

PSALM 127:3-5 AND THE CRISIS OF CHILD POVERTY IN THE NIGER DELTA, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This article examines child poverty in the Niger Delta region in the light of Psalm 127:3-5. Psalm 127:3-5 concerns care, support and protection for children by parents, community, and the society at large. This pericope fits as a road map towards addressing child poverty in the region. Literature on child poverty in the Niger Delta has been approached from the sociological, psychological, economic and political perspectives. This study tends to dive into the area of using the Old Testament as a lens towards observing child poverty in Nigeria. It was discovered that corruption, poverty and lack of political will by stakeholders were the sustainable factors to child poverty in the Niger Delta. From Psalm 127:3-5, these sustainable factors do not portray care, support and protection for children. For the region to attain the much-needed development, the dignity of the Niger Delta children must be restored educationally, socially, and health-wise.

Keywords: *Psalm 127:3-5, God's heritage, Child Poverty, Niger -Delta.*

INTRODUCTION

In Warri, there is increasing child poverty seen in child abuse, cultism, and child neglect in the midst of abundant natural resources. The government and the oil companies in the region claim to be doing enough to curtail child poverty, but the issue has continued to escalate. This makes a theological response of paramount importance. The lens of Psalms 127:3-5 was used to observe the phenomenon of child poverty in the Niger Delta. In Psalm 127:3-5, children are the chief of the blessings of God to families, societies, and nations. They are God's heritage. Psalm 127:3-5 is a wisdom Psalm. Psalm 127:3-5 is mostly concerned with God's work in safeguarding human houses, cities, and families through children (Guzik 2018). Despite the fact that the pericope was written by Solomon, it is most likely that David, who was so proud of his smart son and whose name is introduced in the second verse as Jedidiah, or "beloved of the Lord," composed it for him (Spurgeon 2019). Psalm 127:3-5 is concerned about the place and role of children in national development. Children are one of the best examples of God's blessings, according to the Psalm. In their children, parents can find both happiness and security (Waltner 2006). Psalm 127:3-5 further reveals that children are the future leaders of any society. Children are seen as a blessing from the Lord in Jewish parlance. The Psalmist also suggested that parents should adapt their advice to their children's circumstances when instructing them (Henry, n.d.). After a survey of the pericope, it is believed that Psalm 127:3-5 will speak anew to child poverty in the Niger Delta.

The oil-producing states of Nigeria make up the Niger Delta. The states are River State, Delta State, Bayelsa, Cross River, Ondo, Abia, Imo, and Akwa Ibom. These states belong to the oil-producing region of Nigeria. Most of Nigeria's wealth is derived from these states. Almost 100 percent of Nigeria's crude oil comes from the Niger Delta region (Obialo 2019). Nigeria is reckoned amongst other nations of the world as an oil-producing state because of the oil gotten from the Niger Delta. Unfortunately, the situation there is a sad one. There is a high level of poverty going on there. There is a high rate of unemployed youth. The waters have been contaminated, making clean and affordable drinking water a mirage. There are no good roads or schools.

Literature has approached the issue of child poverty in the Niger Delta from a sociological, psychological, economic, and political perspective. Unfortunately, the Old Testament has been sidelined as if it were a disciplinary refugee. Literature has focused attention on poverty in the Niger Delta, with particular attention to infrastructural development (Amadi & Abdullah 2012). Also, attention has been paid to the poverty level in terms of lack of good housing, electricity, and drinking water in the region (Elum, Mopipi, & Henri-Ukoha 2016). These approaches to solving the problem of child poverty in the Niger Delta region have failed. Observing the Niger Delta today, children are often at the receiving end of the current problem in the Niger Delta region. Most children in the Niger Delta grow up to be criminals and bullies (Ikelegbe 2006). This is nothing far from the psychological trauma they went through when growing up in their environment. Some of these children join cult groups to restore the lost dignity that their environment subdues. This is why there is a high level of cult-related killings, arm robbery, prostitution, and extortion in the Niger Delta region. It is on this basis that the researcher offered a theological response to poverty in the Niger Delta through the lens of the Old Testament (Psalm 127:3-5). This psalm of wisdom combines two proverbs to demonstrate how people can only survive as a result of the LORD's protection, provision, and intervention (Waltner 2006).

The aim of the article is to examine child poverty in the Niger Delta in the light of Psalm 127:3-5. Specifically, this study aims to discuss the place of children in the divine arrangement of the region. The study further looks at the care for children in Jewish parlance as it relates to cultural sustainability. Furthermore, this study sketches child poverty in the Niger Delta of Nigeria and finally uses Psalm 127:3-5 to speak anew to poverty as it affects children in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. The literary analysis was used as the research methodology in the work. This method encourages research to think about how and why a poem, short story, novel, or play was written (OWL 1995). Data were collected mostly from theological materials and secondary sources.

LITERARY INTERPRETATION OF PSALM 127:3-5

Hebrew Text

ג הנה נחלת יהוה בנים שכר פרי הבטן³
 ד כחצים ביד-גבור -- כן בני הנעורים⁴
 ה אשרי הגבר -- אשר מלא את-אשפתו⁵
 מהם לא-יבשו -- כי-ידברו את-אויבים
 בשער

English Text

³ Sons are indeed a heritage from
 the LORD,
 the fruit of the womb a reward.
⁴ Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
 are the sons of one's youth.
⁵ Happy is the man who has
 his quiver full of them.
 He shall not be put to shame
 when he speaks with his enemies in the
 gate.

The first verse of Psalm 127 (vv. 1–2) introduces how God has been able to make his help physically available to mankind. It concerns how God's favour helps man work without being an exercise in futility. The psalm proclaims that without God's favour, love, and participation, man's efforts would not succeed, especially for those who do not merit

God's help because of their actions or their negative outlook. These negative actions could be said to be those of those who indulge themselves in actions that are inimical to societal growth and development.

Psalm 127:3-5 uses the word 'sons' (NRSV). This in no way indicates that they are referring to male children alone. Instead, just like in other Old Testament passages (e.g., Dt. 7:13, 28:4, 11, 18, 53; Mi. 6:7; Ps. 127:3, 132:11), they do not specify the meaning only for women but rather generally apply it to both genders. Thus, the use of sons means both male children and female children are heritage and come from God, with the same blessings to their parents from God. Granting more insight, with the true patriarchal feeling of the blessing of numerous offspring, the writer of Psalm 127:3-5 alludes to Genesis 30:2: "Heritage of the Lord" is, of course, "heritage from the Lord," i.e., a promise granted by Him, just as Israel itself was a possession He made for Himself (Ellicot n.d.).

Spurgeon (2019) quips that the pericope concerns how a family is a unit and in unity. According to Spurgeon, verses 3–5 hint at a different way of constructing a house—leaving offspring to uphold our name and family's legacy on earth. Without this, there is no reason for a guy to amass a fortune. Thus, children are the main reason that everybody in society is working harder and harder. It is in their name that the Israelite Kings provided infrastructural facilities and amenities and other sundry policies. Thus, the house is given a solid foundation so as to last for the children's children.

Good children are their father's arrows. We will find our best assistance in them when the Lord grants us offspring who are devoted, submissive, and affectionate. If we make sure from the beginning that they are oriented in the right direction, we will witness them being launched into existence to our comfort and delight (Exposition 2020). In verse 5, it is clearly explained that those who are childless lament the situation; those who are childless watch their children swiftly grow up and go, leaving the house quiet and their life lacking in charm; and those who are blessed with many kind children are generally happy. Parental blessings include their children.

THEMES IN PSALM 127:3-5

There are several themes in Psalm 127:3-5. They are here-under stated.

The place of the Child

In the context (v.3) Hebrew word בְּנִיִּים was used to show that the gender was an all-inclusive gender and not just peculiar to a single group. In the widest sense, בְּנִיִּים could mean grandson, subject, nation, quality, or condition (Biblehub 2020). Children are a gift from God to a family, society, or nation for national growth and development. They are not tools for molestation, harassment, or neglect. The Hebrew word נְהִלָּה means heritage. It was used in the context to show that children are the possession of God, and thus, they should not be toiled with or abandoned. It also shows that parents and society will give an account of their children under their care to God. The house is built for the family; thus, the family in Solomon's time was the basic unit and most important element of society (Guzik 2018), and children are an important feature for any group to be called a family.

The importance of the Child

v. 4 lays out the importance of a child to the family, the community, and the Jewish nation at large. They are כְּחֵצִים (like arrows) in hands of גִּבּוֹר (mighty). Children and the land are both gifts from God. Large families would inherit family property and carry on the family name, especially males. A parent in that society might feel safe in the defense and protection they provided because of the gift of many steadfast sons (v. 4) (Waltner 2006:617). Hebrew כְּחֵצִים also means shaft, which shows that it is shot from a bow by hand. Thus, depending on how the hand shoots and in what direction the arrow goes, it could be said that the way children are trained and taken care of determines the direction and tone that dictate the direction that society follows. It also represents the metaphor of power and effectiveness obtained from one's offspring (Brown-Driver-Briggs 2006). Hebrew גִּבּוֹר entails men of understanding, not just ordinary men. It also covers those who are helpers. It is also a quality of God, especially in light of the way he defends his people in Psalm 24:8.

Feeling of those who care for Children

V. 5 relates how those who keep children safe—the long- and short-term benefits. First, there is אִשְׁרָיִ (happiness) in the life of the person (nation), and the person (nation) will be proud to showcase himself or herself anywhere without shame. The poet noted that children make the quiver of a man full. A man, whether a hunter or a warrior, feels secure when his quiver is filled with arrows; similarly, a man is blessed in proportion to the number of children he has. This is consistent with the premise frequently expressed in the Bible and the promise frequently given, with numerous generations serving as evidence of the divine favour (Barnes 1897). Hebrew can also mean blessedness, luck, and the fortunateness of having a catalyst for advancing faster in life. Barnes lucidly observed that v. 5 discusses the comfort that a father might expect to derive from the children and the honour that, being properly trained, they would reflect on him and on the family (Barnes 1897).

CHILD POVERTY IN THE NIGER DELTA

The Niger Delta, as already noted, is rich in mineral, natural, and human resources. These oil-producing states are supposed to be supported by part of the revenues the federal and state governments get from the oil exploration in the area. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Most unfortunate of all, children are directly at the receiving end of this anomaly. First, so many children are out of school. Second, there is a high level of teenagers in cults and engaging in

inter-cult violent activities. Third, there is an increased rate of teenage pregnancy. Fourth, single parenting is very high and is still increasing. Fifth, children are at health risk in these areas. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2006), the increased political voice and influence in the Niger Delta have not affected these anomalies. Lamenting this, Geo-Jaja and Azaiki state that the Niger Delta is the only oil-producing region in the entire world with a low Human Development Index (0.545) (Geo-Jaja & Azaiki 2010).

First, many children are out of school in the Niger Delta. This is mostly due to their parents inability to pay their school fees. Furthermore, schools in the region are very expensive due to the false notion that everybody in the Niger Delta region is benefiting from the oil money. Thus, the rich tend to send their children to school, while the poor, who comprise more of the population, cannot send their children to school. Also, parents are so preoccupied with their trade and job that they have little or no time to monitor their children. They do not know if they attend school or not. They do not know if they pay their school fees or not. They do not care if the child is measuring up educationally. Children are left to survive on their own. Small wonder, most of them drop out of school without their parents knowledge. Also, most of them have been sent packing from their school due to poor academic performance. Apart from these, the salary structure of some of the workers (especially civil servants) in the Niger Delta region is nothing to write home about. The purposeful and arrogant government service remuneration system, which is referred to as take-home pay but in reality cannot take care of a primary school child in a week, is the most disturbing and mocking aspect of poverty (Ottuh 2013). The oil workers send their children to the same school that the civil servants, unemployed, and self-employed are limited to sending their children to (Ottuh 2013).

Second, cults and cult-related activities are in the Niger Delta region. Children are lured to engage in these acts due to their crave and yearning for survival. The cult murders appear to be unabated. At least five people were recently killed in a new wave of cult violence on June 12, 2019, just on that day (Nextier 2019). These groups' emergence and survival are also related to politicians' patronage, who either use them as informal security or as a means of intimidating, assassinating, or killing their rivals (Nextier 2019).

Third, there is an increased rate of teenage pregnancy. Thus, they see prostitution as the only way to survive. The high rate of brothels, hotels, and motels seen all over the Niger Delta region is not a surprise. Abortion has been the way these teenagers have sorted themselves out to escape this malaise. Preterm labor and delivery, pre- and eclampsia, antepartum hemorrhage, and fetopelvic disproportion with its associated risks of high genital fistulae are some of the short- and long-term effects (Isa & Gani 2012). These teenage girls (9–17 years old) in the Niger Delta have been lured and deceived to respond to the lust of thousands of oil workers who are sexually promiscuous, which has resulted in a rising incidence of female prostitution, teenage pregnancies, and broken homes (Salami 2015).

Fourth, single parenting is very common in the Niger Delta. This is seen in many homes where women are the ones responsible for taking care of the child. Most times, the father of the child comes to see his family once a year. This is further made possible because he has other mistresses with children for him. Thus, the child is not given a balanced education. Sometimes, these teenage girls are not married to their aggressors. Unfortunately, during the unholy union, their aggressors promise to marry them, which these teenage girls agree to without much thought. This is in a bid to escape their melancholic lifestyle.

Fifth, children have been diagnosed with so many health challenges. This is due to poisoned rivers and streams caused by oil exploration. Polluted water for drinking and domestic uses already worsens health conditions, necessitated by poor nutrition and poor health facilities for the children (Eneh 2011). Especially among rural children, there is a high level of open defecation in the Niger Delta region, brought about by the lack of lavatories. This has led to epidemic diseases such as cholera, tuberculosis, and yellow fever.

The problem of child poverty in the Niger Delta cannot be overemphasized. Thus, the factors that have continuously leveraged this anomaly in the region, although not limited to them, are discussed in the next section.

FACTORS CAUSING CHILD POVERTY IN THE NIGER DELTA

The factors sustaining child poverty in the Niger Delta cannot be underestimated. They include corruption, poverty, and a lack of political will.

Corruption: This is a major problem hampering child growth and development in the Niger Delta. The Niger Delta region has community leaders and development associations. The federal and state governments have continually given allocations to communities, but this money is never being used for its intended purpose. There is too much mismanagement of funds. For example, in 2009, the organization "Concerned Niger Deltans" paid for a newspaper ad accusing the NDDC of corruption and urging Mrs. Farida Waziri, the EFCC's then Chair, to look into the Commission because billions of naira voted to the Commission by the Federal Government and oil companies have no positive impact on the lives of the people of the Niger Delta region (Babalola 2014:118). Despite the enormous sums of money earned by oil extraction in the region, the infrastructure and conditions of living there are deteriorating (Ukong 2019). This is the reason that money for education, good roads, provision of soft loans to the poor, provision of good drinking water, and provision of jobs for parents is stolen into private pockets.

Poverty: Poverty is a serious problem in the Niger Delta. This is because oil spillage caused by oil exploration and exploitation has devastated farmlands, rivers, and fishing ponds. Thus, the source of livelihood for most parents has been tampered with. With this development, parents find it difficult to care efficiently for their children. This has forced most of their children to figure out ways to cater for themselves. Unfortunately, even the oil companies are not helping matters. Their interests have been in how to cheat, coerce, and sideline host communities in their dealings and financial engagements. Less than 30% of residents in the Delta region have access to clean water. The residents of the Delta witness the foreign oil workers' high security compounds, the wealth being extracted from all around them, and the pitiful development of what they receive in return and have received for the past 50 years (CEHRD 2004).

Lack of political will: This has optimally contributed to the sustainability of child poverty in Nigeria. The people involved—administrators, elder statesmen, and stakeholders—have no political will to ensure that the perpetuation of this act comes to an end. This is seen in the fact that some of them serve as accomplices and collect their shares from monies originally meant for development and infrastructural setup. It depends on policymakers and all stakeholders to decide to join hands to build the Niger Delta into a state-of-the-art complex. But if no one is interested in changing the way things are done there, the problem will persist.

APPLYING PSALM 127:3-5 TO CHILD POVERTY IN NIGER DELTA, NIGERIA

The import of Psalm 127:3-5 on child poverty in Nigeria cannot be underestimated. V.3 relates to how children are a gift to the nation and how a nation would continue to wallow in underdevelopment if lip service was paid to the place of the child. The poet emphasized the need for Israelites to pay attention to children and their development. In the Niger Delta, children are not treated as gifts from God. Children are meant to take on the positions of their fathers and continue the work of Providence on earth. The family is the basic unit, and children are the basic component of the family. Thus, even God made it such that national progress and development depend on how the children of a given society are treated and catered for. When it comes to their children's growth and education as a whole, parents are expected to play a significant role because they are responsible for their children's overall physical and intellectual development until they are independent and prepared to face the challenges of the society in which they live (Ceka & Murati 2016:261).

In v. 4, children were likened to a shaft that is an arrow, which goes in any direction that the shooter sends it. Thus, children can be a curse or a blessing to any society. The poet warns the ancient Jewish society to desist from handling children any way they feel like it. They warn parents against underestimating the damage that children may cause when they are allowed to do so and live under the shelter of 'survival of the fittest'. This sapiential psalm is a fruit of meditation on the reality of everyday life and explains how a family rich in children and serene leads to a city well supplied and defended, free of constant worry and insecurity (Benedict XVI 2005). The father who had children when he was young will not only be able to witness them in all of their vitality, but they will also provide for him as he ages. So that he can face the future with confidence, he has transformed into a warrior, armed with those piercing, triumphant "arrows" that are his sons (Benedict XVI, 2005). Relating it to the Niger Delta context, the children in this region will support the old ones when they retire or are unable to contribute their quota to society. The children in the Niger Delta region can bring about a region without security challenges. They dictate the space for arm robbery, kidnapping, and prostitution in tomorrow's Niger Delta region. When those at the helm of affairs fail to take care of and provide a livelihood for the children, there is bound to be chaos in the society.

In v. 5, it is revealed that a man with children is secure. Shame is far from him. The poet describes the man with children as one blessed with prosperity. Thus, man lives happily (Haydock, 1859). For a child to contribute very much to the growth of Israelite society, the efforts of everyone (Feister 2005)—the father, mother, and community—must be involved. Keil and Delitzsch (1889:np) sketch that

. . . one was obligated to have them not merely at hand, but in the hand (בַּיָּד), in order to be able to discharge them and defend one's self. What a treasure, in such a time when it was needful to be constantly ready for fighting, defensive or offensive, was that which youthful sons afforded to the elderly father and weaker members of the family! Happy is the man - the poet exclaims - who has his quiver, i.e., his house, full of such arrows, in order to be able to deal out to the enemies as many arrows as may be needed.

The way a child is trained is the way he will grow. If he is trained to be a deviant, he grows to be one. In the long run, the family, society, community, nation, and even the world suffer from this. In the Niger Delta region, children are treated as additional stressors. Parents cared little for the child's wellbeing. The society cares little about how the child could survive. Policymakers, community heads, stakeholders, and other concerned citizens have paid little attention to the worsening rate of child poverty in the Niger Delta. On this note, this article makes the following resolutions in the next section:

RECOMMENDATIONS

The problem of child poverty could be managed in the following ways:

1. Both genders should be given equal attention in education and health care needs, among others. The use of sons in Psalm 127:3-5 indicates that both genders are from God and should be given the care and development they need.

- This could be done through government sponsorship of the less privileged, the building of more affordable schools, the employment of more qualified teachers, and the enactment of laws to protect the rights of the child.
2. The government should engage these oil companies working in the region and advise them on how best they can reduce the health risks for children in the region. At least a better and prompter approach should be taken against cases of oil leakage, gas flaring, and other water and air pollution.
 3. Parents, community leaders, and the government of this region should find ways of punishing pedophiles that derive gains from deceiving these poor teenage girls. It is advisable that anyone caught be sentenced to a minimum of ten years in prison.
 4. Parents should develop more time to spend with their children. This includes closer monitoring of education and peer groups.
 5. All concerned should see that the care for children portends how far society will go and what it will attain in its quest for development.
 6. Civil society organizations, community-based organizations, non-governmental organizations, and faith-based organizations should see the care, protection, defense, and development of children in the Niger Delta region as a prerogative and a solid step towards managing child poverty in the Niger Delta.

CONCLUSION

Child poverty is caused by corruption, poverty, and a lack of political will by parents, stakeholders, community leaders, and the government in the Niger Delta region. Corruption is a crime against the next generation; it steals opportunities and robs children from the region of their unrealized potential, which makes it the main cause of the continued poverty of children and their families throughout the Niger Delta region. This has resulted in a high level of illiteracy, increased criminality, cultism, prostitution, and overall underdevelopment in the Niger Delta region. Psalm 127:3-5 calls on all to see children as a gift from God that must be accorded the same rights and privileges as other members of the community. Children in the pericope were presented as future leaders of any nation. Thus, it behoves on the people and government of the Niger Delta to put all hands on deck to ensure that children are given their rightful place and opportunities in the scheme of things in the region. Most often, the poverty of a nation is a result of the nation's diminishing family values.

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