsman did not keep the baby for himself, but through this rescue, involving a few additional steps, the baby was adopted by the childless king and queen of Corinth. For a while, Oedipus and his adoptive family lived happily. True, Oedipus's feet did not heal fully, leaving him lame-footed. But for a king's son who was not expected to do a day's work in his life, this was not as big a handicap as it might have been for someone else.

In reading the myth of Oedipus as a mother, I am struck by a detail that scholars, ancient or modern, do not normally consider: the assumption by the baby's parents that the prophecy ruled supreme and that there was no other course of action that they could take. Had they held a different worldview—one in which their baby's life was unquestionably precious and trumped any prophecy about what he might do—they would not have treated him as a threat or an enemy. Instead, the only kindness his parents had given their newborn was not killing him outright but exposing him in the wild. But how much of a kindness was it, really? It was just a ruse to avoid shedding blood and therefore incurring religious pollution for their own baby's murder.

The tragic story of Oedipus illustrates that even the healthy infant son of a king in the ancient world could not assume that his life was indisputably precious and valuable. How much more precarious were the lives of others—the poor or enslaved, infant girls who were fourth or fifth daughters in a family eager for sons, physically or mentally disabled children or adults, the poor, single women or widows, and members of dishonorable professions? By insisting on the preciousness of all human beings in God's eyes, because all human beings are made in God's image, the early church dramatically rewrote traditional Greco-Roman societal expectations. This affected the early Christian community's view of all people, but especially of those whose lives were the most likely to be devalued in the pre-Christian worldview.

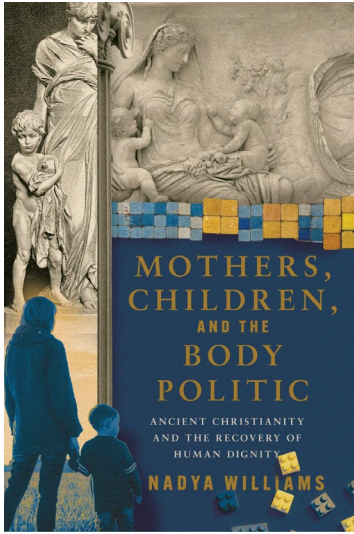
In Christ, every human life is precious, not because of anything a person might do or because of a person's sociopolitical status or any other factor, but simply because a person exists. But how do we know that this is indeed what the early Christians both believed and practiced? Our best source, as it happens, is one that all early Christians knew, even if they did not always fully live out its values: the New Testament.



Karin DeHaven, academic publicist
kdehaven@ivpress.com or ivpress.com/media

ivp

ivpress.com/media



EXCERPT



Mothers, Children, and the Body Politic *Ancient Christianity and the Recovery of Human Dignity*

October 15, 2024 | \$26, 240 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0912-3

Today humans are often seen as commodities rather than image bearers. Classics scholar Nadya Williams brings insight from the beliefs and practices of the early church about motherhood, raising children, and human life, suggesting there is a way to recapture a vision that affirms the imago Dei in each person above our economic production.

At the most obvious level, in the New Testament we see that instead of the traditional Greco-Roman division of people into the categories of “valuable” (and therefore somewhat more protected from cruelty) and “useless” (and therefore fair game for abuse), Christ and many (although not all) of his followers championed the unconditional preciousness of all people in God’s eyes and the value of all people in God’s kingdom, including the church here on earth.

When I was initially doing research for this chapter, the story I had assumed I would be telling would revolve around the church’s display of care for families, children, and the unborn. But these actions, remarkable as they were in a world of death, were not the only manifestations of the church’s revolutionary valuing of life. Instead, I found that the stories that predominate in the New Testament, especially in the ministry of Jesus, are those of redemption of several categories of people who were seen as the most useless of all in the ancient world, in war or in peace: unmarried single women, childless widows and orphans, the sick and the disabled—effectively, those seen as rejects in traditional Greco-Roman society. The prominent place of their stories throughout the New Testament is striking, especially in contrast to the Greco-Roman sources.

Historians look not only for what is present in the sources but also for what is missing. Absences are tricky to watch for but helpful in seeing what is important or not to the people we study. What is fascinating is the relative absence of unmarried people in ancient Greek and Roman sources, except for a few elite or elite-adjacent men. This absence does not mean that unmarried people, especially of poor and disadvantaged backgrounds, did not exist at all in ancient societies but rather that they did not matter enough to talk about. They were, yet again, the useless ones, invisible to most elite writers. In reading about them in the Christian sources, we find stories of redemption, spiritual and physical. These stories are a powerful witness of the church’s mission to embrace a comprehensive ethic of life that reflected Jesus’ buying back of sinful humanity in concrete action. This ethic meant seeing all people around as people and caring for the least fortunate in word, deed, and cash. Indeed, we hear stories like that of Macrina the Younger, who lived as a consecrated virgin in the fourth century AD rescuing exposed infants, among her many other good deeds. Is this not redemption—sometimes in the most literal of senses, financial?

This focus in the New Testament more generally on the redemption of the useless ones, rather than the redemption of specifically mothers and children, is not accidental. In contemporary discourse, the arguments against abortion have included for decades concerns that devaluing fetal life will lead to the devaluing of other lives—those of the elderly, the mentally infirm, the critically ill, and the poor. These fears are coming true. It appears that just as the devaluing of fetal life and of motherhood in the modern world is the canary in the coal mine trying to call our attention to the larger problem of disregard for human life, so did the attention to and care for the lives of vulnerable unmarried people with no family attachments in the early church serve as a sign of a new culture of care—a culture that cherished the lives of all made in God’s image.

—Taken from chapter seven, “The Redemption of Useless People”



Karin DeHaven, academic publicist
kdehaven@ivpress.com or ivpress.com/media



ivpress.com/media