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J.T. Fitzgerald

ORPHANS IN MEDITERRANEAN ANTIQUITY AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of the problem of orphans in the ancient Mediterranean world and identifies ways in which various societies acknowledged orphans' plight and sought to address it. Part 1 gives the ancient definition of "orphan" as a "fatherless child" and statistical estimates for the percentage of children who had lost their father. Part 2 identifies five factors (inadequate public health care, low life expectancy, war deaths, death during childbirth, and differences in age at first marriage for men and women) that contributed to the high incidence of orphans in antiquity. Part 3 surveys the recognition of orphans' vulnerability in ancient Babylon, ancient Israel and early Judaism, ancient Greece, and imperial Rome. Part 4 discusses the treatment of orphans in early Christianity, focusing on the pre-Constantinian period. Part 5 offers a brief conclusion that notes both personal and institutional responses by Christians to the plight of orphans.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM OF FATHERLESSNESS

The modern world is well aware of the multiple problems posed by the death or the mental or physical absence of one of the parents of children. It does not matter whether the deceased or absent parent is the mother or the father, whether the parents are or were ever married, or in the case of gay parents, which partner is no longer present. No matter what the particular situation, the surviving parent and children will encounter numerous challenges.

Prof. John T. Fitzgerald, Department of Theology, University of Notre Dame (USA), and Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa. E-mail: John.T.Fitzgerald.105@nd.edu

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The shape and scope of the problem of fatherlessness was different in antiquity in at least two ways. To begin with, the English word “orphan” today is used almost exclusively of a child who has lost both parents due to death. In antiquity, by contrast, children who had lost either the father or the mother were routinely regarded as orphans. Given the patriarchal world of antiquity, it is not surprising that the focus was on the loss of the father, so that the orphan was typically regarded as “fatherless.” This is seen above all in the frequent association of orphans with widows, with the latter having lost her husband and the former their father. “Only from the time of Justinian” – thus the sixth century CE – “did the term [orphan] signify a child who had lost both parents” (Bobou 2012:4944).

The second difference concerns the prevalence of fatherlessness. If we restrict the term “fatherless” to describe children whose fathers have died, there were many more orphans in the ancient world than there are today in First World countries. Furthermore, the impact of the father’s death was more profound than it is today. Both of these points are stressed by J.-U. Krause (1994a; 1994b; 1995a; 1995b) in his massive *Habilitationsschrift* on widows and orphans in the Roman world. Krause (1995a:9) estimates that during the time of the Roman Empire some 40-45 per cent of children aged 14-15 had lost their father. Because of the greater statistical number of orphans and the more profound impact of fatherlessness, orphans constituted a far greater problem for the ancient world than they usually do for us, though there are of course situations today in which the number of orphans can skyrocket and create a crisis.[1]

2. FIVE FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE HIGH INCIDENCE OF ORPHANS IN ANTIQUITY

This second difference prompts the question, “What factors contributed to the higher incidence of deaths of parents in antiquity and thus resulted in a greater number of orphans?” Five factors merit emphasis.

2.1. The first factor is *public health care,* which aims at preventing disease and prolonging both the length and quality of life, and which includes attention to issues such as nutrition and sanitation. The higher quality of public health in the modern world leads to a greater longevity of life in general. Health care in the ancient world, in contrast, was a constant

1 A third difference is how the modern problem of fatherlessness differs from its ancient counterpart, on which cf. Hübner and Ratzan (2009:3–13).

battle against disease, unhealthy living conditions, and malnutrition.[2] As Hin (2012:4084) observes, "Markers on the bones and teeth of skeletons across the ancient world testify of health problems related to malnutrition." Moreover, according to recent estimates, "adults suffered from disabilities during about one sixth of their lifespan" (Hin 2012:4084). Furthermore, those with serious injuries and diseases often survive today whereas those in antiquity with similar injuries and diseases were more likely to succumb.

2.2 This leads directly to a second factor, *life expectancy*. In the modern world life expectancy varies not only by gender and ethnicity but does so enormously by geographical region and country, with, for example, the AIDS epidemic having significantly lowered life expectancy for some countries, especially on the continent of Africa. According to the World Health Organization (2014:42), for those born in 2012 the global life expectancy was 68.1 years for men and 72.7 years for women. Life expectancy at birth for Romans, by contrast, was "somewhere between 20 and 30 years" (Hin 2013:170), with some scholars (Parkin 1992:85; Garnsey 1998:256) thus suggesting about 25 years as the average. But it may well have been even lower for women. Based on census returns, Bagnall and Frier (1994:87, 100), for instance, persuasively suggest 22.5 years for women in Roman Egypt but theorise at least 25 years for men. Whatever the precise average, the ancient life expectancy at birth was thus significantly lower, and Aristotle famously said that "most children die before the seventh day" (*Historia animalium* 588a8).[3] Yet we must immediately qualify these studies and statements by adding the consideration that a high infant mortality rate in antiquity significantly lowered average life expectancy. According to one study of Roman life expectancy, it was 21 at birth but doubled to 42 by the age of 5 (Frier 1980; see also Parkin 1992:144). Nevertheless, it remains clear that ancient life expectancy was considerably lower than our own.

2.3. A third factor affecting men in antiquity was the danger posed by *war*, whereas for women a fourth factor was *childbirth*. In the opening chapter of his study of widows and orphans in Classical Athens, Cudjoe (2010:17-26) gives a vivid but horrifying depiction of the significant casualties suffered by the Athenian army in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. These soldiers were cut down in the prime of life, leaving behind

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2 On malnutrition as a factor affecting mortality, see Hin (2013:95–96). Ostelological evidence suggests that malnutrition was more likely to afflict girls and women than it was boys and men (Wells 1975). On public health in antiquity and its effect on children's health, cf. Vuorinen and Mussaio-Rauhamaa (1995).

3 Hopkins (1983:225) speculates that 28% of Roman children died within their first year, and Garnsey (1998:256) estimates that *ca.* 50% of children died before they reached the age of 10.

countless young widows and orphans. Given the prevalence of war throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, other cities suffered similar heavy losses. Whereas war posed the major post-childhood threat to men, the greatest threat to adolescent young women was giving birth.[4] And when the child survived but the mother did not, as in the Biblical story of Rachel giving birth to Benjamin (Gen. 35:16–21), fathers were faced with the task of rearing that child without its birth-mother.

2.4. A fifth and final factor is the *difference in the age of first marriage for men and women.* The age at which men and women generally married for the first time has been the subject of debate for decades, but there is a consensus that throughout the ancient Mediterranean world men were typically older than women at the time of first marriage.[5] In Archaic Greece, Hesiod advised men to marry at about thirty, and women to marry about five years after puberty (*Opera et dies* 694–697).[6] Others gave age ranges for marriage; for example, Solon (frg. 27.9–10) placed marriage for men in the fifth of his ten human ages, thus between 29 and 35, and Plato viewed marriage as appropriate for men between 25 and 35 years[7] and for women between 16 and 20.[8] Aristotle (*Politica* 1335a 27–29), on the other hand, pushed the marriage age back to 37 for men and suggested marriage at about 18 for women. There is also evidence for females being married at ages 12-14 (West 1978:327), thus shortly after puberty. Isomachus, for instance, says that he married his wife when she was only 14, at a time when she was "a mere child who had seen and heard almost nothing" (Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 3.13; 7.5). Given the low life expectancies in antiquity, "only one or two of every ten men reaching the age of marriage would still have a father alive" (Golden 1990:111).

As far as the evidence for Roman Italy and the western provinces is concerned, there is a well-known tension between the literary and the epigraphic evidence, with the literary sources pointing to a relatively early time of marriage among the Roman elite for both men and women, with

4 The oldest archaeological evidence for death during childbirth comes from Neolithic Iberia some 7000–8000 years ago; cf. Lieverse, Bazaliiskii & Weber (2015).

5 For an assessment of the debate, cf. Scheidel (2007).

6 Hesiod does not give an age for the onset of puberty, but Plato (*Leges* 833c-d) implies it was 13 and Aristotle (*Historia animalium* 581a–581b) gives it as 14. If Hesiod is thinking similarly, he would be placing marriage for young women at 18 or 19.

7 Plato gives both 25-35 (*Leges* 772d) and 30-35 (*Leges* 721a-d; 785b), viewing 35 as the latest time for men to marry. He permits male sexual reproduction up to 55 years (*Respublica* 460e).

8 Plato, *Leges* 785b; cf. also 833d.

women marrying between 12 and 15 years of age and men between 18 and 20. In keeping with this literary data, Lelis, Percy, and Verstraete (2003) argue that Roman women commonly married around the age of 15 and Roman men at 20, which gives a five-year difference in the age of husband and wife.[9]

But the epigraphic evidence, which is not restricted to Roman elites, suggests a later age for the time of first marriage for non-elite men and women, with the mid-20s to 30 for the former (Saller 1987:29–30; 1994:41) and the late teens or possibly even the early twenties for the latter.[10] Thus in a typical non-elite Roman marriage, the man would have been 25 or a bit older, and the woman about 17 when they married (Timmer 2012:176). This epigraphic evidence from Rome is consistent with the papyrological evidence from Egypt, where the average age of marriage appears to be about 17.5 for women and a little over 25 for men (Bagnall & Frier 1994:114 n. 15, 116). As with ancient Greece, therefore, only a fraction of non-elite fathers would have been alive when their sons married (Saller 1987:32).

On the whole, therefore, the evidence for Greece (with the exception of Sparta)[11] suggests a difference in age for married couples of some 12-20 years, perhaps about 15 years on average. The average age difference for Rome was less, with anywhere from 5 to 10 years being fairly common, and Krause (1994a:34) giving 7-8 years as the difference.[12] The important point, whatever the precise difference in age, was that men were often anywhere between 5 to 15 years older than their wives, a difference that not only reinforced patriarchy but also meant that the husbands were very likely to die before their wives did, and this resulted in a large number of both widows and orphans. As we have noted, Krause (1995a:9) estimates that 40-45% of children aged 14/15 had lost their fathers, and the calculations of Saller (1987:32–33) are similar, with 45-46% of 15 year-old Romans having lost their father, and that percentage climbing to 68-70% by the time they reached 25, the age of full legal majority.[13] Closely related to this pervasive

9 Saller (1987:29–30; 1994:38) argues that men from the Roman senatorial class married in their early twenties.

10 Shaw (1987:430) gives late teens, whereas Saller (1987:30) gives early twenties and uses 20 as his median age (1994:37).

11 Spartan women clearly married later than their counterparts did elsewhere in Greece; cf. esp. Cartledge (2002:144–149).

12 For an excellent analysis of Krause's study, cf. McGinn (1999).

13 Roman children progressed through three legal stages that did not necessarily conform to biological reality: *infantes* (birth to 7), *impuberes* (7 to puberty, which was set at 12 for girls and 14 for boys), and *puberes* (puberty to 25), when they attained their full legal majority. *Puberes* were no longer subject to a tutor (Bednarski 2014:95).

situation for orphans is that for widows. According to Krause (1994a:85), marriage lasted only 15-20 years at most, with a "typical" woman marrying at 18, becoming a widow at 33-35, and living as a widow for another ten years. He estimates that as many as 30% of adult women in the Roman world were unmarried widows, with that percentage rising to more than 40 per cent for women aged 40-50 (Krause 1994a:73). One recalls the story of Anna in Luke 2:36-37, who was married for just seven years, yet was still living as a widow at age 84.

3. RECOGNITION OF THE VULNERABILITY OF ORPHANS

It is incontestable that death typically creates a number of problems for the surviving members of a family, even when the children are adults. But when the children are minors, the problems become acute. The social fact that orphans were an especially vulnerable group was already recognised in the ancient Mediterranean world, and they were viewed in this way because they often had no protection and no power. The powerlessness of orphans and their precarious social situation emerge vividly in a passage found in 1 Esdras 3:19, where three contrasts appear: the free and the slave, the rich and the poor, and the king and the orphan. The powerlessness of the orphan is then underscored in 1 Esdras 4:1-12 by the description of the king's almost complete power. The orphan thus stands over against the absolute monarch at the other end of the power spectrum; the latter has unlimited power, whereas the orphan has none. In what follows I shall devote a significant portion of this study to noting several instances of this recognition and of early attempts to address it.

3.1 My first example is taken from *Ancient Babylon*, where this recognition appears already in the epilogue to the famous law code of Hammurapi (Hammurabi). The law code proper contains 282 laws, but these laws are framed by a prologue at the beginning and an epilogue at the end. In both prologue and epilogue Hammurapi depicts himself as chosen by the Babylonian deities to establish justice in the land and to ensure that "the strong might not oppress the weak." In the epilogue, he says that the great gods called him "in order to protect the widows and orphans." Orphans are thus viewed as a prime example of those who are quintessentially weak, among those most likely to be oppressed, and thus among those most in need of protection. Given that situation, it is understandable why the king, as the most powerful person in the land, could and should function as the orphans' protector.

3.2 My second set of examples comes from *Ancient Israel*. These are particularly important for our purposes, since concern for orphans was one of the legacies that Jewish scripture and tradition bequeathed to early Christianity. It is worth noting at the outset that concern for orphans is found in all three sections of the Tanak, which indicates that the protection of orphans was not the isolated cause of some ancient advocacy group but was widely viewed in ancient Israel as a moral obligation of the community as a whole and especially its leaders.

3.2.1 Furthermore, this concern is ancient, appearing in the oldest legal code preserved in the Torah, namely, the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20:22-23:33), which has numerous affinities and parallels with Mesopotamian law codes and which is widely regarded as being pre-monarchical in origin. The prohibition "You shall not abuse any widow or orphan" (Exod. 22:22)[14] is stated apodictically, like the commandments in the Decalogue; the language used to describe the abuse of widow and orphan (Exod. 22:23) draws on that associated with the Israelites' oppression in Egypt ("abuse": Exod. 1:11-12; "cry out"/"cry": Exod. 3:7 and 22:23); and the law is addressed to the men of the community, who are warned that violation of this command will result in them being killed in war, making their own wives widows and their own children orphans (Exod, 22:24), and thus prime targets for abuse by others.

By issuing such a command, Yahweh assumes the role of protector of orphans by assuring that they are treated justly, which is subsequently stated explicitly in the Deuteronomic law code. As the universal suzerain, Yahweh "executes justice for the orphan and the widow" (Deut. 10:18) and other vulnerable people. Accordingly, the Hebrews are commanded, "You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice" (Deut. 24:17), and this same concern for the orphan is reinforced in the Deuteronomic liturgy of imprecations, where the anathema "Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice" (Deut. 27:19) is uttered by Levites who officiate at this solemn assembly. The assembly's antiphonal response of "Amen" to this curse enshrines justice for orphans as a core communal value and makes the failure to treat orphans fairly a fundamental violation of Israel's covenant with Yahweh. The practical manifestation of this communal commitment appears in the commands that orphans are permitted to "eat their fill" from the produce harvested and stored every three years (Deut. 14:29; 26:12–13) as part of ancient Israel's triennial tithing (Deut. 14:28; 26:12); that they are to be included in the rejoicing that was part and parcel of celebrating the festivals of Weeks (Deut. 16:11) and Booths (Deut. 16:14); that sheaves left in the field after

14 Translations of the Bible are taken from the NRSV, sometimes slightly modified.

reaping (Deut. 24:19), olives left on the tree after beating (Deut. 24:20), and grapes left on the vine after gathering (Deut. 24:21) were not to be gathered, for they were reserved for consumption by orphans and others who were socially and economically vulnerable.

3.2.2 Many of the prophets of ancient Israel continued to reflect this ancient legal tradition of care for the orphan and railed against those who wronged or exploited them; indeed, this occurs with such frequency that it clearly became a prophetic *topos* (Ezek. 22:7; Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5). Isaiah of Jerusalem, for example, viewed the defence of the orphan as one of the ways in which one sought justice (Isa. 1:17), and he condemned Jerusalem's corrupt leaders not only for failing to defend orphans (Isa. 1:23) but also for perverting justice by preying upon orphans through oppressive laws (Isa. 10:1–2). Isaiah had lived through the Assyrian crisis that eventuated in the sack of Samaria and the fall of the Northern Kingdom, and his theological conviction was that this happened because Israel's leaders had led the people astray, so that "everyone was godless and an evildoer" (Isa. 9:17). In short, Yahweh's punishment of Israel by the Assyrians was so severe that, though God was normally viewed as the protector of orphans even when he punished a nation (Jer. 49:11) and as the one in whom "the orphan finds mercy" (Hos. 14:3), in this particular case he had no compassion at all, not even on Israel's orphans (Isa. 9:17).[15]

3.2.3 The Writings echo many of the basic sentiments expressed elsewhere in the Tanak. Job's friends accuse him of mistreating the orphan (Job 22:9), whereas Job argues that if he had in fact done so (Job 31:17, 21), he would indeed merit punishment for such outrageous behaviour. Job insists, however, that, rather than abusing orphans, he has consistently aided them, delivering the orphan who had no helper (Job 29:12) and from his youth rearing the orphan "like a father" (Job 31:18).

Proverbs notes that one of the ways in which orphans can be economically harmed is by encroaching on their fields (Prov. 23:10), and the Psalter recognises that in some cases the wicked go so far as to "murder the orphan" (Ps. 94:6). Given these social realities and the endless ways in which orphans could be victimised (see, e.g., Job 6:27; 24:3, 9; 31:17, 21), shown no pity (Ps. 109:12), and even killed, it was especially important theologically to express the conviction that God as king (Ps. 10:16) was the quintessential "helper of the orphan" (Ps. 10:14) and thus "upholds the orphan and the widow" (Ps. 146:9). Because orphans no longer have a living biological father (Ps. 109:9; Lam. 5:3), Yahweh is the "father of orphans and protector of widows" (Ps. 68:5), and as such is called upon by the aggrieved and those concerned about their mistreatment to "do

15 Similar sentiments are expressed by Jeremiah (5:28; 7:6; 22:3–5).

justice for the orphan and the oppressed" (Ps. 10:18; see also Sir. 35:17). Psalm 82 even depicts Yahweh as taking the gods of the nations to task in his heavenly council because they have permitted earthly rulers to judge unjustly (Ps. 82:2), and they are exhorted to "give justice to the weak and the orphan" (Ps. 82:3).

3.2.4 The ancient Israelite tradition of caring for orphans continued and became a part of the piety of Early Judaism. To mention only the Apocryphal/ Deuterocanonical books, ben Sira (Sirach) expresses the conviction that God "will not ignore the supplications of the orphan" (Sir. 35:17), and the Letter of Jeremiah (38) polemicises theologically against the Babylonian gods, saying that they are unable to do any good for orphans. Jewish men are exhorted by ben Sira to "be a father to orphans" (Sir. 4:10), and several examples of helping orphans are given. Tobit, prompted by the fact that his own father had died and left him an orphan, gave a complete tithe to orphans, widows, and proselytes (Tob. 1:8 [Codex Sinaiticus]). Judas the Maccabee and his soldiers gave orphans part of the spoils of war (2 Macc. 8:28, 30), and deposits for orphans were kept in the Second Temple at Jerusalem (2 Macc. 3:10).

3.3 A third set of examples comes from *Ancient Greece*, where the plight of the orphan was articulated as early as Andromache's lament over the consequences of Hector's death for their son Astyanax (Homer, *Ilias* 22.484–506). And it was precisely war-orphans such as Astyanax who were the focus of Greek concern, for many Greek city-states assumed certain responsibilities for the orphaned children of those who died in battle. I begin with an inscription from Thasos (Pouilloux 1954:371–79, no. 141), usually dated somewhere between about 400 and 340 BCE, that lists various honours paid to the heroes who died in combat. For example, their parents and children are summoned "whenever the city offers a sacrifice commemorating the heroes" and each is given "as much as those receive who enjoy official prerogatives" (lines 9–11). Of particular importance are the following lines (16–22) concerning these fatherless children:

> Whoever of them leaves children behind – when they come of age – the polemarchs must give them, if they are boys, to each greaves, a cuirass, a dagger, a helmet, a shield, a spear, worth not less than three minas at the Heracleia, and they must proclaim their names. But if they are daughters, for the dowry [whenever] they become fourteen years old (Pomeroy 1982:117).

In short, the boys are outfitted for combat when they are old enough to fight for the city, and the daughters are supplied a dowry when they turned 14, which was clearly the anticipated age at which girls from Thasos were expected to marry. The absence of a dowry, usually provided by the

father, would have been catastrophic for these daughters, functionally preventing most of them from being able to marry (Pomeroy 1982:116).

A similar provision is attested for the city of Rhodes, which in the year 305 issued decrees designed to increase the number of soldiers. One of those decrees guaranteed support for both the parents and children of those who died fighting. According to Diodorus of Sicily, the Rhodians

> also wrote another decree, that the bodies of those who fell in the war should be given public burial and, further, that their parents and children should be maintained, receiving their support from the public treasury, that their unmarried daughters should be given dowries at the public cost, and that their sons on reaching manhood should be crowned in the theatre at the Dionysia and given a full suit of armour (*Bibliotheca historica* 20.84.3).[16]

In short, the citizens of both Thasos and Rhodes took steps to ensure that the families of fallen warriors would suffer no loss either socially or economically. It should also be clear that these steps were taken out of self-interest, not for pure humanitarian reasons. State-sponsored care for orphaned sons and daughters, as well as for elderly parents, was designed to remove impediments to military service and to ensure a continuous supply of citizen-soldiers in the future.

A similar support for war-orphans is attested at Athens, though its origins are debated. Diogenes Laertius traces it back to Solon, who is said to have thought "it was in bad taste … to ignore the exclusive claims of those who had fallen in battle," arguing that their sons ought to be "maintained and educated by the State" (*Vitae philosophorum* 1.55). Although an origin of state-sponsored care for orphans in the time of Solon is not impossible and may even be probable, it is certain that it was well established for Classical Athens in the fifth century, for we have evidence for this from Plato (*Menexemus* 248e–249a), Aristotle (*Politica* 1268a 6-11; see also *Athēnaiōn Politeia* 24.3), Greek inscriptions (Stroud 1971), and Pericles' famous funeral oration of 430 BCE. According to Thucydides (*Historiae* 2.46.1), Pericles made reference to this practice at the end of his oration, saying that "the state … will henceforth maintain their children at the public expense until manhood." In addition to providing such support until some point in the mid-fourth century BCE (Stroud 1971:289–290), Athens also, following the Peloponnesian War, appointed an ὀρφανοφύλαξ, "a guardian of orphans," who was in charge of making sure that the children of killed Athenian soldiers had their needs taken

16 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of Greek and Latin authors are from the Loeb Classical Library.

care of (Xenophon, *De vectigalibus* 2.7).[17] Other cities in the Greek world had similar officials (Arnaoutoglou 1998:5), such as Crete, where orphans were included in the common messes known as συσσίτια and given equal portions of food with the adult men rather than the half-portions given other minors (Strataridaki 2009).

3.4 For a fourth example, I turn to *Imperial Rome* but begin with two somewhat surprising negative observations made already by Miller (2003). First, in contrast to Athens and other Greek city-states, Rome "never developed any welfare program for the orphans of its fallen soldiers" (Miller 2003:30). Second, Rome's imperial alimentary program was not primarily intended, as some scholars have occasionally assumed, to benefit orphans, though some orphans may have benefitted from its monthly distributions (Miller 2003:30–31). Although the purpose of this program remains debated, the *alimenta* were certainly not a form of state welfare.[18]

In the absence of state welfare for orphans, their care in imperial Rome fell to the family and friends of the deceased father. That was in fact the norm throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, with Rome making its greatest contribution to the care of orphans by seeking legally to regulate the office of guardian (Miller 2003:31). The Greek world had already given attention to this issue, precisely because it was often the guardian who defrauded the orphan (see, for example, Demosthenes, *Orationes* 27-29). But the Romans, especially the jurists, far surpassed their Greek predecessors in this regard by giving much greater attention to guardianship (Käser 1980:316–324).

3.5 To summarise what we have seen thus far and expand upon it, antiquity recognised that orphans were socially marginal, politically powerless, and economically endangered, and thus were a vulnerable group that needed protection against those who would prey upon or abuse them. This recognition was ancient, yet institutional steps taken to help orphans remained few and largely ineffectual for orphans as a whole, being limited to subsets of orphans, especially war-orphans in the Greek

17 The relationship of this official to the eponymous archon, who had similar duties for orphans (*Athēnaiōn Politeia* 24.3), remains unclear, as does the authorship of the *Athēnaiōn Politeia*.

18 Conceived by Nerva and expanded by Trajan, this was a massive government-sponsored loan-based financial endeavour that gave fixed monthly subsidies to boys and girls, primarily in Italy, during the second and third centuries CE. Despite the continuing debate about its aim, it is abundantly clear that it was not conceived as a response either to widespread poverty (Wolff 1990) or to the plight of orphans.

world. Certain individuals, to be sure, made contributions, but these were necessarily limited in both scope and effect.

For Greeks and Romans alike, it was the orphan's guardian who was primarily entrusted by society with the responsibility of caring for orphans. Plato prefaces his discussion of the guardian by noting that the gods, the deceased parents, and the elderly have a great concern for the loneliness and welfare of orphans (*Leges* 927a–c) and that they view guardianship "as a trust most solemn and sacred" (927c). Consequently, a guardian

> must show as much care regarding the nurture and training of the orphans as if he were contributing to his own support and that of his own children, and he must do them good in every way to the utmost of his power (927c; see also 926e).

That was the ideal, and the closer the guardian was to it in his attitude and action, the better the orphan fared.

4. ORPHANS AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

What about the early Christians? The presence of orphans in Christian communities was noted already by Lucian of Samosata in the second century (*De morte Peregrini* 12). Did they do any better by orphans or improvise any new strategies for helping them? That leads to our final section of the study.

4.1 The Greek noun ὀρφανός occurs only twice in the *New Testament*, or three times if one counts the variant in Mark 12:40, where some copyists added it to Jesus' denunciation of scribes who devour widows' houses, making it the houses of "widows and orphans." The first textually secure reference is the figurative use that appears in John 14:18, where Jesus in the Farewell Discourse assures his disciples that he will not leave them orphaned. The only other reference and the one that merits our attention is James 1:27, where pure and undefiled religion (θρησκεία) is defined as caring for widows and orphans in their affliction. Our author deserves praise for being the only New Testament writer who explicitly mentions actual orphans, and his use of the term θλῖψις, "affliction," accurately describes the general plight of orphans. Unfortunately, James is silent as to how this care is to be given.

In addition, Paul uses the Greek verb ἀπορφανίζω figuratively of himself in 1 Thessalonians 2:17, where he says that he was "orphaned" by being separated from the Thessalonians. The highly emotional language he uses here – of being "separated" from them and of the "great longing" he has to see them again "face to face" – reflects well the loneliness

experienced by real orphans and the earnest desire to be reunited with their deceased parent (Malherbe 2000:182). What is striking, of course, is that Paul has just described himself as their father (1 Thess. 2:11), but instead of saying that his paternal departure from Thessalonica had made them orphans, he applies the image to himself and the deprivation he feels as a consequence. By doing so, he is seeking to identify with his converts and their own emotional situation. As Malherbe (2014:319) astutely notes of Gentile converts to Judaism, “Proselytes were described as orphans because of the social ostracism and feeling of desolation that their conversion caused.” Paul’s use of this image is thus both pastoral and paraenetic.

4.2 But there are at least five *other New Testament texts* where orphans are either implied or likely to be involved. The daily distribution of food to the widows that is mentioned in Acts 6 almost certainly involved more than just the widowed women. Given the general statistics concerning widows in antiquity, at least some of these Hellenistic and Hebrew widows can be assumed to have had children, and in antiquity, those children were orphans. A second text is Luke 4:26, where reference is made to the widow at Zarephath visited by Elijah. Thanks to the narrative in 1 Kings 17, we know that she had a son (v. 6, 13, 15), so there is an orphan linked to this story of the widow. A third text is Luke 7:12, where the only son of a widow has died and is being carried out in a funeral procession for burial. This is the only reference to a dead orphan in the New Testament.

A fourth text likely implying orphans is Galatians 4:1-2, where Paul refers to an heir still being a child and under the power of a guardian. That fits quite well the typical situation of the orphan who was not yet free from the oversight of a tutor, which was typically in the Roman world at the age of fourteen. As noted earlier, some 40% or more of orphans of orphans had lost their fathers by this age. In short, orphans were so numerous in Paul’s time that the apostle is probably presupposing this situation in Galatians 4:1–2 (Goodrich 2013).

A fifth and final New Testament text is 1 Timothy 5:3, where the author mentions widows who have children or grandchildren – those fatherless children are orphans, and the grandchildren are possibly orphans as well, now being reared by their widowed grandmothers. What is interesting here is that these orphans – presumably no longer minors – are now charged with caring for their widowed mothers. And similar to James, this task is understood as a religious obligation, an act of piety (εὐσεβέω), and the failure to bestow this care makes them worse than unbelievers (1 Tim. 5:9).

4.3 When we turn to the *Apostolic Fathers* and their explicit uses of the term ὀρφανός, we note that four authors use the word once: 1 Clement

quotes the exhortation of Isaiah 1:17, "See to it that justice is done to the orphan" (8.4), Ignatius depicts theological opponents as having no care for the orphan (*Smyrn.* 6.2), Barnabas uses it in his Two Ways material to describe those in the way of darkness who have no concern for the orphan (20.2), and Polycarp warns presbyters not to neglect the orphan (*Phil.* 6.1). The latter is our first clear reference linking care for orphans with ecclesiastical office (see also Hermas, *Vis.* 2.4.3). Yet the most attention to orphans appears in the Shepherd of Hermas, who exhibits a strong interest in orphans and possessions. Looking after orphans is identified as a good deed in the *Mandates* (8.10), whereas believers who plunder the livelihood of orphans are condemned in the Ninth *Similitude* (9.26.2). Positively, believers are told to visit orphans and not overlook them – instead, they are to use the money God has given them metaphorically to "purchase lands," namely, orphans and widows (*Sim.* 1.8). In short, orphans are to be given financial assistance.

Perhaps the most interesting passage occurs in *Similitudes* 5.3.7, where the money saved from fasting is to be given to orphans:

> In the day on which you fast you will taste nothing but bread and water; and having reckoned up the price of the dishes of that day which you intended to have eaten, you will give it to a widow, or an orphan, or to some person in want, and thus you will exhibit humility of mind, so that he who has received benefit from your humility may fill his own soul, and pray for you to the Lord.[19]

4.4 The first two references to funds collected in the assembly being used to aid orphans comes from the *Apologists*. The first of these is from the same general period of time as Hermas, that is, mid-second century, and is found in Justin's *First Apology* (67.6). A second is provided by Tertullian at the end of the second century in his *Apologeticus*, where he says that the freely donated funds are not

> spent on feasts, and drinking-bouts, and eating-houses, but to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house (39).

19 The idea of orphans gratefully praying to God on behalf of their benefactors appears later in the *Apostolic Constitutions*:

> But an orphan who, by reason of his youth, … receives alms, such a one shall not only not be blamed, but shall be commended: for he shall be esteemed as an altar to God, and be honoured by God, because of his zealous and constant prayers for those that give to him (4.3; see also 2.26).

Christian concern for orphans is also noted by Aristides of Athens, who argues that Christians deliver orphans from anyone who oppresses them (*Apology* 15).

4.5 Also likely coming from the second century is *5 Ezra* (= 2 Esdras 1-2), in which the image of the mother is applied to the church and she is instructed as follows:

> Guard the rights of the widow, apply justice to the ward, give to the needy, defend the orphan, clothe the naked, care for the injured and the weak, do not ridicule the lame, protect the maimed, and let the blind have a vision of my splendour. Protect the old and the young within your walls. When you find any who are dead, commit them to the grave and mark it (2 Esd. 2:20-23).

That is as full a description of the church's obligation to the socially disadvantaged as I know from the first two centuries.[20]

4.6 But did Christians do anything beyond these acts of support and protection, and the moralising exhortations that encouraged such actions? More was indeed encouraged, and we find it explicitly for the first time in the third century, in the church order work known as the *Didascalia Apostolorum*. The bishop is instructed to take pains over the upbringing of orphans, thereby assuring that they lack nothing. In regard to orphaned girls, he should assume the role of a father and give her in marriage to a Christian. If the orphan is a boy, he is to ensure that he learns a useful trade and is able to earn a living so that he is no longer dependent on the Church's benevolence (17.4.2). But perhaps its most striking ordinance reads as follows:

> If anyone of the children of Christians be an orphan, whether boy or girl, it is well that, if there be one of the brethren who has no children, he should adopt the child in the place of children. And whoever has a son, let him adopt a girl; and when her time is come, let him give her to him to wife, that his work may be completed in the ministry of God (17.4.1; see also *Apostolic Constitutions* 4.1).

Adoption of orphans is known from the pagan world (Krause 1995a:78-84), but it was typically done by family or friends of the deceased. Here, however, adoption is encouraged as a way of addressing the needs of Christian orphans, with childless Christians especially encouraged to adopt. Among these Christian orphans, it is likely that those of martyrs

20 Although 5 Ezra is occasionally viewed as an originally Jewish work that has been lightly redacted by a Christian editor, most scholars view it as a Christian composition (see esp. Stanton 1977).

were regarded as a priority, and Lactantius argues that concern for the fate of one's children should not be a deterrent to martyrdom, for martyrs can be confident that their loved ones will be cared for (*Institutiones divinae* 6.12). One early third century indication of this may be found in the *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, which records the martyrdom of Perpetua, a twenty-two year-old noblewoman, and her slave Felicity (Felicitas), who is pregnant when arrested and later gives birth to a baby girl in prison. The text says that a "sister" reared Felicity's daughter as her own. Although this sister could be a biological sister, that possibility seems unlikely given the fact that Felicity was a slave. It is more probable that this is a sister in the faith, who rears a martyr's child as her own. If that is correct, we have not only a third-century text that encouraged Christians to adopt Christian orphans, but an actual example of one Christian woman having done so for a martyr's child.[21]

With the accession of Constantine, the Church was to witness other developments, with Constantine himself giving food supplies to the churches for the support of orphan children (Eusebius, *Vit. Const.* 4.28.1). Yet the most important development in the post-Constantinian period was doubtless the establishment of the first orphanage or ὀρφανοτροφεῖον, the Orphanage of Constantinople. This probably happened during the reign of Constantine's son, Constantius II, in the mid-fourth century CE, and, once established, it became the centre for a host of educational and philanthropic activities (Miller 2003:176–248).

5. CONCLUSION

Orphans constituted a long-standing problem in the ancient Mediterranean world, and early Christians were not unique in seeking to address it. They made a variety of responses both as individuals and as an institution. Of the responses by individuals, adoption was surely the most significant one, and it was encouraged by church leaders. Adoption as practiced by individual believers focused on the orphans of deceased Christians, especially the martyrs' orphans. The creation of an orphanage, on the other hand, was an institutional response, and as such, it was an utterly unique, truly *sui generis* institution in the ancient world. And it was to have a long history, extending even to today.

21 See also Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 6.2.12–13, who says that after Origen's father Leonides was martyred and the family's property confiscated, a rich woman took the teenager Origen into her home and provided for him, along with a Christian heretic named Paul of Antioch, who was her adopted son.

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