

Dr O.G. Chukwuma 

Department of Old Testament
and Hebrew Scriptures,
University of Pretoria 
Pretoria, South Africa;
Department of Religion and
Cultural Studies, University of
Nigeria  Nsukka, Nigeria.
E-mail: u05141517@tuks.co.za
ORCID: [https://orcid.
org/0000-0003-1387-7357](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1387-7357)

 [https://doi.org/10.38140/
at.v45i2.9413](https://doi.org/10.38140/at.v45i2.9413)

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2025
45(2):80-99

Date received:
16 May 2025

Date accepted:
23 October 2025

Date published:
12 December 2025



Published by the UFS
<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

© Author(s)



OPEN  ACCESS

Psalm 127:3-5 and the status of sons in ancient Israelite society: Salient issues in contemporary African society

ABSTRACT

The preference for male children is a distinctive feature of patriarchal societies. Psalms 127:3-5 celebrates the value of sons in ancient Israelite domestic structures. Sons were regarded as evidence of God's blessings and great assets, because they grew to become defenders of their father, and their presence guaranteed the continuation of the family line. Hence, the absence of sons was usually a source of concern. With historical-critical analysis, this article studies Psalm 127:3-5 to ascertain the historical and cultural context in which the Psalm was written and how it relates to other texts. This article demonstrates how the pericope resonates in contemporary African society concerning preference for male children, large family size and other practices. Although the text is traditionally male-centred, a feminist biblical interpretation emphasises an inclusive interpretation on the premise of the value of both sons and daughters and the significant roles of women in contemporary societies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The ancient Israelite society was family-oriented, and the family unit played significant roles in the socio-religious, economic, and political spheres of the community. Having a family and children were socio-religious obligations among the Israelites (Lavee & Katz 2003:193). The ancient Israelites valued children and regarded them as blessings from God. Children were the bedrock of a family, as

they provided security, a legacy, and defence in their parents' old age. Thus, the absence of children in a family was usually a source of concern, as shown in Abram-Sarai's and Elkanah-Hannah's narratives. Abram was worried that he had no son who would inherit his possessions (Gn. 15:3). Hannah was an object of ridicule as a result of her state of childlessness (1 Sm. 1:6-8). In Genesis 30:1, Rachael was ready to die rather than to remain childless; she said to Jacob (her husband), "Give me sons, or I shall die."

Having sons guaranteed the continuation of the family line and protection of family inheritance (Mays 1994:401). Thus, the birth of a son was usually celebrated (1 Sm. 1:24-25). Ademiluka (2021:1) reiterates that

[t]he preference for sons in ancient Israel was for the perpetuation of a man's lineage, as well as for inheritance.

In I Samuel 1:11, Hannah's specific request for the gift of a male child indicates that the ancient Israelite society was patriarchal; male children were preferred to females, and humankind was predominantly referred to in terms of males (Ackerman 2016). In the Book of Genesis, there are narratives about women who gave birth to sons after a long period of barrenness (Gn. 21:2; 25:21-26; 29:32-35; 30:6, 22-24). Moss and Baden (2015:221) support that

[m]any women who experienced a long delay before childbearing usually gave birth to sons who became great in the history of Israel.

Unfortunately, during crises, male children were often the target, as noted in the Egyptians-Israelites narrative in Exodus 1:15-22.

Psalm 127 is a Wisdom Psalm believed to have originated in Ancient Israel, and composed by King Solomon. Many exegetes have argued that it is originally composed of two independent psalms (vv. 1-2; vv. 3-5) which have no manner of connection in thought (M'Caw & Motyer 1970:532; Anderson 1971:866; Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:381). However, Clifford (2003:239) opines that the connection between the two parts is seamless. According to verses 1-2, builders alone cannot build a house. In contrast, verses 3-5 imply that sons, merely by their existence, constitute a house. Verses 1-2 assert that sentries alone cannot guard a city. In contrast, verses 3-5 assert that sons are effective guards. One of the unique features of the psalm is that it identifies three of man's most universal preoccupations, namely building, security, and raising a family (Kidner 1975:440). The second part of the psalm (vv. 3-5) illustrates the value of sons in ancient Israelite families. Sons are a divine gift of inestimable value, indicating their essential role in the family and communal spheres (Exell 1978:211). They have great potential to contribute to the growth

of the family and community. It is not untypical of God's gifts that they are first liabilities, or at least responsibilities, before they become assets (Kidner 1975:442).

Against that backdrop, this article aims to study Psalm 127:3-5 *vis-à-vis* the significance of sons in ancient Israelite and African families. The objectives are to understand the various meanings of the term "son" in the Old Testament world view, investigate the realities associated with the absence of sons in ancient Israelite and African families, as well as discover areas of harmony regarding the status of sons in Israelite families and African contemporary society. The article also sheds light on the implications of a feminist reading of the text.

2. INSIGHTS INTO PSALM 127:3-5

Psalm 127:3-5 is centred on the family. Bullock (2017:422) opines that "the text identifies children as the most significant gift from God to those he loves". Barnes (1976:249) notes that

[t]he psalm appears to be an address to a man who was set to start a domestic life to acquaint him with certain guidelines, particularly about dependence on God.

Toombs (1971:297) argues that "[t]he psalm was written to celebrate the birth of a son". Jüngling (1998:852) notes that "Psalm 127:3-5 refers to the justice that is achieved with a numerous and vital posterity". These varying perspectives have a common idea: the psalm has a familial orientation. Psalm 127 comprises two parts. Addis (1962:393) and Dahood (1970:222) note that the first part (vv. 1-2) centres on the futility of all human toil without divine guidance, while in the second part (vv. 3-5), the psalmist emphasises that בְּנִים (sons) are invaluable and freely given by God. Leslie (1957:589) and Anderson (1971:866) affirm that verses 3-5 contain a beautiful description of the importance of sons in Jewish culture. It maintains that sons are the joy and defence of their father.

At the beginning of verse 3, the particle interjection הִנֵּה (see, behold) is used to stress the importance of the subsequent statement. The presence of in any text of the Bible quickly captures the attention of the reader and signals the introduction of a new development in the text.

Psalm 127:3 uses synonymous parallelism. The first line unequivocally establishes that sons are נַחֲלָתָא (heritage) received according to the free will of the giver (God). In the Old Testament, the noun נַחֲלָתָא is usually used to denote

the land of Israel as the gift of God (Anderson 1971:868). Similarly, in the second line, the expression שְׂכָר פְּרֵי הַבֶּטֶן (the fruit of the womb is his reward) identifies God as the ultimate giver of sons. In the verse, the words בָּנִים (sons) and פְּרֵי הַבֶּטֶן (fruit of the womb) are synonymous. The noun שְׂכָר (reward) should not be understood literally in light of wages received for performing a duty; rather, it refers to the benefits that God bestows on men according to his free will. In this regard, sons should not be demanded, because they are freely given (Keil & Delitzsch 1891:299; Calvin 1949:110).

In verse 4, the psalmist compares the sons of one's youth to arrows in a warrior's hand. Exell (1978:212) notes that "[a]n arrow is a small, but powerful weapon". כְּחֵצִים בְּיַד-גִּבּוֹר (like arrows in the hand of a warrior) means that a mighty man uses arrows to slay his enemies, just as sons are a source of a man's protection. The number of enemies a soldier kills depends on the number of arrows in his possession (Keil & Delitzsch 1891:299). Since sons are supposed to become defenders of their fathers, it is expected that they are not to be weakly trained but to be wisely and strictly disciplined for the duty that awaits them. Baab (1962:239) notes that "[s]ons are to be disciplined and carefully trained in the traditions of the community and the meaning of wisdom". As a warrior straightens his arrows, fathers have the responsibility of preparing their sons for the challenges of life (Jones 1974:338).

The expression בְּנֵי הַנְּעוּרִים (sons of one's youth) means "begotten in the vigorous age of the father" or "offspring of a youthful marriage" in contrast to the "sons of old age" (Gn. 37:3). "Sons of one's youth" grow to become their father's protectors, especially in old age. They are at their prime when their father is declining in strength and needs support (Jamieson, Fausset & Brown 1993:509; Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:381). Invariably, the most appropriate time for marriage is in one's young age. Earle (1967:528) notes that "[t]he children of young people are usually more vigorous and healthier than those of elderly persons". The phrase בְּנֵי הַנְּעוּרִים (sons of one's youth) is beautifully illustrated in Genesis 49:3 with reference to Reuben (Jacob's first son). Dahood (1970:222) observes that "[a] son born at one's old age is no advantage".

Psalm 127:5 contains a beatitude elaborated by an illustration (Mays 1994:401). The particle interjection אֲשֶׁרִי (blessed) is very significant in the verse and points to the noun גִּבּוֹר (man). The expression אֲשֶׁרִי הַגִּבּוֹר אֲשֶׁר מְלֵא אֶת-אֲשָׁפוֹתָו מֵהֶם (blessed is the man who has his quiver full of them) literary means that a man who has many sons is fortunate, in the same way as a warrior has a full quiver of arrows. The noun אֲשָׁפָה (quiver), according to Barnes (1976:251), is "[a] case in which arrows are carried; a warrior feels secure when he has his quiver full of arrows". In the same vein, a man is blessed in proportion to the number of his sons.

The second line of verse 5 sheds light on the message of the first part. With a negative particle לֹא (not), it lays bare the reason why a man with many grown sons is considered blessed. When falsely accused, he is confident of a fair hearing, redress, and victory, because his numerous sons will serve as his witnesses and protect him from disgrace. Again, he is not afraid of raiders, because his house is well guarded by his vigorous sons. Earle (1967:528), Anderson (1971:869), and Toombs (1971:297) note that a man who has many sons will not be wrongly deprived of justice in judicial matters; the contrary was often the case with widows, orphans, and aliens who had no families to protect their interests. The use of שַׁעַר (gate) points to a legal dispute rather than war. Gate is the centre of communal life; a place where disputes are settled and business transacted. Conflicts at the city gate (the court) are more likely to end in favour of the man with many sons as a sign of blessing and importance (Leslie 1957:589; M'Caw & Motyer 1970:532; Jamieson *et al.* 1993:509; Terrien 2003:830; Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014:543).

3. CONCEPT OF “SON” IN THE OLD TESTAMENT LITERATURE

The Hebrew masculine noun בֶּן “son” is one of the most common words in the Old Testament and is usually used when referring to an immediate male offspring of a husband and his wife (Gn. 4:1). Pfeiffer, Vos & Rea (1975:1610) write:

There are more than 3,700 occurrences of the word ‘son’ in the Hebrew Bible, with its first occurrence in Gn. 4:17, used of Enoch (son of Cain).

Gehman (1970:893) adds that “[i]t is used when referring to a person received into a family relationship by adoption (Ex. 2:10).” Stearns (1979:644) and Niskanen (2009:335) observe that the noun בֶּן is the most common word for “son” and “children” and occurs repeatedly in the phrase “children of Israel” (*i.e.* Israelites), in which case, it refers to both males and females. The phrase “son of ...” is commonly used in genealogies to specify the particular family to which a person belongs. A son is considered part of a broader network of relationships, including clan, tribe, and nation.

In the Wisdom Literature, especially in the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, sages addressed their students as sons (Pr. 1:10; 5:1; Ec. 12:12). Gehman (1970:894) writes:

The term ‘son’ is employed as a friendly or informal address used by an elderly man to a younger person (Jos. 7:19).

More so, the word “son” is used when referring to the members of certain social or professional groups. For example, “sons of the prophets” (I Ki. 20:35; 2 Ki. 2:3); “sons of the priests” (Neh. 12:35; 1 Chr. 9:30), and “sons of Zion” (Ps. 149:2) (Renard & Grelot 1973:561; Hawk 1988:570). Pfeiffer *et al.* (1975:1611) as well as Robinson and Millard (1980:1474) aver that the term “son” is used to specify certain qualities; בְּיָהוֹן “sons of might” refers to “valorous and courageous” (Jdg. 18:2; I Sm. 14:52) and בְּגִי־שָׁחַץ “sons of pride” (Job 41:26 in Hebrew Text; Job 41:34 in English text) describes a proud person.

4. VALUE OF “SONS” IN ANCIENT ISRAELITE FAMILIES

In ancient Israelite society, children, particularly sons, were important and highly valued. Rodd (2001:400) submits that “[c]hildren were important for building up the power and prestige of the family”. According to Ibita (2012:84), “[t]hey become the adults who take care of the past generation and continue the future of the extended family”. Through them, the house that God built (Ps. 127:1-2) is continued. בֵּן, “a son”, and, בַּת, “a daughter”, as well as בֵּית, “a house,” come from the same root בָּנָה, “to build”, because sons and daughters build up a household (Earle 1967:528; Toombs 1971:297). The preference for male children was explicitly expressed by certain childless women while they were making requests to God for the gift of children. In 1 Samuel 1:11, Hannah specifically asked God for a male child. Sons are gifts from God and are regarded as evidence of divine favour. Psalm 128:3 notes that a man who fears God is rewarded with a fruitful wife and numerous sons. The birth of a male child brought joy to a family and was usually celebrated. Hawk (1988:570) notes that

[a] man's utmost desire is the preservation of his lineage, and this can be actualised by the presence of numerous sons.

Baab (1962:239) restates that, in Hebrew families, sons are second in importance to the father, because they determine the perpetuation of his name and personality; descent is reckoned through a man's sons. Hence, sons were desired, because their presence provided the means for parents to live on through their posterity. Kraft (1963:134) highlights the value of having numerous sons, stating that

[a] man who had numerous sons was a rich man; his position was dignified and influential; his possessions were secured to his family, and his name perpetuated.

The importance attached to the possession of sons was also given to the possession of a large family. Harper (1967:569) and Wright (1992:766) note that a large family was among the most tangible and desirable of God's blessings and an important element in the blessings that were promised for obedience in the Sinai covenant (Lv. 26:9). In ancient Israel, the child mortality rate was high; many children died from various diseases and the effects of war. Thus, it was a blessing for parents to have a large family (Meyers 1992:248; Habtu 2006:730). In an agrarian society, wealth was measured in the number of sons a man possessed for tilling and herding. A man who has a large family with numerous sons occupies a strong position in the community and is well respected (M'Caw & Motyer 1970:532; White 1975:498). On his death, his sons inherit his possessions. However, Deuteronomy 21:17 notes that the eldest son occupied a special position, received a double share of his possessions, and took the position of the head of the family. Similarly, Anderson (1971:869) and Mitchell (1971:501) posit that the first son assumes pre-eminence in the family and receives the best of his father's inheritance. Hunt (1982:280) adds that, in the absence of the father, the first son takes over certain responsibilities such as maintaining the religious life of the family (offering sacrifices on behalf of the family). A daughter was not privileged to inherit from her father unless there were no sons. White (1975:498) opines that

[a] woman had no legal status in Israel; she had to be under the legal protection either of her father or husband, and if neither were living, then under a kinsman, as described in the Book of Ruth.

Psalm 127:5 emphasises that sons are the strength of an old man. Willis (2007:427) asserts that

[s]ons were desired more than daughters because they would grow up to become viable defence and support to their fathers, while daughters married and joined themselves to another male.

In the words of Igbelina-Igbokwe (2013), girls are perceived as expendable commodities who will eventually be married out to other families to procreate and ensure the survival of the spouses' lineage by bearing sons. Jones (1974:338) submits that "[s]ons are God-ordained human defence of the family in times of need". As a warrior relies on his arrows, a father depends on his sons for defence in times of danger, or for help in securing provision for himself and his family (Barnes 1976:251). Hence, a man who has many sons is less vulnerable than one who has few. Mays (1994:401) opines that

[w]hen a man had to face his adversaries in legal conflict that ended up in the court convened in the gates of the city, it helped greatly to appear accompanied by a platoon of boys.

Likewise, a tribe that has many sons is not scared of battles, because their sons will defend them against their adversaries. Exodus 1:8-22 records that the king of Egypt issued a death warrant against all male babies born to Israelite women, because he was afraid that, if there were to be a war, the Israelites could join their enemies to defeat them. Female children were allowed to live, because they did not engage in war.

5. ABSENCE OF CHILDREN (SONS) IN ANCIENT ISRAELITE FAMILIES

A significant characteristic observed in the Old Testament literature is the importance assigned to the possession of children, and correspondingly, the intense sorrow and disappointment of childless parents (Kraft 1963:133). Barrenness was regarded as a reproach and punishment inflicted by God, as indicated in the expression "The Lord had closed her womb" (Gn. 16:2; 1 Sm. 1:5). A childless woman was treated with contempt and considered a disgrace to womanhood. Regardless of their wealth, a childless couple felt incomplete and insecure. Jones (1974:338) avers that "[a] home without a child is most unenviable".

The Old Testament has narratives about the ordeals of families who experienced childlessness; the first being Abram and Sarai, as recorded in the Book of Genesis. The matriarch, Sarai, was despised by her maid (Hagar) (Gn. 16:4) when the latter found out that she was pregnant, following her sexual relationship with Abram. Rachel's state of childlessness materialised into envy and depression; "give me children or I shall die" (Gn. 30:1). I Samuel 1:6 records that Hannah's rival ridiculed her, because the Lord had closed her womb.

The various practices that childless couples adopted to have children are attested to in Nuzi texts. It was a usual practice to add another wife to the family if a wife could not bear children. A barren wife could also present her slave-girl to her husband (Selman 1980:1103); this practice is equally apparent in the Old Testament, as recorded in Genesis 16:1-4, where Sarai offered her slave girl (Hagar) as a wife to Abram following her delay in bearing children for her husband. Similarly, Rachael offered Bilhah (her slave girl) to Jacob so that she could have children through her (Genesis 30:1-7). In these instances, the wife had authority over her slave-girl's children and took responsibility for them. More so, the Nuzi documents report that the ancient Mesopotamians

practised adoption, whereby childless couples take someone who becomes their child and assume the responsibilities thereof; it was in keeping with this practice that Abraham considered making one of his servants (Eliezer) his heir (Mitchell 1971:501). The Israelites also practised levirate marriage (referred to as "Widow inheritance" in Chukwuma 2024:3) in which a man was permitted to marry his brother's widow to preserve his name (Dt. 25:5).

6. PSALM 127:3-5, ITS DOMESTIC PARALLELS IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA AND AN INCLUSIVE READING OF THE TEXT

Many scholars have demonstrated that some Old Testament texts have striking resemblances with certain practices in African cosmology (Masenya 2019:412; Chukwuma 2022:1; Ugwuewo, Obiorah & Chukwuma 2024:4). Psalm 127:3-5 explicitly expresses the African worldview concerning the value attached to the possession of children, preference for male children and the value of having a large family. Africans believe that the primary motive for marriage is procreation. Moreover, having children is necessary for fulfilment and marital success. Thomson (2015) restates that children reinforce the commitment between a couple, leading to stability in the marriage.

During marriage ceremonies, the Supreme Being or ancestors are beseeched to bless the new family with children, both males and females. Hence, couples with children are considered blessed, whereas those without children are believed to be under curses as a result of their misdeeds (personal or generational). A sense of intense sorrow and disappointment seems to engulf couples without children (Ikeke 2021:12). The absence of children usually leads to chaos in the family and, in many cases, the couple part ways (Zhang & Hayward 2001:11; Meyer 2008:28). As a result, many men are pressured by family and friends to impregnate a woman they have chosen to marry before carrying out the marriage rites. Some men ensure that their "wives" give birth to at least two children before the necessary rites are completely carried out. If a woman is unable to conceive after a period of cohabiting with her would-be husband, she is chased away, and another woman is brought in. Unfortunately, there is a wrong notion that women are responsible for all cases of childlessness (Ikeke 2021:12). It is, therefore, not uncommon to see many childless women patronising the activities of prophets and diviners (Holter 2014).

Children are highly treasured in African societies, because of the socio-economic and psychological values they give to their parents, community, and society at large. Nauck and Klaus (2007:487) and Thomson (2015) restate that a profound benefit of parenthood lies in the economic value and other

benefits that parents receive in the intermediate and long term for having and rearing children. These values underlie parents' desires for having children, which, in combination with their ability to achieve those desires, influence their decisions to have children and how many children they will have. To this end, parents invest their time and resources in training their children to reap the rewards of children's labour from adolescence onward (Schultz 1973:2; Caldwell 1976:321).

Emphasis is also placed on having a large family, because it is believed that each child contributes additional labour and economic security for parents (Thomson 2015). In many African societies, families with many children are more highly valued than those with fewer or no children. In such cultures, it is taboo for a married couple to be childless. The presence of many children is regarded as a sign of approval by the Supreme Being and equally recognises women's role in motherhood. According to Mbiti (1969:130) and Masenya (2019:415), a family that has many children (both sons and daughters) is assumed to be in tune with the demands of the order created by the ancestors. Adult children of a large family help one another and are significant to the economic well-being of their aged parents (Jones 1974:338; Rendall & Bahchieva 1998:293; Buhler 2008:569). The old-age security value of children is particularly important in societies where no public provisions exist for the care of elderly persons (Cain 1985:145). A man who has many children (especially sons) is respected and regarded as a compendium of wisdom that he garnered through the years of child upbringing.

Among many Africans, it is a prevalent wrong notion that women with few children have some medical conditions that have prevented them from having more children (Ikeke 2021:12). In fact, the number of children a woman has determines how she is loved and respected by her husband's family. In some Igbo communities, a woman receives gifts (cash, a motorcycle, and cows) if she gives birth to up to 12 children (including males and females). She is regarded as a strong woman owing to the enormous challenges of birthing and raising children. Nevertheless, owing to economic difficulties, couples should have the number of children they can comfortably care for, educate, and prepare for life. Those with very lean resources decide to have a maximum of three children to invest sufficient time and money in each child (Bulatao 1981:1; Habtu 2006:730). Most importantly, a woman's health should equally be considered in decisions concerning the number of children to have. It should also be noted that having numerous children should not be the sole yardstick for determining a man's success because, for certain reasons, some children may grow up to become disappointments to their parents. One well-trained and established child is better than ten never-do-well children.

Both the Israelites and Africans predominantly have a strong preference for male children. The importance attached to the continuity of a man's lineage underlies the strong desire for sons (Ademiluka 2018:349). The birth of a male child brings joy and is usually celebrated. In fact, among the ancient Israelites, the actual strength of a man was determined by the number of sons he had (Masenya 2019:416). Until she gives birth to a son, a woman is believed to be a visitor in her husband's house. Her stay in her husband's house is even more secure if she has many male children (Nwaoga 2013:705). Hence, giving birth to many sons naturally endears a woman to her husband's heart, because he does not need to hire labourers for farmwork. Jones (1974:338) notes:

People fear to offend a man who has many sons because his sons will significantly attack his adversaries and defend their father.

Especially in patriarchal societies, the presence of only female children in a family is a concern, because daughters marry and join another male, while sons ensure the continuance of the family line. Thus, a man without sons is regarded as a dead man, because, at the end of his life, there are no sons to preserve his name. In his old age, his many sons give him financial support and, at his demise, ensure that he gets a befitting burial. The value of daughters is, however, strongly perceived in household duties and companionship; they tend to be closer to their elderly parents, even when they have been married.

Concern for heirs is a factor in the institution known as levirate marriage, in which a childless widow would marry her deceased husband's brother, with the first child produced by that liaison considered the dead man's heir (Meyers 2008:xlili). In many African societies, childlessness and the absence of sons are usually tackled through getting another wife. Hence, a woman with no sons lives in constant fear of losing her marriage (Igbelina-Igbokwe 2013). In some instances, the consent of the first wife is sought before such an arrangement is made. Rarely is the first wife privileged to get a woman from a good, reputable family. A typical African man does not easily resort to adoption, because of the belief that adopting a child is a contamination of the family lineage (Ugwuewo *et al.* 2024:4). Omosun and Kofoworola (2011:1) aver that some infertile women are not willing to adopt children as a result of the ensuing sociocultural effects. A few of the wealthy and educated women use various medical means to have children. A husband and wife who have only one son usually get a wife for him early to start perpetuating the family line. In some instances, a daughter is encouraged to give birth to a child out of wedlock; regardless of the gender, such a child belongs to the father of the girl, but the man feels fulfilled if the child is a male (Ezugwu, Obi & Onah 2002:211; Ugwuewo *et al.* 2024:4).

The traditional interpretation of Psalm 127:3-5 highlights the male-centric aspects of the text, concentrating on men strengthening their reputation through their numerous sons. Although ancient Israel was a patriarchal society with women subordinate to men (Haddox 2014:512), women played significant roles in the sociopolitical, religious, and economic spheres. Meyers (2008:xli) posits that

[i]n the Old Testament, men are mentioned more than women, but women are equally mentioned throughout the Bible; many passages in the Prophets and Writings provide insights about their lives and contributions in the socio-religious life of Israel.

While men exercised significant social and political power, women had considerable influence within the household, particularly in managing the household economy. Haddox (2014:515) restates that, “[a]lthough femininity is constructed as subordinate to masculinity, within the household, women could hold considerable power”. Male dominance was practically limited in nature, and as a result, women were not controlled by men in all aspects of life.

A feminist reading of the text, however, emphasises a more inclusive understanding of family, leveraging on the knowledge that children (regardless of gender) are gifts from God and that both men and women play essential roles in the family. The family was one of the most important gendered institutions in ancient Israel (Haddox 2014:515). Both men and women were important to sustain God’s plan for family life (Chukwuma 2024:7). As a result, the relationship between a woman and her husband was complementary. Family life was task-oriented; both the wife and the husband, as well as the children (both male and female) supported themselves to ensure family stability. In meeting a household’s economic, educational, and religious needs, the responsibilities of all family members were not the same. The division of labour by gender, albeit with some overlap, was the most efficient way to accomplish the myriad household tasks. Both men and women, although in different ways, took part in the discussions and decisions affecting community life (Meyers 2008:xliii). Notwithstanding, women played distinguished roles that could not go unnoticed.

An inclusive understanding of Psalm 127:3-5 aims to celebrate women’s roles in raising children and ensuring a sustainable family life. According to Martin (2017:541),

[a]lthough her primary duty is to bear children, a mother also possesses considerable influence over her family and gains respect and honour from her husband and children.

Both parents are important, but because of the special needs of children, mothers play significant roles in the raising of children (Chukwuma 2024:2). Women are the primary caregivers for children, although some fathers are involved, specifically concerning child discipline and providing some money for their children's upkeep. Women spend more time with their children, and so are more opportune to nurture their development, shape their character, and inculcate moral values and societal norms in them. Omuholo (2024) reiterates that mothers play invaluable roles in their children's growth and thus become their initial contact with the culture and traditions of society. Proverbs 31:10-31 portrays a woman as one with social power to act as manager of an extended and productive family household and as a counsellor to husband and children (Camp 2000:549). Besides their individual agricultural activities (cultivation of garden vegetables and herbs), women also participated in male-centred tasks such as growing grains and tending orchards and vineyards (Ruth 2:2-9). Through their expertise and labour, women contributed significantly to the household economy, by transforming agricultural products into edible and wearable forms for commercial purposes (Meyers 2008:xliv). Likewise, in contemporary times, women venture into diverse careers to support their husbands in maintaining a peaceful and habitable home.

7. CONCLUSION

There is an apparent striking resemblance between certain Israelite and African world views. In both societies, children are highly valued and regarded as blessings from God. The absence of children in an Israelite family was a cause for concern and usually led to family instability. To preserve the family name, male children were preferred over female children. A man who had many sons was sure of safety and sustenance in his old age. Psalm 127:3-5 explicitly lays bare the Israelites' world view concerning the blessedness of having many sons. It demonstrates that a man benefits more from the possession of sons than his wife. The earlier verses of the text (vv. 1-2) aim to establish that man should depend on God for success in everything, including family life. These realities in Israel resonate with African views on the value of children.

In many African societies, the birth of a child is celebrated, because it signals that the marriage is approved by God. The presence of children usually strengthens the bond between a woman and her husband. Invariably, childlessness is a major cause of marital chaos, given that women are usually blamed for the absence of children. Being a patriarchal society, a typical African believes that he has no child, even if he has ten daughters and no sons. In both cultures, childlessness and the absence of sons were usually handled in

two ways such as getting another wife and adoption. In contemporary African society, many men resort to getting another wife to exonerate themselves from the societal stigma associated with childlessness.

An inclusive perspective of Psalm 127:3-5 considers children, regardless of gender, as a blessing to their parents; they add value and social prestige. If nurtured and supported well, children grow to become valuable assets to their societies. Undoubtedly, women have continued to play very indispensable roles that can never be overemphasised in any age. Women, therefore, should be encouraged and supported, instead of being denigrated by the shackles of male dominance in patriarchal societies. Negative stereotypes that have the potential to undermine the essential roles of women in society should be avoided. A man's success should not be solely determined by the number of sons he has, but it should be reflected in the positive impact his family makes on the community. Therefore, although Psalm 127:3-5 is a male-centred text, it has the potential for promoting an inclusive understanding of family and parenting.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ACKERMAN, S.

2016. Women in ancient Israel and the Hebrew Bible. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia: Religion*. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.45> [19 September 2024].

ADDIS, W.E.

1962. The Psalms. In: A.S. Peake (ed.), *Peake's commentary on the Bible* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons), pp. 366-396.

ADEMILUKA, S.O.

2018. Patriarchy and women abuse: Perspectives from Ancient Israel and Africa. *Old Testament Essays* 31(2):339-362. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621>

2021. Hannah's prayer for a male child: Interpreting 1 Samuel 1:11 in the Nigerian context. *In die Skriflig* 55(1):1-8. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v55i1.2719>

ANDERSON, A.A.

1971. The Book of Psalms. In: R.E. Clements & M. Black (eds), *New century Bible* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott), pp. 529-956.

BAAB, O.J.

1962. Family. In: G.A. Buttrick (ed.), *The interpreter's dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), pp. 238-240.

BARNES, A.

1976. The Book of Psalms. In: R. Frew (ed.), *Notes on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House), pp. 249-252.

BRUEGGEMANN, W. & BELLINGER, W.H.

2014. Psalms. In: B. Witherington (ed.), *New Cambridge Bible commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 541-544.

BUHLER, C.

2008. On the structural value of children and its implication on intended fertility in Bulgaria. *Demographic Research* 18(20):569-610. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2008.18.20>

BULATAO, R.A.

1981. Values and disvalues of children in successive childbearing decisions. *Demography* 18(1):1-25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2061046>

BULLOCK, C.H.

2017. Psalms. In: M.L. Strauss & J.H. Walton (eds), *Teach the text commentary series* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), pp. 1-640.

CAIN, M.

1985. Fertility as an adjustment to risk. In: A.S. Rossi (ed.), *Gender and the life course* (New York: Aldine), pp. 145-160. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351329040-10>

CALDWELL, J.C.

1976. Toward a restatement of the demographic transition theory. *Population and Development Review* 2:321-366. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1971615>

CALVIN, J.

1949. Commentary on the Book of Psalms. In: J. Anderson (ed.), *Calvin's commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans), pp. 103-112.

CAMP, C.V.

2000. Woman wisdom. In: C. Meyers (ed.), *Women in Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans), pp. 548-540.

CHUKWUMA, O.G.

2022. Old Testament dietary laws in contemporary African Christian practice. *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43(1):1-9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2604>

2024. Proverbs 31:10-31: Autochthonous wives' roles for stable families in Ohafia matrilineal society. *In die Skriflig* 58(1):1-7. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v58i1.3095>

CLIFFORD, R.J.

2003. Psalms 73-150. In: P.D. Miller (ed.), *Abingdon Old Testament commentaries* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), pp. 238-241.

DAHOOD, M.

1970. Psalms 101-150. In: W.F. Albright & D.N. Freedman (eds), *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday), pp. 222-226.

EARLE, R.

1967. The Book of Psalms. In: A. Clarke (ed.), *Adam Clarke's commentary on the Holy Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House), pp. 461-536.

EXELL, J.S.

1978. *The Bible illustrator*. Vol 7. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

EZUGWU, F., OBI, S. & ONAH, E.

2002. The knowledge, attitude and practice of child adoption among infertile Nigerian women. *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 22(2):211-216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443610120113463>

GEHMAN, H.S.

1970. Son. In: H.S. Gehman (ed.), *The new Westminster dictionary of the Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press), pp. 893-895.

HABTU, T.

2006. Psalms. In: T. Adeyemo (ed.), *Africa Bible commentary* (Nairobi: Word Alive), pp. 605-746.

HADDOX, S.E.

2014. Masculinity and femininity. In: J.M. O'Brien (ed.), *The Oxford encyclopedia of the Bible and gender studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 512-518.

HARPER, A.F.

1967. The Book of Ecclesiastics or the preacher. In: W.T. Purkiser (ed.), *Beacon Bible commentary* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press), pp. 547-591.

HAWK, L.D.

1988. Son. In: G.W. Bromiley (ed.), *The International Standard Bible encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans), pp. 570-571.

HOLTER, K.

2014. Pregnancy and Psalms: Aspects of the healing ministry of a Nigerian prophet. *Old Testament Essays* 27(2):428-443.

HOSSFELD, F.L. & ZENGER, E.

2011. A commentary on Psalms 101-150. In: K. Baltzer (ed.), *Hermeneia – A critical and historical commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press), pp. 379-395.

HUNT, L.

1982. Family. In: G.W. Bromiley (ed.), *The international standard Bible encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans), pp. 279-281.

IBITA, M.S.

2012. Child. In: M.A. Beavis & M.J. Gilmour (eds), *Dictionary of the Bible and Western culture* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press), pp. 84-85.

IGBELINA-IGBOKWE, N.

2013. Contextualizing gender-based violence within patriarchy in Nigeria. *Pambazuka News: Voices for freedom and justice*. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.pambazuka.org/contextualizing-gender-based-violence-within-patriarchy-Nigeria> [8 May 2025].

IKEKE, M.O.

2021. The unethical nature of abuse of childless women in African traditional thought/practice. *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion* 3(1):12-22. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtr.3.1.299>

JAMIESON, R., FAUSSET, A.R. & BROWN, D.

1993. Psalm 127. In: R. Jamieson, A.R. Fausset & D. Brown (eds), *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans), pp. 509-512.

JONES, W.

1974. Psalm 127. *The preacher's complete homiletic commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House), pp. 337-339.

JÜNGLING, H.

1998. Psalms. In: W.R. Farmer (ed.), *The international Bible commentary: A Catholic and ecumenical commentary for the twenty-first century* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press), pp. 779-859.

KEIL, C.F. & DELITZSCH, F.

1891. Psalm 127:3-5. In: C.F. Keil & F. Delitzsch (ed.), *Keil and Delitzsch commentary on the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson), pp. 299-305.

KIDNER, D.

1975. Psalms 73-150. In: D.J. Wiseman (ed.), *Tyndale Old Testament commentaries* (Lisle, IL: Inter-Varsity Press), pp. 440-442.

KRAFT, C.F.

1963. Child, children. In: F.C. Grant & H.H. Rowley (eds), *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), pp. 133-134.

LAVEE, Y. & KATZ, R.

2003. The family in Israel. *Marriage and Family Review* 35(1-2):193-217. https://doi.org/10.1300/J002v35n01_11

LESLIE, E.A.

1957. Psalms 1-72. In: F.C. Eiselen, E. Lewis & D.G. Downey (eds), *The Abingdon Bible commentary* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), pp. 509-601.

M'CAW, L.S. & MOTYER, J.A.

1970. The Psalms. In: D. Guthrie & J.A. Motyer (eds), *The new Bible commentary* (Lisle, IL: Inter-University Press), pp. 446-547.

MARTIN, W.C.

2017. Moses. *The layman's Bible encyclopedia* (Nashville, TN: The Southwestern Company), pp. 541-543.

MASENYA, M.

2019. Making sense of Psalm 127:3-5 in African/South African contexts. *Old Testament Essays* 32(2):412-425. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2019/v32n2a9>

MAYS, J.L.

1994. Psalm. In: P.D. Miller & P.J. Achtemeier (eds), *Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox), pp. 400-402.

MBITI, J.S.

1969. *African religions and philosophy*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

MEYER, J.

2008. *Start your new life together*. New York: Faith Words Hachette Book Group.

MEYERS, C.

1992. Everyday life: Women in the period of the Hebrew Bible. In: C.A. Newsom & S.H. Ringe (eds), *The women's Bible commentary* (Louisville, KY: John Knox), pp. 244-251.

2008. Women in Ancient Israel – An overview. In: T.C. Eskenazi & A.L. Weiss (eds), *The Torah – A women's commentary* (New York: URJ Press), pp. xli-xlvi.

MITCHELL, T.C.

1971. Family, household. In: J.D. Douglas (ed.), *The illustrated Bible dictionary* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press), pp. 500-502.

MOSS, C.R. & BADEN, J.S.

2015. Reconciving infertility: Biblical perspectives on rocreation and childlessness. *The Biblical Annals* 9(1):221-226. <https://doi.org/10.31743/biban.3247>

NAUCK, B. & KLAUS, D.

2007. The varying value of children: Empirical results from eleven societies in Asia, Africa and Europe. *Current Sociology* 55:487-503. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392107077634>

NISKANEN, P.

2009. Son. In: K.D. Sakenfeld (ed.), *The new interpreter's dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), pp. 335-348.

NWAOGA, C.T.

2013. Socio-religious implications of child adoption in Igboland South Eastern Nigeria. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 4(13):705-710. <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2013.v4n13p705>

OMOSUN, A. & KOFOWOROLA, O.

2011. Knowledge, attitude and practice towards child adoption amongst women attending infertility clinics in Lagos State, Nigeria. *African Journal of Primary Health Care and Family Medicine* 3(1):1-8. <https://doi.org/10.4102/phcfm.v3i1.259>

OMUHOLO, O.

2024. Mothers as custodians of African languages and cultures. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://localizationafrica.com/mothers-as-custodians-of-african-languages/#> [10 May 2025].

PFEIFFER, C.F., VOS, H.F. & REA, J.

1975. Son. In: C.F. Pfeiffer, H.F. Vos & J. Rea (eds), *Wycliffe Bible encyclopedia* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press), pp. 1610-1611.

RENARD, H. & GRELOT, P.

1973. Son of God. In: X. Leon-Dufour (ed.), *Dictionary of biblical theology* (Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman), pp. 561-563.

RENDALL, M.S. & BAHCHIEVA, R.A.

1998. An old-age security motive for fertility in the United States. *Population and Development Review* 24:293-307. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2807975>

ROBINSON, D.W.B. & MILLARD, A.R.

1980. Sons (children) of God. In: J.D. Douglas (ed.), *The illustrated Bible dictionary* (Lisle, IL: Inter-Varsity Press), pp. 1474-1475.

RODD, C. S.

2001. Psalms. In: J. Barton & J. Muddiman (eds), *The Oxford Bible commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 355-404.

SCHULTZ, T.W.

1973. The value of children: An economic perspective. *Journal of Political Economy* 81:2-13. <https://doi.org/10.1086/260151>

SELMAN, M.J.

1980. Nuzi, household. In: J.D. Douglas (ed.), *The illustrated Bible dictionary* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press), pp. 1103-1104.

STEARNS, W.N.

1979. Child. In: G.W. Bromiley (eds.), *The international standard Bible encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans), pp. 644-645.

TERRIEN, S.

2003. The Psalms. In: D.N. Freedman (ed.), *The Eerdmans critical commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans), pp. 828-831.

THOMSON, E.

2015. Children, value of. [Online.] Retrieved from: <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1284512/fulltext01.pdf> [9 September 2024].

TOOMBS, L.E.

1971. The Psalms. In: C.M. Laymon (ed.), *The interpreter's one-volume commentary on the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), pp. 297-303.

UGWUEWO, C.S., OBIORAH, M.J. & CHUKWUMA, O.G.

2024. Genesis 15:1-6 and child adoption in Awkunanaw, Enugu State, Nigeria. *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45(1):1-6. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v45i1.3151>

WHITE, W.

1975. Family. In: C. Merrill (ed.), *The Zondervan pictorial encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House), pp. 496-501.

WILLIS, T.M.

2007. Family in the Old Testament. In: K.D. Sakenfeld (ed.), *The new interpreter's dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), pp. 427-430.

WRIGHT, C.J.H.

1992. Family. In: D.N. Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible dictionary* (New York: Doubleday), pp. 761-769. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300261882-570>

ZHANG, Z. & HAYWARD, M.D.

2001. Childlessness and the psychological well-being of older persons. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 56(5):11-20. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/56.5.S311>

Keywords

Trefwoorde

Psalm 127:3-5

Psalm 127:3-5

Sons

Seuns

Ancient Israel

Antieke Israel

Perpetuation of family line

Voortsetting van familielyn