

## Christ's Little One's

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It is exceedingly touching to observe the tenderness of our Lord's habitual thought of his followers, as manifested in the affectionate designations which he applies to them. It was a land and an age in which the teaching function was greatly magnified. "No Hindoo fanatic," writes Edersheim, "would more humbly bend before Brahmin saints, nor devout Romanist more venerate the members of a holy community, than the Jew his great Rabbis." And Jesus was the supreme Rabbi, veritably "a teacher come from God" (John iii. 2). First and above everything else, therefore, his followers were his "disciples," and so he constantly thought and spoke of them (Luke xxii. 11; John viii. 31; xiii. 35; xv. 8). As his "disciples" they were, of course, also his "servants" (Matt x. 24, 25; John xii. 26; xiii. 16); for this is the relation which was universally assumed to be implied in discipleship.<sup>1</sup> But Jesus did not wish to look upon his "disciples" as "servants," though he alone of the rabbis was really their Lord as well as Master. He preferred to think of them as "friends" (John xv. 15). Nay, they were more even than "friends"; they were his "children" (Mark x. 24; John xxi. 5), or in the extreme expression of his tenderness, his "little children" (John xiii. 33). His shepherd heart went out to them as his "flock" (Matt. xxvi. 31; John x. 16, R.V.), or, rather, in the fondness of his thought of them, his "little flock" (Luke xii. 32). They were his "sheep" (Matt. x. 6), or even his "little sheep" (John x. 7, 16); or, rather, more lovingly, his "lambs" (Luke x. 3), or even his "little lambs," his "lambkins" (John xxi. 15). It will be observed that the use of what the grammarians call "hypocoristics," or "endearing diminutives," is characteristic of our Lord's thought and speech concerning his followers. In a word, he employs by predilection "pet names" in designating them.

What may be looked upon as, in a formal point of view at least, the typical form of our Lord's "endearing diminutives" as applied to his disciples, may possibly be discerned in a designation that occurs a half-dozen times in the record of the Evangelists, though in all these cases it may have been spoken by the Lord on not more than two or three different occasions. We refer to the designation, "These little ones." There is no substantive expressed. The adjective "little" simply with the article is used substantively — "the little"; though the demonstrative pronoun is always present, and the phrase is not "the little [ones]," but ever "these little [ones]." The emphasis, that is, is solely upon the objects to

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<sup>1</sup> Schoettgen, *Horae Hebraicae*, on John xv. 11.

whom the designation is applied. These objects are called nothing whatever but "little." This certainly bears the appearance of being formally just the perfect embodiment of the "endearing diminutive," the "pet name," so to speak, at its climax, the expression of pure affection without implication of aught else whatsoever. It seems, that is, to tell us nothing about Christ's "little ones" except that he loves them very fondly and thinks of them with exquisite tenderness, going out towards them in a passionate impulse of protection. Let us see if this be not true.

It has sometimes been thought, no doubt, that the phrase "these little ones" is merely a paraphrase for "children"; and even that it is sometimes employed quite literally to mean just actual children. Thus multitudes of Christians seem to be accustomed to read Matt. xviii. 10: "See that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven," quite simply as a declaration that the "angels of little children" (whatever these "angels" may be) hold a peculiarly exalted place in heaven. The repetition of the phrase "these little ones" in this verse from verse 6, and the relation of the phrase in verse 6 to the corresponding phrase "one such little child" in verse 5, together with the connection of this whole series of verses (5-14) with verses 1-4, where a "little child" is presented as a model to the disciples, appear to many readers to exclude all other interpretations. And this feeling seems to receive support from the parallel passages, Mark ix. 37, 42, Luke ix. 48, xvii, 2, from which it is inferred that the idea of actual little children underlies the expression. The conviction derived from these passages, that it is little children who are meant by the phrase, becomes so strong in the minds of some, indeed, that they are ready to impose it *vi et armis* even on such a passage as Matt. x. 42, where there is no allusion to children in the context at all. Thus, for example, Alford and Morrison suggest that we must suppose that some actual children were present when our Lord was delivering his instructions to the apostles, and that he indicated them by a gesture — "one of these little ones," these, to wit, whom you see standing there, To seek the "children" somewhere outside the discourse, however, surely amounts to an admission that they are not discoverable in the discourse.

In endeavoring to ascertain the real meaning of the phrase, it may be well to take our start from this last-cited passage. It gives us at once its first appearance in the Gospel narratives and its earliest recorded occurrence in the discourses of our Lord. Our Lord is (Matt. x. 40-42) bringing to a close his instructions to the apostles as he sent them forth on their first, their trial, evangelistic tour. His words are words of the highest encouragement. "He that receiveth you," he says, "receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me." That is the general declaration: our Lord makes common cause with his messengers. Then comes the enforcement by illustration. It was a matter of common understanding that "he that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet" — that is, not in the name of another prophet, but on this sole ground, that he is a prophet, or, as we should say in our English idiom, "as a prophet" — "shall receive a prophet's

reward; and he that receiveth a righteous man in the name of a righteous man” — that is, again merely because of his righteousness — “shall receive a righteous man’s reward.” The broad principle, then, is that the receiver shall be put, in the matter of reward, on the level of the received: he, by his reception of the prophet or righteous man, takes common ground with him, and becomes sharer in his reward.

Now comes the application, marked as such (and not the continuation of the examples), by a change of construction. “And whosoever” — perhaps we may paraphrase, “Likewise whosoever” — “whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only, in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward.” The ordering of the clauses in this sentence is parallel with the ordering of the clauses in each of the preceding sentences. As, then, in them the prophet was received in the name of a prophet, and the righteous man in the name of a righteous man, so here when we read of “one of these little ones” being received in the name of a “disciple,” it is clear that these two terms are synonyms. “One of these little ones” means in other words just a “disciple.” Again, “in the name of a disciple” here means just what “in the name of a prophet” or “in the name of a righteous man” meant in the preceding clauses; that is to say, not “in the name of another disciple,” but “on this sole ground, namely, that he is a disciple.” If the receiver of the prophet shall share the prophet’s reward, and the receiver of the righteous man the righteous man’s reward, so the receiver of the disciple shall share the disciple’s reward. Therefore, again, a “little one” is just another name for “a disciple.”

It is not merely the parallelism that would be ruined, however, by reading, “Whosoever shall give drink unto a little child in the name of a disciple.” The entire significance of the declaration would be wrecked. The object of the declaration was to enhearten and encourage the apostles on their mission. How would it enhearten them to tell them that goodness to children would surely receive its reward? It was that goodness to them, the disciples, should receive a high reward that they needed to be assured of. We may be certain, then, that it is this that is asserted. And even the variations of phraseology introduced into the parallel sentences in this application, conduce to emphasizing this needed lesson. These variations are four in number. In the first place, instead of the simple “he that” receiveth we have here the emphasized universal “whosoever”; there is no danger of failure here! Next, instead of the simple comprehensive “receiveth,” we have here the least conceivable benefit specified — “shall give to drink a cup of cold water only”: the slightest goodness to them shall be noted and rewarded! Next, instead of the simple statement that the benefiter shall share the reward of the benefited, we have the solemn asseveration that in no case will a due reward be missed: the nature of the reward is left in large vagueness, and it is hinted only that it shall be appropriate, treated as due, and surely given. Lastly, instead of the cold “a disciple,” we have the tender “one of these little ones.” The “disciples” our Lord has in mind are his own disciples; his own disciples he loves with a devoted love; and this love is pledged to their protection. How natural it is,

then, that he that receives them shall be treated as having received him! The effect of these variations from the formally exact parallel is thus not to destroy or even to mar the parallel, but to raise it to its emotional climax. The lesson conveyed is that Christ's disciples are under the watchful charge of his jealous love, a love that is as strong as death, the flashes whereof are flashes of fire, a very flame of the Lord.

The case stands precisely the same with the paragraph Matt. xviii. 6-14. It can seem to be different there, indeed, only when we misapprehend the relation of this paragraph to the preceding one (Matt. xviii. 1-4) and the nature of the transition that is made at verse 5. The apostles had been disputing as to their relative claims to greatness in the coming kingdom; and the Lord teaches them a much-needed lesson in humility by means of the example of a little child. Setting a little child in their midst, he exhorts them to emulate its simplicity if they would be first in the kingdom of heaven. With the fourth verse, however, this incident closes, and the lesson from it is concluded. The discussion that follows, in the succeeding verses, is no longer an inculcation of humility. It is an exhilarating pledge of the whole mediatorial, or rather divine, power, to the keeping, protection and glorification of Christ's followers. The connection between the two paragraphs is of the slenderest, and appears to consist of little more than this — that Christ's followers are spoken of in both paragraphs as like little children. In the first paragraph they are exhorted to become "as little children," and commendation is passed upon those who humble themselves "as this little child." In the second paragraph we are told how our Lord stands affected towards — not "little children" literally, but "such little children" — such, that is, as become like little children, in obedience to him. These, he declares, he takes under his own protection, rewarding those who benefit them, and visiting with the severest punishment those who evil-entreat them; their angels ever behold the Father's face in heaven; if they go astray everything is dropped that they may be sought out and recovered; the Father's will is pledged that no one of them shall perish.

The note of individual, as over against class, oversight and protection, must be observed in order to appreciate the full value of this language. From the beginning throughout, the stress is laid upon the individual as the object of the divine love. Whoever receives any one such little child receives Christ; whoever causes a single one of them to stumble, were better drowned in the sea; no single one of them must be despised, since their angels abide in the Father's presence; if only one of them strays, all is left until he be recovered; the Father's will is that not a single one of them shall perish. It were absurd to suppose that the subject of all these great assurances were the whole body of human infants — of a large number of whom such assurances are never fulfilled. The passage is in effect but the Synoptic parallel of the seventeenth chapter of John, with its great assertion that nothing shall be lost of all that the Father has given the Son; or, perhaps better, the evangelic parallel of Romans viii. 28-39 with its triumphal note of perfect safety for all that love God. Christ's "little ones," in short, are just who he tells us they are — "those that believe on him," of whom "it is not the will

of the Father that one should perish," whose angels "in heaven do always behold the face of the Father which is in heaven."

The same conclusion is forced on us similarly at Mark ix. 42, the declaration of which is parallel with Matt. xviii. 6, and is immediately preceded by a verse, the thought of which is parallel to Matt. x. 42, so that it gives us afresh in a single context the two primary statements which we have met with in Matthew. We read here: "Whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink because ye are Christ's, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward. And whosoever shall cause one of these little ones that believe to stumble, it were better for him that a great millstone were hanged about his neck and he were cast into the sea." The variation of the phraseology in verse 41 from its parallel in Matt. x. 42 supplies a commentary upon the meaning of the phrases in the latter. The "little ones" of the one becomes the "you" — that is, Christ's apostles — in the other; and the "in the name of a disciple" of the one becomes "in the name that ye are Christ's" in the other. Thus the interpretation offered of the passage in Matthew is confirmed by the very language of the passage in Mark. But this language also sets the meaning of the phrases of the succeeding verse. The "you," that is, the disciples, of this verse is replaced in that by "these little ones that believe," which must therefore mean the same thing as the "you" — that is to say, just "the disciples." This would be manifest, indeed, of itself, since these "little ones" are specifically defined here not as little ones simply, but as those little ones "that have faith." This specific class of little ones, then — the class of "believers" — is the one designated. It is quite clear therefore that "these little ones" in this passage means not children, but Christ's disciples.

In the only other passage in which the phrase occurs — Luke xvii. 2 — the matter is equally clear. This passage is parallel in its assertion with Matt. xviii. 6 and Mark ix. 42, and repeats in effect their language. "It were well for him, through whom occasions of stumbling come," we read, "if a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, rather than that he should cause one of these little ones to stumble." There is no allusion to children in the entire context, in which our Lord simply warns his "disciples" against sins against their brethren. In this and the parallel passage in Mark, in other words, we have simply renewed manifestations of the Savior's infinite concern for those he calls "these little ones." He pronounces the sin of causing those for whom his love was thus pledged to stumble almost too great for words to express.

On each occasion of its occurrence, therefore, the phrase "these little ones" evinces itself, independently, a designation, not of children, but of the disciples of Christ. In these circumstances we cannot permit doubt to be thrown on its meaning in the palmary passage, Matt. xviii. 6, by the circumstance that certain passages in Mark (ix. 37) and Luke (ix. 48) which are parallel to Matt. xviii. 1-5 might easily be understood of little children. The phrase "these little ones" does not occur in these passages of Mark and Luke; its place being taken by language which, if these passages stood alone, might easily suggest to the reader only

little children. Perhaps, however, this is saying a little too much of the passage in Mark (ix. 36, 37), at least. This reads: "And he took a little child and set him in the midst of them: and taking him in his arms, he said unto them, Whosoever shall receive one of such little children in my name, receiveth me; and whosoever receiveth me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me." The account in Matthew is fuller and permits the connection of the clauses to be more exactly estimated: it seems as if it were merely the compression of Mark's report which is responsible for the apparent identity of the "little child" of verse 36 and "one of such little children" of verse 37. But even in Mark it is to be noted the phrases employed in the two verses are not the same. The phrase used in the latter verse is not "a little child," but "one of such little children." This is practically the same with Matthew's "one such little child," and seems to be open to the same interpretation — not "one little child," but "one of those who are spiritually like little children." And the subsequent use (verse 42) of the phrase "one of these little ones," obviously in this spiritual sense, renders this interpretation easier. Dr. Alexander Maclaren appears entirely justified, therefore, when he tells us that "such little children" here means just "those who are thus lowly, unambitious and unexacting."<sup>2</sup>

It must be confessed, on the other hand, that if Luke ix. 48 stood alone, we should very naturally think in it of nothing but a literal child. What Luke tells us is that Jesus "took a little child and set him by his side and said unto them, Whosoever shall receive this little child in my name, receiveth me; and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth him that sent me." "This little child" seems an explicit reference to the child seated by Jesus' side. Indeed, the reference is just a little too explicit. Are we to believe, for example, that just this particular child was intended, and no other? Is the promise confined to those who received this single child which Jesus now had by his side? Surely the meaning is not this particular child, but as G. L. Hahn puts it, "that which is represented by this child."<sup>3</sup> Is, then, what is represented by this child just other actual children like itself? Or rather all those who bear an inner resemblance to its child-like qualities? It does not seem out of the question that the latter may be intended. And the concluding clause does something to bear this out. "For," we read, "he that is least among you all, the same is great." "Least" — surely not in size or age: in inner self-estimation rather, in humility and absence of self-consciousness. Thus, after all, there is a flavor of something else than youthfulness even in this passage also.

Perhaps we may not unjustly say, then, with Hahn, that "the sense of the first clause is: not 'A child is so highly esteemed in God's sight that to receive it in Christ's name is the same as to receive God' (Bisping, Keil); nor yet, 'Every disciple of Christ who is like a child in unassumingness and humility is so highly esteemed of God that whoever receives him, etc.' (Meyer); but, 'Every kindness

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<sup>2</sup> Bible Class Expositions: Mark, 1893, p. 142.

<sup>3</sup> G. L. Hahn, *Des Evangelium des Lucas*, I. 1892, p. 631 (on ix. 48).

that any one shows to the least of my followers, because he is my follower, is reckoned to him as if he had shown it to me, even to my heavenly Father himself.” Something like this is obviously intended: and in proportion as we feel that this is the case in that proportion we feel that it is at least inadequate to understand the phrase “this little child” as referring merely to a literal child. Accordingly, Dr. Broadus waxes very bold, and prefers to interpret explicitly of the spiritual child (on Matt. xviii. 5-9). “The reference in Matthew and Mark,” he says, “is plainly to the lowly believer. But Luke says, ‘Whosoever shall receive this little child in my name.’ Luke’s account is very brief, omitting the sayings of Matt. xviii. 3, 4. The idea had become familiar to all Christian minds that Jesus used a little child for an object lesson, and so it is likely that Luke meant ‘this little child’ representatively, the lowly believer who is like this child.”<sup>4</sup>

Some may feel, no doubt, that such an interpretation subjects the actual text of Luke too strongly to the influence of the parallel passages: and that we ought to interpret Luke strictly independently, apart from all influence from them. In that case surely we should interpret Matthew and Mark also strictly independently, apart from the influence of what may appear to us the natural meaning of Luke; and this passage cannot then be pleaded as modifying the apparent sense of those. Indeed, in any event, explain the difference of language as we may, and understand Luke as we can, the passages in Matthew and Mark too clearly indicate their own meaning to be successfully explained in a different sense, for the purpose of harmonizing them with Luke. If we find it difficult to understand Luke in harmony with them, we must just let Luke bear the brunt of the difficulty. However we ultimately expound his text, we must abide by the clear meaning conveyed by the language of Matthew and Mark for theirs.

We may take it, then, as established that the phrase “these little ones” on the Master’s lips meant not “children,” but distinctly “my disciples.” The question still presses, however, whence the Master derived this term as a designation of his disciples. It has frequently been suggested that he simply adopted it from the rabbinical schools, in which “little ones” had come to be a current designation of “pupils.” This idea seems traceable to John Jacob Wetstein, who in his great edition of the Greek New Testament illustrates the phrase on its first occurrence (Matt. x. 42) by the following citation from an old Jewish commentary on Genesis, known as the *Bereshith Rabba* (xlii. 4): “If there are no little ones, there are no disciples; if there are no disciples, there are no sages; if there are no sages, there are no elders; if there are no elders, there are no prophets; if there are no prophets, there is no God.”<sup>5</sup> Following this suggestion, commentators of the highest rank, such as Bolten, Kuinoel, Bloomfield, Fritzsche, have accordingly explained the phrase simply as a Hebraism for “disciples,” so that in his employment of it our Lord would have done nothing but adopt a current

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<sup>4</sup> John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 382.

<sup>5</sup> *Novum Testamentum Graecum*, 1751, p. 379.

denomination of “disciples.” The correctness of the assumption on which this explanation is based, viz., the currency in the rabbinical schools of the phrase “little ones” as a designation of “pupils,” was, however, long ago called sharply in question by Meyer<sup>6</sup> and Bruno Bauer.<sup>7</sup> The passage from the *Bereshith Rabba*, Meyer points out, is scarcely foundation enough for such an assumption, especially as the progressive development of the idea embodied in it seems plainly to indicate that in it the term “little ones” means not “disciples,” but just “children.” As a consequence of these criticisms the notion has quite generally died out, and most commentators will agree today with Weiss<sup>8</sup> when he says briefly: “Wetstein erroneously maintains that the expression was current among the rabbis for the conception `disciples.’”

It is worthwhile to observe, however, precisely what is set aside by the criticisms of Meyer and his successors. It is no more than that the term “little ones” means directly (Meyer says “schlechtin”) “disciples,” and was current as a well-known synonym of that term. It would be too much to claim that it could not be, or even never was, employed by the rabbis to designate “disciples” figuratively. It would be too much to say even that the passage in the *Bereshith Rabba* referred to has no bearing on such an employment of it. We observe that, undeterred by such criticism, Dr. Edersheim still appeals to this passage<sup>9</sup> to show that a fuller meaning might be borne to our Lord’s contemporaries by the phrase “these little ones” than it bears to us. “It shows,” he remarks, “that the phrase `little ones’ would naturally be understood as `the children’” (inverted commas his) “who were still learning the elements and who would by and by grow into `disciples.’” It would seem to be used here, then, in his opinion, not indeed of “disciples,” but of “disciples in the making”; and on our Lord’s lips, therefore, to designate his followers not exactly as “disciples” but at least as inchoate disciples.

How far this view is justified, and what the real bearing of the passage in the *Bereshith Rabba* is on the meaning of the phrase as used by our Lord, may perhaps be best estimated, however, by reading it more at large. We translate it from Wunsche’s version:

What then, was the distress in the days of Ahaz? Aram pressed from before and the Philistines from behind. It was just like a prince whom his tutor wished to destroy, but considered that if he killed him himself he would forfeit his life to the King, but if he should rather simply take his nurse from him he would die of himself. So also Ahaz said: Where there are no lambs, there are no rams; and where there are no rams, there are no sheep; and where there are no sheep there is no shepherd; and where there is no shepherd, there the world cannot

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<sup>6</sup> Ed. 2, p. 215, note.

<sup>7</sup> II. 241.

<sup>8</sup> Meyer, ed. 8, 1890.

<sup>9</sup> *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, ed. 1, I. p. 652.

subsist. Accordingly he thought: Where there are no children learning, there are no disciples; where no disciples, no sages; where no sages, no elders; and where no elders, there are no prophets; and where there are no prophets, there God does not let his Shechina rest on them (see Isa. viii. 16). Rabbi Hunja bar Eleasar said: Why is the King called Ahaz? Because he destroyed the houses of assembly and instruction. Rabbi Jacob bar Abba, in the name of Rabbi Acha, referring to Isa. viii. 17, 18, `And I wait for the Eternal who hides his face from the house of Jacob,' said: There is no heavier hour than that in which God says, `I hide my face' (see Deut. xxxi. 18); and from that hour I wait for the fulfilment of the word of Deut. xxxi. 21, `It shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed.' Of what profit is this? `Behold I and the children whom the Eternal has given me are a sign and a wonder in Israel' (see Isa. viii. 18). Were they then his children? They were certainly his disciples. They were, however, so dear to him that they were as if his children. When King Ahaz began to destroy the houses of assembly and teaching, they all began to cry Woe!<sup>10</sup>

It is dangerous to launch out ever so little upon the sea of rabbinical interpretation. But the central idea of this passage appears to be the importance of the rising generation. Ahaz, wishing to root out the worship of God in Israel, wisely began by destroying church and school, shrewdly arguing that if he dried up the supply of worshippers at its source, the stream would die out of itself. And the rabbis, so far commending this unrighteous ruler, remind themselves that in the rising generation is the hope of the nation and of the church and the school alike. The passage cited by Wetstein thus appears to be in essence but a study in correlatives, the gist of which is that the hope of everything hangs on the children: when no children are in the schools — then there can come out into the work-a-day world nothing good; sages, elders, prophets alike fail, and God can not visit his people. Of course, it is all spoken from the rabbinical standpoint, and it is children in the school that are in mind; but we cannot see that the word “little ones” means in the context anything but just “children.” That the idea, nevertheless, of the affectionate designation of “disciples” by the tender name of “children” was by no means foreign to the rabbinical mind appears from the latter portion of the passage we have quoted. There, Isa. viii. 18 is interpreted as having reference to these children of the mind rather than of the body. The general result we derive from this passage is therefore that, although it affords no proof that the specific phrase “the little ones” was current among the rabbis in the sense of “disciples,” it does clearly exhibit that the affectionate application of the term “children” to one’s disciples was by no means alien to rabbinical feeling, as, indeed (since they too were men) it could not well be. Nothing could be more touching than the simple words with which our extract closes, which tell us that Isaiah’s pupils were “so dear to him” that they were as his children: and nothing could more aptly illustrate the employment by our Lord of the designation “these

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<sup>10</sup> *Bibliotheca Rabbinica: eine Sammiung alter Midraschim*, 1880, pp. 191f.

little ones” of his disciples, if that phrase in its literal connotation denotes children.

The source of the suggestion to our Lord of the particular phrase, “These little ones,” as a designation of his disciples, remains, however, even after we have heard the rabbis, still to seek. We have seen that it is natural to think and speak of one’s disciples as his “children,” and that the passage quoted by Wetstein from the *Bereshith Rabba* seems to indicate the use among the Rabbis of the term “little ones” for “children.” But we are afraid that when we have said this we have not said quite all. It would seem that we must add that this particular term, as applied by the rabbis to children, appears to be freighted not so much with affectionate feeling as rather with the simple implication of immaturity. If we may trust the lexicographers, children were “little ones” to the rabbis only as undeveloped and unripe things, not yet arrived “at years of discretion.” The “katan” and “katanna” were simply the “boy” and “girl” in opposition to the mature man and woman. Although then this term for children was occasionally transferred by them metaphorically to their pupils, it was not in a very pleasant sense. The “little one” among the pupils was just an “abortion” — one who set himself up in his immaturity in opposition to his master’s ripe learning, or one who, while yet fit only to learn, prematurely assumed the functions of a teacher (*Tract Sotah* 22a, quoted by both Levy and Jastrow *sub voc.*). It was assuredly not from this circle of ideas that our Lord derived his use of the phrase.

It is worth remarking further that this term, employed by the rabbis to express the immaturity of childhood, never occurs in the Old Testament as a designation of children. Children are never spoken of as “little ones” in the Hebrew Old Testament. Readers of the English Bible will no doubt be surprised by such a statement, since the English Bible is sown thickly with such a designation. But this is wholly due to the English translators, who render thus a Hebrew collective noun (*taph*) the suggestion of which is not smallness of size, but trippingness of gait. To the Hebrew, in other words, children appealed, not as “little ones,” but as “toddlers” (Gen. xxxiv. 29; xliii. 8; xlv. 19; xlvi. 5; xlvii. 12, 24; 1. 8, 21; Ex. x. 10, 24; Num. xiv. 31; xvi. 21; xxxi. 9, 17; xxxii. 16, 17, 21, 24; Deut. i. 39; ii. 34; iii. 19; xx. 14; xxix. 11; Josh. i. 14; viii. 35; Judges xviii. 21; 2 Sam. xv. 22; 2 Chron. xx. 13; xxxi. 18; Ezra viii. 21; Esther iii. 13; viii. 11; Ezek. ix. 6. Yet other terms with other implications are used in Ps. cxxxvii. 9; Job xxi. 11; Jer. xiv. 3; xlviii. 4; Zech. xiii. 7, where the term “little ones” occurs in the Authorized Version). This term (*taph*), moreover, is never rendered in the Greek Old Testament by the Greek phrase meaning “little ones” which our Savior employs. Indeed, this Greek phrase (*mikroi*) never occurs in the Septuagint as the translation of any Hebrew word standing for “children.” The Greek phrase “little ones” in the sense of “children” is thus just as unexampled in Biblical usage as is the corresponding Hebrew one. (Students will perceive at a glance that such passages as Gen. xlv. 20; Isa. lx. 22 for the Hebrew, and Gen. xlii. 32; 1 Sam. xvi. 11; 2 Chron. xxii. 1, in the Greek, where “little one” means distinctively “*the* little one,” that is, the smallest child, are not exceptions to this statement.)

Nor indeed would it have seemed much more natural to a Greek affectionately to designate children “little ones” than it did to the Hebrews. Their term for “little,” *mikrós*, did not easily suggest fewness of years, but rather smallness of size, with an implication of triviality; and when applied to people in a metaphorical sense it was apt to convey a tinge of reproach. No passage is adduced in Stephens’ *Thesaurus* where it is used as a substantive, singular or plural, in the sense of “child” or “children.” It occurs no doubt as an adjective qualifying the word “child”: “You deceive me with words as if I were a little child,” for example, we read in *Theognis* (254) — where its essentially uncomplimentary implication is apparent. But this is something very different from its use without substantive to mean “child” or “children.” It is also found in an epithet attributed to individuals in the classics, as in the New Testament (“James the Less,” or rather “the Little”) and in Rabbinical Hebrew (“Samuel the Little”): thus we read in Aristotle of “Amyntas the Little” and in Xenophon of “Aristodemus, called the Little,” and in Aristophanes of “Kleigenes the Little.” But no more in the classics than in the New Testament or Rabbinical Hebrew is it inferiority of age that is expressed.<sup>11</sup> There seems thus to be no obtrusive point of connection in either Hebrew or Greek usage to explain naturally the selection by our Lord of “these little ones,” conceived as a designation for “children,” as an endearing diminutive to designate his “disciples.”

If we search the Old Testament, indeed, for a possible point of departure for the framing of such a phrase as our Lord uses, there is but one passage which readily suggests itself. We refer to Zech. xiii. 7. This passage in our Revised English Version is as follows: “Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the Lord of Hosts; smite the shepherd and the sheep shall be scattered; and I will turn my head upon the little ones.” This remarkable prophecy our Lord quotes (Matt. xxvi. 31; Mark xiv. 27), recognizing in himself Jehovah’s Shepherd, who is also Jehovah’s fellow, and in his own apprehension and crucifixion the smiting of the shepherd by which the sheep of the flock should be scattered abroad. This recognition implies the application of the term “the little ones” in the last clause of the verse to his followers. The Hebrew vocable here employed is not the ordinary Hebrew word for “little” things used in later Hebrew for “children,” nor yet the Biblical term so frequently rendered in our English version “little ones,” but a word used in the precise form in which it here occurs in this passage only, but occurring in related forms often elsewhere, ordinarily with the implication of youthfulness (Gen. xix. 31, 34, 35, 38; xxv. 23; xxix. 26; xliii. 33; xlvi. 14; Josh. vi. 20; 1 Kings xvi. 34; Job xxx. 1; xxxii. 6; Jer. xlvi. 4), though sometimes also with that of insignificance (Judges vi. 15; 1 Sam. ix. 21; Isa. lx. 22; Jer. xiv. 3; Micah v. 2). The Septuagint translators have rendered it by the precise Greek phrase employed by our Lord, “the little ones” (*oi mikroi*). The implication of the word as used in this verse, as well as its general connotation, commends it powerfully to us as possibly forming the starting point for the forming of the phrase which our

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Meyer on Mark xv. 40.

Lord uses. Clearly it is equivalent, not as Chambers and Shegg, for example, take it, to “the poor of the flock” of Zech. xii. 7, but rather to “the little ones of the flock” of Jer. xlix. 20, 50; 1. 45 — if indeed there is any distinction intended between “the little ones” and the flock at large, and these “little ones” are not rather to be conceived as the flock itself called “the little ones” in an excess of tenderness, possibly with additional implication of the humbleness of their estate and the humility of their hearts (cf. in general Köhler). If we suppose our Lord’s phrase to be based on this passage of Zechariah, the fundamental implication of its employment would seem to be a conception of his followers less as his “children” than as his “little sheep” or his “lambs.” The two implications are not, however, mutually exclusive, but, on the contrary, run into one another: so that even in this contingency the passage from “one such little child” in Matt. xviii. 5 to “one of these little ones” in Matt. xviii. 6 would be neither inexplicable nor unnatural.

The suggestion that our Lord’s phrase “these little ones” may find its root in Zechariah’s “little ones,” together with the uncertainty whether Zechariah’s “little ones” are identical with the flock or must rather be looked upon, with the majority of the commentators, as only a portion of the flock — the truly pious remnant — raises the question whether our Lord by “these little ones” meant all his disciples or only a specially designated class of them. The latter has been quite commonly supposed, and interpreters have busied themselves in defining what are the characteristic qualities of this particularly specified class. Hahn, for example, strenuously argues that the disciples at large cannot be meant, but that the designation presupposes that there are greater and smaller among the disciples (cf. Luke vii. 28); and that the essence of the exhortation, in Luke xvii. 2 at least, is that the greater must not despise the lesser. Similarly Godet supposes that the “little ones” are “beginners in the faith,” “those yet weak in faith”; and Alford appears to think that it is worth considering whether the “lower and less advanced converts” may not be meant. Surely, however, the idea of such distinctions within the limits of Christ’s followers is not only without support from the contexts in which the phrase occurs, but is distinctly inconsistent with them. In Matt. x. 42, for example, such a distinction is definitely negated by the parallelism by which the “little ones” are identified with the “disciples.” Its assumption would leave wholly out of account, also, the defining “these.” Our Lord was addressing his disciples and speaking (verse 40) of the reception accorded to them. “These little ones” can therefore only mean them. The matter is even plainer in Mark ix. 42, where “these little ones” takes up again the “you” of the preceding verse; they are therefore identified definitely with the disciples at large. They are besides openly defined as “those that believe,” that is to say, as “believers” in their essential character as such. Much the same may be said of Luke xvii. 2, in the context of which there is a distinction noted between brother and brother, but not between greater and lesser. While the whole drift of Matt. xviii. 5-14 is to exalt “the little ones” and to identify them just with that body of chosen ones to whose salvation the will of the Father is pledged. It may be taken as exegetically certain, therefore, that by “these little ones” our Lord does not

intend to single out a certain section of his disciples — whether the weakest in faith or the most advanced in that humility of heart which is the fruit of a great faith — but means just the whole body of his disciples. This is therefore simply one of the somewhat numerous general designations which he gives to his disciples, by which to express his conception of their character and estate and the nature of his feelings towards them.

What, then, is the conception of his disciples and his feeling towards them which our Lord expresses in the use of this designation? In their answers to these questions, too, the commentators differ very widely among themselves. The disciples were called “little ones,” thinks Reuss, because they were drawn from the most humble and least distinguished portion of society; they were so called, thinks De Wette, because they were despised and meanly esteemed for Christ’s sake; they were so called, thinks Dr. Riddle, in recognition of their weakness in themselves, in the midst of the persecutions of the world. As many voices, so many opinions. Among them all the characteristically crisp and clear-cut note of Bengel on Matt. x. 42 commends itself to us: “‘Little ones,’ see chapter xi. 11; Zech. xiii. 7: a sweet (suave) epithet for disciples.” “A sweet epithet” — that is, a loving epithet, a term of endearment. That surely is the main import of the epithet: it is an utterance of deep-reaching tenderness, the very expression of endearment.

Other implications may be present, but they are certainly secondary. Among these the chief one assuredly is the neediness of the disciples. The passages in which the epithet occurs are preeminent for their note of protecting care. They read like the cry of a mother’s heart for her child: they have in them something of the fierceness of the mother’s protecting love (Matt. xviii. 6; Mark ix. 42; Luke xvii. 2); and all of the passion of her brooding tenderness (Matt. x. 42; Mark ix. 41). And they run up into that marvelous declaration of the eighteenth chapter of Matthew that no man and no thing can snatch the objects of this love out of the Savior’s hands. We think we should not go wrong, therefore, if, neglecting everything else, we should say that our Savior calls his disciples “these little ones” because he thinks of them as the particular objects of his protecting care and gives in this designation of them a supreme expression to the depth and tenderness of his love for them. It is thus the diminutive of endearment by way of eminence; the purest expression, among all his affectionate names for his disciples, of the fondness of his love for them. They were his friends and his children: his sheep and his lambs: but above all these, they were “his little ones” — his “little ones” who needed him and whom he would never fail in their times of need, even though their times of need be all times as indeed they are.