



Children in the Bible

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Introduction

From a biblical perspective, children are gifts from God, blessings that will ensure the continuity of life in a community. The role of adults is to help them to 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 humankind.

In their nature and innocence these children are, Jesus says, the image of the Kingdom of God. Therefore no-one should harm them.

Every society experiences childhood, whatever our differences. Wherever we live, children are seen as fragile, but also as the future of the community. That is why they are both desired and protected. In Africa, a couple without a child consider themselves unhappy.

So 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 the innocence of children, their fragility and the future of the community disappeared? Is not such a society failing to fulfil its divine mandate to restore a community of justice, peace and joy?

I'd like to look at the perspectives on children in traditional Africa and then look at biblical perspectives on children, and set these against the reality of child witch accusations in today's Congolese communities.

Perspectives on children in traditional Africa

It is attested in traditional Africa that a childless couple is unfortunate. In the patriarchal system, a father believes that his son will be his replacement in life. So to die without a child is to die forever.

Under this system children were taken care of, fed properly, treated with natural medicine when sick and protected against danger. They were also initiated into the community and the profession that would help maintain them.

However, all was not perfect. The types of discipline inflicted on children were not the best. Also girls did not get the same treatment as boys. But in general, children received attention from parents and adults in the community.

Accusations of witchcraft against children are a modern phenomenon in the DRC. The causes need to be searched for in the disintegration of the family and community context as a result of socio-economic and politico-cultural failure within the country.

Perspectives on children in the Bible

In the Bible, children are recognised as being from God. Not having a child was considered as being forgotten by the Lord.

The implication of this is that children belong to God, as Job said at the death of his children (Job 1:21). Therefore, adults bear 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.

When Moses was giving the Shemah prayer to the Israelites (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), he insisted that they should always teach their children 'the fear of the Lord' so that they may never forget his ways. This recommendation runs through the Old Testament.

In biblical accounts, the child assumes the role of perpetuating the name of the family. They were also seen as future supporters of parents in old age (Ruth 4:15).

Children deserve special treatment

The story of Jacob and Esau points to the frailty of children and the special attention they therefore deserve.

Orphans and widows are the focus of God's protection of the defenceless. God recommends the preservation of the rights of orphans, and abhors those who murder or oppress them.

Out of this caring attitude emerge all the metaphors of God taking care of Israel like a good parent takes care of their children.

God punishes severely those who mistreat orphans and widows or deprive them of their rights. One can already see in this the beginning of child rights (Deuteronomy 1:31).

The best thing that a person and a community may experience is being blessed with a child and to see them become a responsible adult in the community. Many biblical stories confirm that.

What the New Testament says

In the New Testament, Jesus comes to be born as a human child in a modest human environment. This offers the chance to see a baby grow and become an adult. The incarnation of God happens without jumping childhood, showing childhood's importance. Then, the growth of the child happens both in spirit and in body (Luke 2:40).

To consider children as full carriers of human potential does not mean that they are perfect. Passages in the New Testament recognise their frailty and immaturity. For instance, Paul asks the Church in Corinth to "stop thinking like children and be adults" (1 Corinthians 14:20).

However, rather than looking at this frailty as negative, we can see it as the chance for an adult to mould the child for a better holistic growth. So Jesus warns any adult who would mislead or harm a child (Matthew 18:6). This is a clear message about how believers should care for their children.

He goes further to say that, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me," (Luke 9:48). This is to say that molesting or mistreating children equals mistreating Jesus or negating his teachings.

The New Testament commands love, care, teachings and Christian discipline for children. The author of the Book of James recommends the care of orphans as one of three tests of the reality of our faith. 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.

Children through biblical narratives

Another view comes from the 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 how Pharaoh's daughter rescued the baby, Moses. God had a plan for everyone – even a tiny child.

Samuel was given back to the Lord by his mother, Hannah. Ministry therefore is not reserved for adults. Children also do it, maybe better because they do so with humility and without serving their own interests.

And of course, there are many other stories of children that we could look at in biblical narratives. But, let's take a look at the birth of the most special child, Jesus.

The story of Jesus' 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 too. He presented us with a model of how God takes care of children and how his disciples ought to behave towards children.

Conclusion

Throughout the Bible 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.

So today, in the DRC, any ill-treatment of children on the pretext of witchcraft accusation cannot be viewed as biblical. It is non-Christian and displays a lack of understanding of what children represent for the future of every community.

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

for the **Stop Child Witch Accusations** coalition

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