'It is always refreshing to read a book that brings new things to the table, alongside valuing all that has gone before . . . Anne Richards explores some fresh lines of thinking and understanding of the Scriptures in relation to children. Her five themes of calling, life and salvation, commissioning, healing and blessing take us into fresh ways of ensuring that children are seen as fully human and fully part of the people of God, even from the womb. *Children in the Bible* is not just for those concerned about children in society and the Church – it is for all leaders who want to take being human seriously.'

The Rt Revd Paul Butler, Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham, and Children's Advocate for the Church of England

'This is a hugely important book. It is all too easy to assume that the Bible's treatment of children is either monochrome or overly sentimental. Here Anne Richards presents us with an altogether richer, deeper and broader picture in which children stand right at the heart of God's vision for the world.'

Dr Paula Gooder, writer and lecturer in biblical studies

'An outstanding and undoubtedly "fresh approach" to what childhood suggests about God and what God suggests about childhood. Arising from thorough and original theological reflection on the surprisingly many ways in which childhood and children appear in the Scriptures, Anne Richards provides so much more than a book merely about "children in the Bible". She calls us to discern the profundity of God's purposes embedded in the universal human experience of being a child, and to consider what a theology of childhood means for relating to children today.'

Dr Rebecca Nye, lecturer and researcher in children's spirituality, and lead UK consultant of Godly Play

For Chris Corrigan,
and for JJ and Pip

CHILDREN IN THE BIBLE

A fresh approach

ANNE RICHARDS

SPCK

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Contents

About the author vii
Acknowledgements viii
Introduction ix

1 God finds children worthy of calling **1**
'Be . . .' 1
God calls us into being 2
How we begin 4
The image of God 7
Jesus is also called into being 10
A double miracle 13
Some implications of God's calling us into being 16
How children recognize God's call 20

2 God finds children worthy of life and salvation **29**
'Grow . . .' 29
The weeping woman 31
The courageous midwives 32
The she-bear 33
What does this say to us today? 34
Giving children a chance: instances of salvation 37
Parental pressure in today's society 49
What does parenting have to do with God's finding children worthy of salvation? 50

3 God finds children worthy of commission **56**
'Act . . .' 56
The commission to become fully human: Adam and Eve 57
The problem with adults 62
The commission to speak God's difficult word 63
God's commission for children can be announced through others 67
Mary and Jesus as children: Apocryphal infancy gospels 68

God's commission emerges from context 72
Commission emerges from complexity: the little servant girl 74
Commission as an effect in the life of God's people 75
The commission to build a kingdom fit for children 78

4 God finds children worthy of healing 83
'Whole . . .' 83
The barren woman 83
How does this help *us*? 89
Barrenness revisited 94
Sick children can be healed 95
Elijah and the widow's son 98
Elisha and the raising of the Shunnamite's son 99
The healing of Jairus' daughter 101
The healing of the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter 105
Feeding and healing 108

5 God finds children worthy of blessing 111
'Grace . . .' 111
Jesus as rejected child 112
So what exactly *is* blessing? 117
Parenthood and blessing 121
The obstacles between children and God 123
A child in the midst 124
Privileging children 127
The Church as God's young family 128

6 Final reflections 134
The words of God in the world 134

Appendix 1: Words associated with the idea of 'child' in the Bible 137
Appendix 2: List of Scripture passages referring to children 139
Bibliography 143

About the author

Dr Anne Richards is National Adviser for mission theology, alternative spiritualities and new religious movements for the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England. She is the convener of the Mission Theology Advisory Group, which provides churches with resources for spirituality, theology, reconciliation, evangelism and mission. Previously, she combined an academic life teaching literature in Oxford with working in a hospital, and she has long experience of working with and writing about children and young people. She is also a trustee of Godly Play UK and (with Peter Privett) co-edited *Through the Eyes of a Child* (Church House Publishing, 2009).

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All the arguments and opinions expressed in this book are my own and I am solely responsible for any mistakes or omissions. However, many people have helped me form the ideas for this book and I want to acknowledge their friendship, guidance and wise advice.

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Not least I want to pay tribute to all the children and young people I've worked with over the years who have both challenged and inspired me in equal measure. But there are a few children whose stories especially find their way into these pages. So thanks and love are due especially to Jonathan and Philip, Eden, Jude, and Matthew and George.

Introduction

A child asks God a hard question

In 2011, the journalist Alex Renton wrote an article about how his six-year-old daughter wanted to ask God 'who invented you?'[1] Renton himself did not feel able to help with the question, or indeed, how to go about asking God, so he sent the enquiry to various churches, including the Church of England at Lambeth Palace in London. A little while later, Lulu received a letter from Dr Rowan Williams, who was then Archbishop of Canterbury. It read:

> Dear Lulu,
> Your dad has sent on your letter and asked if I have any answers. It's a difficult one! But I think God might reply a bit like this –
>
> 'Dear Lulu – Nobody invented me – but lots of people discovered me and were quite surprised. They discovered me when they looked round at the world and thought it was really beautiful or really mysterious and wondered where it came from. They discovered me when they were very very quiet on their own and felt a sort of peace and love they hadn't expected.
>
> Then they invented ideas about me – some of them sensible and some of them not very sensible. From time to time I sent them some hints – specially in the life of Jesus – to help them get closer to what I'm really like.
>
> But there was nothing and nobody around before me to invent me. Rather like somebody who writes a story in a book, I started making up the story of the world and eventually invented human beings like you who could ask me awkward questions!'
>
> And then he'd send you lots of love and sign off.
>
> I know he doesn't usually write letters, so I have to do the best I can on his behalf. Lots of love from me too.
>
> +Archbishop Rowan

In its simplicity, generosity and directness, this letter embodies many of the things I think are important for a book about God's relationship

[1] A. Renton, 'A Letter to God – and a Reply from Lambeth', *The Times*, 22 April 2011.

to children. First, the Archbishop suggests that finding out and asking questions about God is important and all such questions deserve to be taken seriously, whether we are children or adults. Such questions may certainly be difficult and awkward and lead us to confusing and baffling places, but that is not an excuse to avoid them or to give up on the search to find out what we can know and what we can say (which might not be the same thing). Neither should we shy away from the sheer difficulty of making sense of God. Second, the journey of spirituality includes discovery, surprise, beauty, mystery, and personal experiences of peace and love. Recognizing that these things are both experienced and recognized by children and have spiritual value is also important. God is not 'out there' at some immeasurable distance, but discoverable within our world and within ourselves. Rowan Williams presents God as the eternal storyteller, whose rich, unfolding narrative brings people into being who can recognize and ask big questions of the Creator. But there is a warning too – that people have also 'invented ideas' about God which are 'not very sensible'. This means that part of the discovery of God is to find *trustworthy* means of finding out what God is like and what God's purpose is for human beings. Rowan Williams notes that for Christians, the person and ministry of Jesus especially offer that route to knowing God.

What I most like about the letter, though, is that while the focus is a young child, Rowan Williams becomes an amanuensis, allowing *God* to speak, doing 'the best he can' to put the child in touch with her divine correspondent. This is at the heart of theology, not to prescribe (or proscribe) on behalf of God, or to create God in our own image, or to use God as an excuse for making people do as we want them to do, but simply to create a space where something of God can be understood.

In this book, I will try to do the same. There are many wonderful books written about children, about children and the Church, and about children in the context of faith. But it seems to me that there is often something missing; we very easily make assumptions about what God is about in all this, or if it's too complicated, simply leave God out of the mix altogether.

I want to ask what we can know and what we can say (if anything) about God's relation to children, and then to ask what difference

that theological enquiry might make to the complex issues which face us as children, parents and communities in today's world. I want to do that by reframing issues from the starting point of the child. The results might be surprising. They might also be challenging. They might lead us to places where there are no answers to our questions and we will have to look through the options for the best possible way to grapple with what confronts and baffles us.

The question then arises: where can we find more letters from God? For Christians, our personal sense-making ability and our experience as human beings bring vital evidence to bear. The long tradition of Christian history and Christian community also gives us material to reflect on and evaluate together. But at the heart of the Christian tradition, Scripture offers God's story. Scripture is of course made up of extraordinary texts including, among other things, history, poetry, dramatic allegory, lament, chronicle, law, testimony, letters and sheer overwhelming mystery, with a host of different writers doing the best they can to offer windows into God's world so that we can see God at work. And in God's world, we find that children have a very particular and special place, not just as part of God's story but also as *makers* of God's story, the providers to us of a language through which God's will for the creation is revealed.

To do that, I have offered five words, one for each of the following chapters, which I suggest represent the God-language manifested to us by and through children. At the heart of this I will show that children are worth God's special attention and that they are deeply woven into God's purposes. I want to see how far we can find evidence that, according to Scripture, overlooked and under-represented children, both in the Bible and in our contemporary world, are found worthy by God. They are found worthy of calling, salvation, commission, healing and blessing. That search will also have to take place in the knowledge of a background reality in the world of the Bible of many, many children whose lives are blighted, damaged or destroyed. For them, too, there must be some account, as the God-language they mediate into the world is twisted, ruined or obliterated.

I also want to look at how the idea of being a child or children of the Father becomes embedded into the self-description of the early church, a church of brothers and sisters, of a young family looking forward to growing up in God's reconciled world.

Struggling with Scripture

How are we supposed to read Scripture? Robert Alter, Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature in the Department of Near Eastern Studies, University of California, Berkeley, tells us that interpretation of the Bible is a never-ending process because the texts are so rich and diverse. However, he does caution that when anyone offers commentary or discussion of the Bible it should be done in a way that 'instead of submerging the text under the weight of erudition actually helps us to read the text more fully'.[2] How can we do this? In Genesis, the first book of the Bible, there is a dramatic, profound and mysterious story (32.23–33). It concerns the famous Hebrew patriarch Jacob. We know from the buildup to this story that Jacob is the younger twin brother of Esau,[3] and that he has stolen from his brother both his birthright and blessing. Now Jacob is about to meet his brother again and he is terrified of his brother's vengeful anger and possible retribution. In the pitch black of night, alone and afraid, on what might be his last night on earth, Jacob has a fight with a mysterious 'man'. They struggle and wrestle together. The fight in the darkness isn't just a dream; Jacob is physically injured and ends up limping. Because the 'man' does not overcome Jacob, Jacob holds on to him and refuses to let go until the stranger gives him a blessing. The stranger tells him that he is going to give Jacob another name – Israel, meaning the one who has struggled with God and prevailed. Jacob also names the place where this struggle has taken place: Peniel, meaning 'I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved'.

This event has profound and lasting effects. Jacob believes that by applying himself in the struggle he has met God face to face and lived, something which is supposed to be impossible, and this supernatural encounter has utterly changed him. Jacob becomes a new person, whose future is invested in a holy community; he is

---

[2] R. Alter, 'Scripture, Commentary and the Challenge of Interpretation', in A. Weiner and L. Kaplan (eds), *Graven Images – on Interpretation: Studies In Culture, Law, and the Sacred* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), p. 27.

[3] We will see that scriptural narratives often have two children or paired children, or paired stories which reflect one another.

spiritually changed and he also goes out to an extraordinary and powerful reconciliation with his brother.

I think that this story tells us a great deal about what it should be like to read Scripture. Reading Scripture is, or should be, a struggle, a wrestling, with a rich, maddening and complex text, whose patterns, meanings and textures are often so difficult to discern. When we really engage with Scripture we can be like Jacob, alone in the dark, battling with strangeness, trying not to be overwhelmed. That's true even if we are very familiar with the Bible, at home with its well-known stories and language. Sometimes we forget that it is always much deeper, richer and more troubling than we allow.

Yet the struggle leads to something really important. We cannot say for certain who it is Jacob struggles with – is it himself, his conscience, a man, an angel, God? The struggle can lead to all these conclusions, but the exact answer does not really matter. We can see that it is in the act of encounter that Jacob comes to understand something about himself and something about God. First Jacob has to be literally put out of joint, dislocated from his presuppositions. His own life is given new purpose and meaning, but this is not just a private revelation, it changes the way his future life with his family and his people works.

So reading Scripture and wrestling for its meaning offers these possibilities. The history we bring to the encounter is different for each one of us and can be conditioned by scepticism, a feeling of inadequacy, by love, or by faith, or even by all of these. Yet the encounter holds out the possibility that at the end of the struggle with words and meanings we will know more about the story and purpose of God, and that learning will make us think more profoundly about what that story means for the world in which we live. We are asked to find ways of 'unfolding its meanings, illuminating its dark places, sorting out its seeming ambiguities, explaining its implications'.[4]

For some Christians, the New Testament is the most important part of the Bible to read and less weight may be given to Old Testament literature. I know some Christians who can quote vast amounts of the New Testament by heart but who never spend any time on the rest of the Bible. But I believe that it is very important to struggle

[4] Alter, 'Scripture, Commentary and the Challenge of Interpretation', p. 22.

with the Hebrew Scriptures as well. These were, after all, Jesus' own biblical texts and he steeped himself in them, reading them, teaching out of them, interpreting them for the people around him. So did the Apostles and Paul. If we want to know what Jesus is doing in his words and actions in the Gospels, then seeking to understand his own engagement with Scripture is for me also an act of discipleship.

There are some other issues of which we need to be aware. As the Bible was not written in English it can be difficult to know exactly what words translated as 'infant', 'child', 'children', 'youth', and so on really mean and in places I have suggested that the words offered in well-known translations might be misleading. Also, while there are different names for God in Scripture, and those differences are important for exegetical purposes, I prefer simply to call God 'God', wherever possible without gender attributions. In quoting from the New Testament, I have typically used the New Revised Standard Version. In referring to extracts from the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), I have wherever possible used translations by the same Robert Alter, noted above, which have been particularly helpful to me in understanding better the role of God in the history of the world.

The shape of this book

There are five chapters in this book, each of which concentrates on an aspect of what God wants for the lives of children. Each chapter also focuses on a word (be, grow, act, whole, grace) in which I find God-language manifested to us by and through children. At the end of each chapter are a number of questions, which may be used by individuals or by groups studying the book together. There is also a suggested 'Activity', which can be used to make a small but positive change in your own life, your church or community. I conclude the book with some final reflections.

At the end of the book is an Appendix listing words associated with the idea of 'child' in the Bible, and a list of significant Scripture passages which refer to children.

1

God finds children worthy of calling

'Be . . .'

I once had a conversation with a nun in which she told me that she had been convinced of her calling on the day she took her First Holy Communion at the age of seven. I was sceptical, because I could imagine that all the teaching and preparation for the event, the making of a special dress, the drama of the occasion, all the fuss and attention, the mystery and sacredness, that sheer sacramental power of the first Eucharist, could very well make a powerful impression on a young child. But was this powerful impression really God's will? Was there really a call?

'How did you know?' I asked. 'What happened?'

'God asked me,' she said, 'and I said yes.'

If anything this made me more intrigued. God spoke? How? And how did a little child know this was God speaking? What did God say? Weren't you scared? Did you tell anyone? Did you have this experience once or many times?

'That's not the point,' she said, laughing. 'The point is: I am here.'

Gently, she was telling me that I was looking to pinpoint and analyse something that was really a process, the choosing of a path on a journey that matches a growing sense of purpose and rightness. But more to the point, she was telling me that her journey was shaped by an experience in childhood; it was as a child that God found her worthy of call and powerful, loving response.

The hymn that is often sung at First Holy Communion services has the words 'Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night', based on the call of the child Samuel in 1 Samuel 3. In these words and in the nun's story, we learn some important things about how God finds children worthy of calling, and when we turn to Scripture we can find out a great deal more about how that calling happens. First, that call is not necessarily something that comes from 'out there' as many people instinctively imagine. Rather God's call to us can be

encountered deep within ourselves, a recognition that it is there in the depths of our being; it is intimate, ongoing, personal, loving, and ultimately transforming. It is also related to the fact of our being as embodied creatures and to the way we grow. Second, God's call only becomes something that focuses the direction of a person's life if at some point there is a response, a 'yes! I am here!' to the recognition that God is asking something of us, opening a pathway for us, creating and shaping a place for us to be in the power of the Spirit. Third, being part of a fellowship of believers helps to make space for that vocation to be recognized, encouraged and acknowledged. How vocation happens, whether as a 'voice', a dream, a gradual conviction, discernment of God's presence, or recognition by others that God is shaping a person's life, is unimportant. What matters is that all are called, and that there is a point when a person comes to a decision to be obedient to that calling, in the words of Isaiah: 'Here am I; send me!' (Isaiah 6.8).

In this chapter I want to reframe the idea of 'call' and suggest that Scripture gives us insight into how God calls us into being from our earliest beginnings. I will suggest that human growth and development is of itself a response to God's call. I also want to look at how, when children become aware of God's active presence in their lives, this leads to a presenting of the self before God which is both a 'yes!' and 'I am here'.

God calls us into being

If we look into Scripture to find out more about how God finds children worthy of call, we immediately encounter an extraordinary prospect: that if God calls us to be, then God also calls us into being and these two divine purposes are mixed together. The 'yes!' in response to God's work in a person's life is preceded by a biological 'yes!' as the new person comes into being. This is perhaps echoed in the assertion in Galatians 1.15: 'God . . . set me [Paul] apart before I was born and called me through his grace'. It is not surprising, then, that in both Jeremiah and Isaiah, the prophetic vocation is traced back to a time before birth.

> Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
> 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
> And before you were born I

Consecrated you;
Appointed you a prophet to the nations.'

(Jeremiah 1.4–5)

The Lord called me before I was born,
While I was in my mother's womb he named me.
He made my mouth like a sharp sword,
In the shadow of his hand he hid me;
He made me a polished arrow,
In his quiver he hid me away.
And he said to me, 'You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified.'

(Isaiah 49.1b–3)

The writer of this passage of Jeremiah imagines that God's relationship with the prophet began before his birth. He was known, loved and made special. The writer of this part of Isaiah offers us beautiful images for the love relationship between God and the unborn child: he is an arrow who has been lovingly polished and crafted, protected by the shadow of God's hand, given a name and a destiny and a purpose. Both these passages suggest that the prophetic vocation is part of a divine calling that begins to unfold from conception. There is another passage of Scripture which tells us more about God's relationship with the unborn child. The psalmist tells us:

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
You knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
That I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
When I was being made in secret,
Intricately woven in the depths of the earth [i.e. the womb].
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
All the days that were formed for me,
When none of them as yet existed.

(Psalm 139.13–16)

The language here is of making, forming, knitting together, but there is more to it than that. There is a sense of God being at the heart

of the new individual's being, watching over it, being intimately involved in the child's becoming, loving him and calling him into birth and the life that God desires for him. This suggests that every newly conceived person has a rightness and goodness in God's eyes which echoes the goodness God sees in the whole creation (Genesis 1.31). What happens to the child when she is born, whether into poverty, a vastly overpopulated world, with disabilities, or subject to illness and suffering, is another matter which will be looked at in other chapters of this book. The essential point is that God loves and is involved with every new human being that is conceived and has a loving purpose for them, irrespective of what actually happens to them in an imperfect world. What then can we say about the mysterious beginnings of each of us?

How we begin

Embryogenesis is an extraordinary sequence of events which most people know very little about. Although all of us have gone through the process in the womb which makes us what we are, and all mothers who have given birth have directly experienced pregnancy, we tend to know very little about what our earliest moments were like, or what was happening to the developing child in the womb. Books on pregnancy may give information about what the developing foetus looks like at different weeks into the pregnancy, and pregnant women and their partners in many societies are usually offered scans which allow them to see their unborn children, but they may have little idea how their developing children came to be like that. Yet embryogenesis is marvellous, mysterious and extraordinarily beautiful. To give a sense of this I will draw on Armand Marie Leroi's account of embryological beginnings in his book *Mutants*, because he combines a scientific account with striking images which convey to us the beauty and mystery of what occurs in early life.[1]

When sperm meets egg, the resulting conceptus begins immediately to divide until it forms a ball of about 100 cells. Leroi then tells us: 'On the seventh day after conception, a human embryo begins to dig . . .

[1] A. Leroi, *Mutants: On the Form, Varieties and Errors of the Human Body* (London: HarperCollins, 2003).

Most of the cells in the hollow ball are occupied with the business of burrowing, but some are up to other things. They are beginning to organise themselves into a ball of their own so that by day 9 the embryo is rather like one of those ingenious Chinese toys composed of carved ivory spheres within spheres within spheres.'[2]

What this communicates to us is a sense of purposeful becoming at the deepest cellular level: complexity is emerging and organization is already taking place. At the point where the 'primitive streak' appears, about 13 days after conception, Leroi describes how 'Cells migrate towards the streak and pour themselves into it' giving a sense of energy and urgency in the earliest becoming of the new individual.[3] The embryo becomes organized into three layers, all of which are destined for future roles in our bodies. The top layer will be skin and the nervous system, the middle layer will become our muscles and bones, the bottom layer our organs, although other parts of the body will form from cells from different layers combined. Leroi then asks us to consider another miracle: that the embryo has both orientation and geometry: 'Two weeks after egg met sperm, the embryo has a head and a tail, a front and a back, a left and a right. The question is, how did it get them?'[4]

Leroi tells us that science has been able to show that embryonic development is dependent on signalling molecules which communicate across the body of the embryo, switching genes on and off and conveying instructions on what cells should become. But the strength of the signal also matters: 'the cells from our bodies must be continually bathed in many signals emanating from many sources. Some of these signals speak with one voice, but others offer conflicting advice.' The conflict is solved, according to the relative strength of the chemical signals: 'the fate of a given cell depends on the balance of the concentration between the two competing molecules'.[5] Leroi then goes on to make the following observation: 'In a way, the embryo is just a microcosm of the cognitive world we inhabit, the world of signals that insistently urge us to travel to one destination rather than another, eschew some goals in favour of others, hold some things to

[2] Leroi, *Mutants*, p. 36.
[3] Leroi, *Mutants*, p. 36.
[4] Leroi, *Mutants*, p. 37.
[5] Leroi, *Mutants*, p. 42.

to children. First, the Archbishop suggests that finding out and asking questions about God is important and all such questions deserve to be taken seriously, whether we are children or adults. Such questions may certainly be difficult and awkward and lead us to confusing and baffling places, but that is not an excuse to avoid them or to give up on the search to find out what we can know and what we can say (which might not be the same thing). Neither should we shy away from the sheer difficulty of making sense of God. Second, the journey of spirituality includes discovery, surprise, beauty, mystery, and personal experiences of peace and love. Recognizing that these things are both experienced and recognized by children and have spiritual value is also important. God is not 'out there' at some immeasurable distance, but discoverable within our world and within ourselves. Rowan Williams presents God as the eternal storyteller, whose rich, unfolding narrative brings people into being who can recognize and ask big questions of the Creator. But there is a warning too – that people have also 'invented ideas' about God which are 'not very sensible'. This means that part of the discovery of God is to find *trustworthy* means of finding out what God is like and what God's purpose is for human beings. Rowan Williams notes that for Christians, the person and ministry of Jesus especially offer that route to knowing God.

What I most like about the letter, though, is that while the focus is a young child, Rowan Williams becomes an amanuensis, allowing *God* to speak, doing 'the best he can' to put the child in touch with her divine correspondent. This is at the heart of theology, not to prescribe (or proscribe) on behalf of God, or to create God in our own image, or to use God as an excuse for making people do as we want them to do, but simply to create a space where something of God can be understood.

In this book, I will try to do the same. There are many wonderful books written about children, about children and the Church, and about children in the context of faith. But it seems to me that there is often something missing; we very easily make assumptions about what God is about in all this, or if it's too complicated, simply leave God out of the mix altogether.

I want to ask what we can know and what we can say (if anything) about God's relation to children, and then to ask what difference