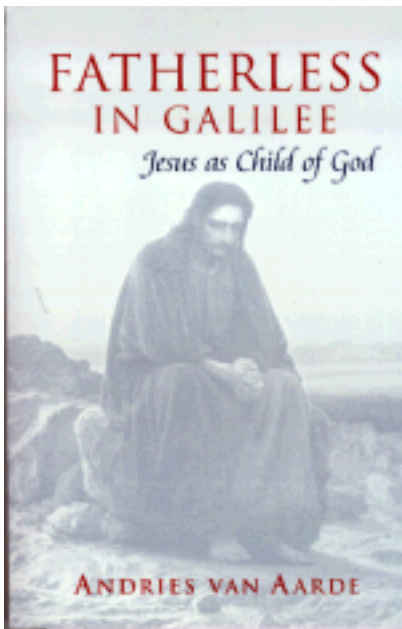


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van Aarde, Andries

Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus as a Child of God

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Lincoln H. Blumell
University of Calgary
Calgary, AB T2N 1N4

Andries van Aarde has undertaken a novel approach to the study of the historical Jesus. Whereas most attempts to explain the historical Jesus commence with Jesus' encounter with John the Baptist at the Jordan, van Aarde argues that it is possible, even helpful, to move beyond Jesus' baptism to his adolescence and early years to elucidate the historical figure. Accordingly, his work devotes considerable attention to Jesus' childhood and attempts to explain how his upbringing profoundly influenced and shaped his later message.

The central thesis of his book is that Jesus grew up fatherless. Van Aarde suggests that Jesus did not even know who his biological father was, thus rejecting certain noncanonical traditions that Joseph died when Jesus was still quite young. Growing up fatherless in first-century C.E. Galilee was more than just painful for Jesus; it also was shameful as he was severely chastised by his society, being regarded as a "bastard" child. This experience of growing up fatherless in a very judgmental and unforgiving society is the factor that best explains Jesus' message for van Aarde. That is why Jesus regarded God as his heavenly father, lacked a patriarchal ethos, and directed his ministry of compassion to the disenfranchised and marginalized members of society, such as women, children, the sick, and the needy.

Van Aarde's thesis is based on the absence of any father figure for Jesus in the earliest Christian literature such as Q, *Thomas*, Mark, and Paul. In Mark, Jesus is not referred to as "son of Joseph," as one would naturally suspect, but rather by the obscure designation "son of Mary" (Mark 6:3), suggesting that Jesus had no father. Since Joseph is not present in the early literature, van Aarde believes he was an invention of the later church to serve as an ideal surrogate and that his creation was necessitated for many reasons. He served as an ethical paradigm for the church, and he also deflected Pharisaic accusations of Jesus' illegitimacy. Hence, Joseph is only mentioned in the later Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John.

Jesus being fatherless figures prominently in his motives for being baptized by John. Van Aarde argues that prior to his baptism he suffered from "epistemic sin" as a result of his marginalized position in society stemming from his illegitimacy. But at the baptism by John Jesus' epistemic sin was washed away. Following his baptism, he not only regarded God as his new father but also took up the mantle of preacher. He returned to Galilee to proclaim a message of remission of sin and trust in God, and he sought to defend the fatherless and plead for the widow.

This book has many strengths. Foremost, it is an interesting read that offers an alternative approach to understanding the historical Jesus. Van Aarde displays his erudition in the field with his clearly sketched contours of the current quest for the historical Jesus and where his work is situated in that quest. In his first chapter, "My Journey," though tedious at times, he conveys an immense amount of material and organizes it neatly to explain where his research is located. Later in chapter 4, "The Joseph Trajectory," he draws out many interesting features about the father figure Joseph and ties them together through an innovative series of seven links.

Notwithstanding the work's strengths, it also contains certain shortcomings ranging from the minor irritants of recurring problems with the Greek fonts used in the book and periodic misspelling of some Greek words to more serious foundational issues that potentially weaken van Aarde's main arguments. Van Aarde's bleak assessment of a child without a father in first-century C.E. Galilee is perhaps exaggerated. He goes to great lengths to show how these children were ostracized and stigmatized in society, and he uses an "ideal type" model to demonstrate this. However, he never provides much evidence of experiences of fatherless children in first-century C.E. Galilean society to validate his thesis. Additionally, he only presents material that reinforces his contention that fatherless children were outcasts and severely marginalized. He never engages with material that suggests otherwise. There are numerous injunctions in both Exodus and Deuteronomy that call for compassion and care toward the fatherless.

In the last chapter (“The Continued Importance of Jesus”) the book takes a radical turn from a rather scholarly to a devotional enterprise. Van Aarde digresses, and at times borders on a full-fledged sermon, on how Jesus (his version) can potentially help people in the contemporary period. Having read the last chapter one cannot help but think of John Dominic Crossan’s apt statement concerning historical Jesus scholarship: “It is impossible to avoid the suspicion that historical Jesus research is a very safe place to do theology and call it history, to do autobiography and call it biography” (*The Historical Jesus*, xxviii). Parts of the last chapter seemed out of step with the rest of the book, and it cast shadows of suspicion over his earlier work. He should have omitted this material completely or at least placed it in an appendix.

In the final analysis, Van Aarde marshals the evidence and the source material in such a way that he paints a coherent and even plausible picture of the historical Jesus. Despite his best efforts, however, his conclusions are not convincing, and they rest solely on the double claim that Jesus was fatherless and that Joseph was a legendary figure; both the claims are never fully demonstrated. In spite of some of the shortcomings one has to applaud van Aarde for undertaking this novel enterprise of trying to find a fresh angle on the well-plowed field of historical Jesus research.