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Christianity Today, July 9, 2001

## Babywise Almost Dropped

Author Ezzo nearly loses book contract in ongoing dispute.

By Corrie Cutrer | posted 6/22/01

Having survived nearly a decade of controversy surrounding his childcare advice, self-proclaimed parenting expert Gary Ezzo has nearly lost his publisher. Multnomah, the Christian publisher that created the surprise bestseller, *The Prayer of Jabez*, told Ezzo, coauthor of *On Becoming Babywise*, it wanted to sever relations, only to reverse that decision. In the aftermath, Ezzo's editor resigned.

In February, Multnomah commissioned editor Jeff Gerke to investigate long-standing allegations by parents, physicians, and church leaders that the book's advice to parents puts infants at risk of poor development. Gerke, who joined Multnomah's staff after *Babywise* had been published, edited several of Ezzo's other parenting books. Gerke concluded that Ezzo's materials were dangerous, based on his interviews with former Ezzo employees and medical professionals.

Gerke shared his information with Multnomah executives, who began to sever ties with Ezzo. The company's attorneys said that Multnomah was in a position to pull away because of the medical and character issues in question. According to an e-mail written by Gerke, the attorneys also identified a clause in Multnomah's contract with Ezzo that would

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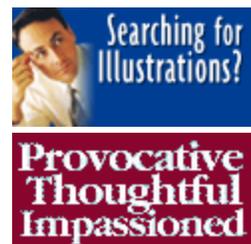
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nave allowed tne company to sever ties without being in breach of contract.

Multnomah Vice President Kyle Cummings reportedly telephoned a stunned Ezzo to tell the author of the company's decision. But Don Jacobson, Multnomah president, personally intervened shortly afterward to stop the contract cancellation. Within days, Gerke resigned his position.

**Unanswered Questions**

A central element of Ezzo's plan in *Babywise* is feeding newborns on a firm schedule, controlled by parents, rather than "on-demand," whenever a newborn seems hungry. Ezzo says his parent-directed method is essential to develop respectful, obedient, and godly children. Yet many breast-feeding mothers report that they have been unable to produce an adequate milk supply when following the program according to Matthew Aney, a California pediatrician.

A major focus of *Babywise* is to get infants to sleep all night as soon as possible. But some pediatricians, when comparing newborns whose parents use Ezzo's guidelines to other infants, have noted a higher incidence of inadequate weight gain, dehydration, and failure to thrive. Critics also sharply question other *Babywise* emphases, such as introducing a form of spanking in children younger than 2 (CT, Nov. 13, 2000, p. 70).

Multnomah has not responded to the following concerns about Ezzo's materials:

- Suspect medical claims: Pediatrician Aney, a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), has documented 35 unsubstantiated claims in *Babywise*, all of which he says are Ezzo's opinions—not proven facts—on infant care. For example, Ezzo writes that infants who are fed according to the *Babywise* plan rarely suffer from colic (a stomach spasm) while demand-fed infants experience intensified colic. Aney asserts that Ezzo has not provided any research to support this claim.
- Inaccurate statements: Two *Babywise* companion books describe coauthor Robert Bucknam as a faculty member at the University of Colorado's Medical School. Yet three sources at the

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medical school verified that Bucknam has never been employed as a faculty member there. (A representative at Bucknam's medical office says that medical residents visit his office for observational purposes.) Furthermore, when Bucknam became coauthor of *Babywise* in 1993, he had been in practice as a pediatrician for less than a year and was first introduced to Ezzo's methods while attending a local course for new parents. Yet *Babywise* says that it provides a "needed reformation to pediatric counsel." Also, Multnomah has described Ezzo as having an M.A. in Christian education, although the author holds no such degree.

- Marketing errors: Multnomah has become involved in several questionable endorsements of Ezzo and his materials. In a *Babywise*-related book, *On Becoming Preteen Wise*, endorser Amy Maughan is said to be a licensed marriage and family counselor in California. Yet when the book was published, Maughan's license had been expired for five years and was not renewable. Multnomah has further misstated Ezzo's academic background; in a radio ad he was referred to as "Dr. Gary Ezzo." Ezzo has no medical or doctoral degree, earned or honorary.
- Integrity issues: A number of Christian leaders formerly associated with Ezzo have alerted the public to doubts about Ezzo's fitness for ministry, including Pastor John MacArthur; Ezzo's former editorial director, Frank York; and former ministry colleagues Eric and Julie Abel, who worked with Ezzo in the early 1990s. All have severed ties over integrity concerns.

### **'Materials Are Dangerous'**

In the weeks before his resignation, Gerke had extensive interaction with pediatrician Aney. According to e-mail messages provided by Aney to *CT*, Gerke told Aney that he initially investigated the allegations believing that Ezzo had been attacked unfairly, a sentiment shared by Multnomah executives.

"We weren't really feeling the need to do an 'unbiased investigation,'" Gerke wrote to Aney. "We were just trying to field complaints. I think we started the investigation merely so

that we could say that we'd truly looked into it. We believed we would find verification for Gary's explanations. We believed we would put out a statement and go our merry way."

As the editor spearheading the investigation, however, Gerke changed his mind. "I'm personally convinced Gary Ezzo and his infant care materials are dangerous," Gerke later wrote to Aney. "He has no medical training and therefore no business writing medical books—or disregarding the advice of bona fide medical professionals."

Gerke also admitted that Multnomah did not have a medical editor who reviewed Ezzo's manuscripts. "Besides these [*Babywise*] books, we don't do any medical books," Gerke wrote.

After lengthy discussions, Multnomah executives decided to sever ties with Ezzo. "The bomb has been dropped," Gerke wrote to Aney in mid-March. According to Gerke, Multnomah Vice President Kyle Cummings told the author he had two choices: "to purchase the books, inventory, plates, etc. back from us. The alternative is to have us terminate the contracts." The latter, Cummings told him, would be "messier" and would "send a different message to the marketplace."

Yet in March, after *CT* published an article about the Multnomah action on its Web site, the company released a statement saying that its investigation was still under way and that Gerke's opinions of Ezzo did not necessarily reflect the company's position.

Regarding his resignation, Gerke told *CT*, "Multnomah felt that I had divulged confidential information to a third party and it was of such an embarrassing nature that I had exercised poor judgment."

In late May, Multnomah issued a statement that did not address the specific issues raised by Gerke or Ezzo's critics. The publishers said they met with Ezzo and were hoping to reconcile the author with his critics. While Multnomah said it would arrange "face-to-face meetings" of Ezzo and his critics with a Christian conciliator, the company would not say who would be invited, when the meetings would take place, or who the mediator would be.

York doubts such meetings will resolve the conflict, noting that similar meetings have been held before. "This is a ploy that Gary uses to make himself look good," York said. "He'll go to these meetings, refuse to give in to any of the criticisms, and then issue a public statement saying that his critics refused to reconcile with him."

Phil Johnson, executive director of MacArthur's radio ministry, unsuccessfully attempted to reconcile with Ezzo in 1998, and he says Ezzo misstated the outcome of those meetings.

Aney says it is time for action. "Multnomah should recall [the books]. ... They should acknowledge that they've been deceived by Ezzo. They are an accomplice and a victim. But they're not innocent."

Despite the unresolved controversy, Ezzo continues to develop family ministry resources for outlets in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

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### **Related Elsewhere:**

*Christianity Today's* earlier coverage of Gary Ezzo and Babywise includes:

[Babywise Publisher Plans Contract Cancellation](#) | Multnomah editor now considers Ezzo book "dangerous." (Mar. 23, 2001)

['Our Review Is Still In-Process'](#) | Multnomah President Don Jacobson responds to *Christianity Today's* coverage. (Mar 23, 2001)

[Unprepared to Teach Parenting?](#) | Two churches long associated with *Babywise* author Gary Ezzo denounce his character and fitness for Christian ministry. (Oct. 27, 2000)

[On The Record: Gary Ezzo](#) | The controversial creator of *Babywise* speaks to *Christianity Today*. (Oct 27 2000)

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[Growing Criticism](#) | Groups back away from *Preparation for Parenting*. (Feb. 9, 1998)

[The Brave New Baby](#) | Does a new curriculum for families build up the parent-child relationship, or put infants at risk? (Aug. 19, 1993)

[Are Ezzos Culturally Insensitive?](#) (Aug. 19, 1993)

Susan Wise Bauer [reviewed](#) *Babywise* and other parenting books for *Christianity Today* sister publication *Books & Culture*.

At press time, [Multnomah's Web site](#) still promoted Ezzo's books.

Steven and Kateri Rein's "[Concerns about the Ezzos' Preparation for Parenting Class](#)" site offers criticism of the Ezzos from theological, biological, historical, and other perspectives. It also [reprints and links](#) to several articles in the mainstream press. It has a copy of [York's open letter](#) to Multnomah and [Aney's AAP article](#).

Ezzo [responded to CT's earlier coverage](#) on the [Growing Families International](#) site.

[World](#) magazine also profiled Ezzo's techniques, resulting in an controversial [response](#) by Ezzo.

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