



Children in the Bible

Blessings from God
and images of His Kingdom

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Blessings from God and images of His Kingdom

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Abstract

From a biblical perspective, children are gifts from God, blessings that will assure the continuity of life in a community. The role of adults is to help them grow physically, morally, socially, intellectually and spiritually for the welfare of the community both now and, above all, tomorrow, and for the glory of God who graciously gave them to mankind. In their nature and innocence, these children are, says Jesus Christ, the image of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, no one should harm them.

1. Introduction

Human civilization and culture vary in time and space. Yet in their diversities, some realities though not being identical are constantly universal. One such reality is human procreation. Every society experiences the human growth stage called childhood. It is not a daring generalization to say that children are recognized as fragile; and at the same time there is not the slightest shadow of a doubt that they are the future of the community. That is why they are desired and protected. In Africa, a couple without a child considers itself unhappy.

When one wakes up to the reality of child witch accusations in Congolese ethnic and religious communities, one wonders what is going wrong in that community. Has the sense of innocence of children, their fragility and the future of the community disappeared? Is not such society failing to fulfil his divine mandate to restore a community of justice, peace and joy?

The present paper seeks to respond indirectly to these questions by starting with a quick look at the perspectives on children in traditional Africa. Then, it focuses on biblical perspectives on children. In a contextual reading of children narratives, it reflects on the biblical views, like in a mirror, against the reality of child witch accusation in present Congolese communities.

2. Perspectives on children in traditional Africa

When we look at literature on African traditional society, we perceive that attention has been given to the religious and supernatural belief systems. Anthropological studies deal with them beside other cultural dimensions of life. Little is explicitly stated about children. However, they are mentioned indirectly, that is through the necessity for a couple and a community to have children. The existence of children was an inescapable reality of society.

First, it is attested that in traditional Africa a childless couple is unfortunate. Some cultures allowed polygamy, including polygamy with the younger sister of the wife for the sake of giving a child to the husband. It is not that they saw it as a gift they want to benefit from, but children were valuable for different reasons. In that patriarchal system, a father believes that his son will be his replacement in life. To die without a child is to die forever because the one who leaves a child continues to live through him in different life settings, for example:

- He is the representative of the father in the family. The other members of the family see the dead father through him. Life is being perpetuated.
- The child is the heir of the land, houses and livestock left by the father. He uses them to maintain the life of the family and its members. In many cases, the child inherits the profession of the father and if he is responsible, he takes care of the economic needs of the family.
- A father who dies leaving behind responsible child(ren) goes happily out of this world. He knows that the child will continue to perform the cultural and customary duties he used to perform.

Such cultural thoughts explain the care the father offered to his children. They were taken care of, properly fed, treated with natural medicine in case of sickness, and protected against dangers. They were also initiated in the culture of the community and the profession that would help them maintain or get wealth. The father made sure that his children's integration in his community was successful. We should not overlook other reasons behind the burning desire in traditional Africa to have children: they constitute good human resources for field work and they also take care of their parents in old age.

However, all was not perfect. We may discuss about the types of discipline that were inflicted on children. They may not have been the best, one would say today. But, they were done out of positive intention though sometimes the means of discipline were too harsh. In addition, in this patriarchal way of thinking, girls were not getting the best treatment compared to boys. But in general, children received attention from parents and adults in the community, because they belonged also to the community.

Another idea about the traditional African child is that of a fragile, innocent, and protected being to be educated holistically, with the aim of preparing him to replace tomorrow the adult in the community. As a result, it was rare to find 'fatherless', abandoned children or those excluded from the community, let alone street children. It was a shame for a family or a community not to be able

to educate children properly. The socio-economical and political mutations that African communities are experiencing today have brought many negative social changes, including the ill-treatment of children.

Generally speaking, accusations of witchcraft against children are a 'modern' phenomenon in DRC. The causes need therefore to be searched for not in some cultural patterns but in the disintegration of the family and community context as a result of socio-economical, politico-cultural and national failure in DRC.

Before making some reflections on children witchcraft accusations, I will first explore, in this second section, some biblical perspectives.

3. Perspectives on children in the Bible

a. Old Testament perspectives

Children are gifts from God

The origin of children is the first idea we get from the Old Testament. Whatever men do in terms of participation in the process of procreation, children are recognized as being from God. About her first child Cain (the first case in the biblical history of man), Eve says, "I have produced a man with the help of the Lord" (Genesis 4.1). Later, when she gives birth to her third son Seth, she says "God has granted me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him" (Genesis 4.25).

Another illustration is found in the Jacob's story. When Rachel asks Jacob to give her a child, Jacob became very angry with Rachel and said, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" (Genesis 30.2) Later, Esau came to meet Jacob, his wives and children as they were coming back from their uncle Laban's place. When Esau asked Jacob who were the people coming with him, he would again acknowledge that children are a gift from God by saying, "the children God has graciously given your servant" (Genesis 33.5). No wonder the naming of children was an opportunity to thank the Lord for what he did. The abundance of names ending with '-el' would confirm that.

Not having a child was considered as being forgotten by the Lord; anyone who wanted a child would ask it from the Lord alone.

The implication of this thought about the origin of children is that children belong to God. As Job would say about the loss of his properties and the death of his children, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1.21). Therefore, man bears the responsibility of taking care of children according to the will of God.

Despite current scientific knowledge about procreation, Judaeo-Christians still believe that this biological process is blessed and made possible by God.

Children are to be raised in the right ways of the Lord

When Moses was giving to Israelites the Shemah prayer (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), he insisted that Israelites should teach their children 'the fear of the Lord' (Deuteronomy 5.29) so that they may

never forget the ways of the Lord. This recommendation runs throughout the Old Testament, as a fundamental responsibility of parents. Children are considered as dependent on their parents in all respects, including the spiritual dimension of life. Parts of the book of Proverbs contain wisdom on how to bring up children in a manner that honours God and the parents.

Failure to educate children according to the Torah was imputed to the parents, not to society or any external influence.

Children perpetuate the community and the family name

When the Egyptians got afraid that the Israelites would multiply and rebel against their Egyptian masters, they decided to kill their male children, hoping to decimate the Israelite population (Exodus 1.15–21). In those days, the child assumed the role of perpetuating the name of the family. In case a man died without a child, his brother would take the widow and have a child with her to perpetuate the name of the late brother (Genesis 38.8, Ruth 4.9–10). Hence, the hymns to ancient heroes in Sirach:

May their [heroes] bones send forth new life from where they lie, And may the names of those who have been honoured live again in their children! (Sirach 46.12).

Children were also seen as future supporters of parents at old age (Ruth 4.15).

Children deserve special treatment because of their frailty and the future hope they carry

The same story of Jacob and his brother Esau points to the frailty of children, and the special attention they deserve. Jacob said, “My lord knows that the children are frail... Let my lord pass on ahead of his servant, and I will lead on slowly ...according to the pace of the children” (Genesis 33.13–14).

Orphans (and widows) are the focus of God’s protection of the defenceless. Job (24.9) complains against violence on earth and points to its worst immoral manifestation:

They (the wicked) drive away the donkey of the orphan; they take the widow’s ox for pledge. They are those who snatch the orphan child from the breast, and take pledge the infant of the poor (Job 24.3, 9).

What the Word of God recommends is to preserve the rights of orphans. It encourages ‘rearing orphans’, ‘giving them food’, ‘helping them’, ‘doing justice to them’, ‘defending them’, etc. On the other hand, the Lord abhors those who murder and oppress them or deprive them of their rights.

Except in cases where an entire community is condemned to be killed, as in the case of Canaanites or the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15.1), children were not to pay with their lives the sins of their fathers. The Lord God says, “Know that all lives are mine, the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.” (Ezekiel 18.2–3).

Out of this caring attitude, emerge all the metaphors of God taking care of Israel like a good mother or a good father takes care of his children (Deuteronomy 1.31; Isaiah 49.15; 66.13). Finally, the messianic hope rests on the shoulder of a child who will grow to become a saviour, a messiah:

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9.6–7).

In summary, children are considered as gifts from God. They may display frailty, yet they are indispensable for the future of the community. The Torah insists on the care and the teachings that the adults have to give children. Besides, the most vulnerable of them, that is the orphans, must be protected. God punishes severely those who mistreat orphans and widows or deprive them of their rights. One can already see in this care about children the beginnings of child rights.

The worst thing that may happen to a person is to lose a child through sickness, war or similar events. We understand why Rachel weeping in Ramah would refuse to be consoled because her children are no more (Jeremiah 31.15). And yet worse, to those Israelites who will disobey Him, God says,

In the desperate straits to which the enemy siege reduces you, you will eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your own sons and daughters whom the Lord your God has given you. Even the most refined and gentle of men among you will begrudge food to his own brother, to the wife whom he embraces, and to the last of his remaining children, giving to none of them any of the flesh of his children whom he is eating, because nothing else remains to him (Deuteronomy 28.53–55).

The best thing that a person may and a community may experience is being blessed with a child (many biblical stories confirm that) and to see him grow to become a responsible person in the community. Contrary the one time punishment mentioned in Genesis and Ezekiel (5.10), Isaiah foresees the Glorious New Creation God is preparing for his servants:

No more shall there be in it, an infant that lives but a few days, they shall not labour in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord and their descendants as well (Isaiah 65.20,23).

b. New Testament perspectives

In the New Testament, Jesus, the promised Christ of the Old Testament, comes to be born as a human child in a human modest environment. This offers the opportunity to see a baby grow and become a man. The incarnation of God happens without jumping childhood. Then, the growth of the child happens both in spirit and in body (Luke 2.40).

The flag bearer of Jesus, John was to become the Baptist, was born to Zechariah and Elisabeth. This couple experienced the pain of childless couples; then God blessed them by giving them a son. John also grew up in wisdom (Luke 1.80).

A child is born without strength, knowledge and wisdom. But as he grows, under the blessings of God and proper guidance of the community, he becomes a fully fledged man. He is a man in miniature, just like the seed of a big tree has the full potential that simply needs a proper environment to grow. In absolute value, that child is a man. But before he becomes a man, he needs to grow under the protection of the parents. Joseph and Mary had to take refuge in Egypt in order to protect the child Jesus whom Herod sought to kill.

To consider children as full carriers of human potentialities does not mean that they are without imperfection. Passages in the New Testament recognize their frailty and immaturity. Paul asks Christians in Corinth to ‘stop thinking like children and be adults in their thinking’ (1 Corinthians 14:20). He makes a difference between how children speak and think as opposed to adults (1 Corinthians 13:11). He also warns Ephesians to “no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4.14).

However, rather than looking at this frailty as a negative status, what one sees is the opportunity for an adult to mould him for a better holistic growth. He is an innocent being, fully trusting adults and completely in their hands, for the better or the worse direction they take in life. That is why Jesus warns any adult who would mislead children away from what is right:

If any of you put a stumbling–block before one of these little ones who believes in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea (Matthew 18.6).

This is a clear message about how the believers should care for the life of children.

The fundamental teaching we get from the New Testament is the virtue of humility that characterizes the Kingdom of God/Heaven. This statement Jesus makes about children and the key topic of the Kingdom of God is picked up by the three synoptic Gospels (Matthew 18.3–5; 19.14; Mark 9.36–37, 10.35; Luke 9.48, 18.17). In the Kingdom of God, humility is a capital character. Adult men, including Christian (spiritual) leaders, are often attracted by power and honour. Human beings want to become the greatest in every aspect of life. But in the Kingdom of God, children become our models.

Jesus goes further to say that “whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (Mark 9:36; Luke 9.48). This is to say that molesting or mistreating children equals to mistreating Jesus or negating his teachings. The author of Matthew (2.16) picks up the cruelty against children by narrating the massacre of innocent and defenceless children in and around Bethlehem by Herod. It contrasts with the value of the Kingdom where the defenceless are protected.

In the Epistles, we read many recommendations or orders to care for the children. Ephesians and Colossians are told by Paul “not to provoke children to anger but to bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6.4; Colossians 3.21). Parents are also invited to assume their responsibility of providing for their children rather than children providing for them (1 Corinthians 12.14) and manage the children and household well (1 Timothy 3:12). Properly caring for one’s children and household is one of the qualifications for someone to be appointed deacon or church leader. Paul compares his gentleness towards Thessalonians to “a mother caring for the little children” (1 Thessalonians 2.7) and he invites older women to encourage young women to love their husbands and their children (Titus 2.4).

In summary, the New Testament commands Love, Care, Teachings, and Christian Discipline to the children. The author of James, advocating for a practical religion that is pure and undefiled before God, mentions “help to orphans and widows” (James 1.26) as one of the three tests of the reality of our faith.

Apparently, compared to other topics, the topic of children is less pervasive. But, one metaphor is pervasive and almost omnipresent both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. It is the metaphor of God the father with regards to believers being his children. In the Old Testament, God is the “father of Israel and Judah” (Isaiah 1.2; Hosea 11.1). In the New Testament, all the believers or born-again Christians are “children of God” (John 1.12; Luke 6.35; 20.36). If, God is our father, and Christians are his children, then the way Christians relate to God and experience his fatherhood/motherhood ought to be the way Christians relate to (their) children.

Christians are regenerated or born again as children in spirit. They benefit from his tender care from their spiritual childhood to spiritual maturity. They experience God’s love, care, encouragement, provision, support, peace, forgiveness, etc. to name few out of many more. That experience ought to be replicated in the way we relate to children in our community. In other words, Christians should adopt the ways of God the father in heaven for dealing with their children. It is not a choice; it is the way.

4. Children through Biblical narratives

In the preceding section, I looked at biblical perspectives on children through statements about children. Another view comes from biblical narratives of children by looking at what happened to them, how people took care of them and how God deals with them.

In Exodus, we read that the new king of Egypt who did not know Joseph wanted to exterminate the Hebrews. All their male children were to be killed. But Moses’ mother decided to save him by hiding him among the reeds of the river Nile. He would be found by the daughter of Pharaoh (Exodus 2.1–10). God has plans for everyone, including the little child; though he is fragile, God uses human beings to protect him. No one could have guessed that Moses would be the greatest liberator of his people, just like today, no one can guess which child is going to be a great and important person tomorrow. It does not matter where he is born and under which circumstances. Though Moses was a ‘found’ child, he was not stigmatized for that. On the contrary, God was preparing him in a particular way to become a mighty man.

Samson was an exceptional child (Judges 13.2–25). Before his conception, his mother was barren. God had chosen him before his conception. The parents received instructions on the way they should treat him. Right from his childhood, God started to manifest himself through the child. We read that “the child grew and the Lord blessed him. The spirit of the Lord began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan” (Judges 13.24–25). An exceptional birth, an exceptional child God used for delivering Israelites from the hands of Philistines. Children are precious servants of the Lord. Their childhood frailty means nothing to God who will use them in mighty ways.

Hannah, the second wife of Elkanah, was barren. But, when she prayed to God and asked for a son, He gave her a child, named Samuel (1 Samuel 1.1–28). She gave him back to the Lord in His house, and the boy remained to minister to the Lord. Ministry to the Lord is not reserved for adults. It is not a privilege of adults. Children do it, maybe better because they do it with humility and without seeking their own interests. Contrary to the evil behaviour of Eli’s sons, the presence of Samuel was well appreciated by Eli. The child was a source of blessing and joy for the parents (1 Samuel 2.18–20). We are told that he grew up in the presence of the Lord (2.21). The same statement is repeated later with more details: Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in

stature and in favour with the Lord and the people (2.26). God was so interested in him that he called him three times without the child knowing that God was the one calling him. Eli had to divert him to God. That is how God reveals what He is about to do in Israel concerning the evil behaviours of Eli's sons and the judgement to follow. This is how Samuel served the Lord in Israel, from childhood.

Solomon was born to David and Bathsheba after their first child died. The Lord loved him (2 Samuel 12.24-25). This short statement reinforces the idea that the love of the Lord is for all including the children.

The story of Elisha and the widow's oil (2 Kings 4.1-37). The story depicts how the Shunammite woman does all she could, travelling to look for Elisha, petitioning for the resurrection of her child to bring her child back to life. And Elisha is concerned by the fate of the child without neglecting the child on the pretext that he is a child.

In the New Testament, the story of Jesus Christ's birth reminds us of how Moses was saved. God is in charge of children's destiny and has plans for each one of them. In his ministry, Jesus healed many children as well. Jesus presented us with a model of how God takes care of children and how his disciples ought to behave towards children.

5. Conclusion

Throughout the Bible and biblical narratives, children are depicted as gifts from God made to bring joy in families, to be prepared for service in the community, and to be taught by adults in right ways. Any ill-treatment of children on the pretext of witchcraft accusation is not biblical; it is non-Christian and displays a lack of understanding of what children represent for the future of the every community.

Any child witchcraft accusation is the sign of failed community. It has failed to take care of its children. Instead of seeking to build future by preparing the next generation, its members fall in the irrational and evil behaviour towards children. Without proper care for children, there is no bright future.

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