

# “Like Olive Shoots”: Insight into the Secret of a Happy Family in Psalm 128

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## Abstract

Beset by all kinds of ideologies that divest it of its divinely endowed values, family in our contemporary society suffers greatly from those who purport to have a better way of fulfilling its divine mandate. All who understand the importance of family are greatly concerned at the overt derailment that has proved detrimental to human society. The Sacred Scripture offers us varied insights into solving the problem in which we find ourselves. Psalm 128 chosen for this paper is one of those texts in the Bible that reflects on family and its value in human society. As a Wisdom Psalm and didactic in nature, the poem presents to its readers what family is in dire need of at this time. The meaning of this Psalm is coded in its rich poetic techniques and similes that the paper endeavours to explain in its immediate context as a Song of Ascents and in the contexts of other Wisdom texts of the Old Testament. Its theological thrust, the fear of God, which is introduced at the beginning and iterated in various phrases within the Psalm comes out clearly as messages the Psalm offers to worrisomely deformed image of family in our time.

## Keywords

Family, Psalm 128, Wisdom Psalms, Fear of God, Retribution, Vine

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## 1. Introduction

Perplexed would anyone, who truly understands the sacredness of marriage as the oldest divinely instituted reality, be at the face of the perverting situation of the surging concepts of human family in our society today. Who would not be startled by the many new forms of constituting a family? Well-meaning individuals of varied religious professions as well as those who claim to profess nothing marvel at how human beings themselves are steadily eroding and desecrating marriage. Ubiquity and frequency of divorce seems to have degenerated into unnatural and deplorable form of marriage of both partners of same sex. Some resort to wilful and premeditated

single parenting whereby an individual opt to rear children exclusively and outside marriage. One also finds some who have agreed to live together but are devoid of that divine love that ought to bind the couple together and of which the Creator intended in his symbolic gesture of making the primordial parents of humankind share common substance (Genesis 2:21-24). A *Preparatory Document* of the Third Extraordinary Synod of Catholic Bishops articulates these unusual phenomena which deviate from God's plan for human family in these words:

Concerns which were unheard of until a few years ago have arisen today as a result of different situations, from the widespread practice of cohabitation, which does not lead to marriage, and sometimes even excludes the idea of it, to same-sex unions between persons, who are, not infrequently, permitted to adopt children (*Synod of Bishops, 2013: 1*).

Repercussions of these ills stare at all of us in the face and engender diverse social anomalies because nature has been distorted and divine plan apparently thwarted. Family as the nucleus of the society has been adversely punctured and this action rebounds on all its aspects. Deformed families which we experience today contribute immensely to our social ills. Terrorism of various shades and shapes and multifaceted corruptions in all sectors of life are invariably upshot of unhealthy family and clear evidence of lapses in parenting skills. Therefore, it is timely that the Catholic Church is reflecting, in a twofold Synod (Extraordinary and Ordinary in 2014 and 2015 respectively), captioned "Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization", on the indispensable place and role of family in our contemporary society. With this exercise, the Church intends to continue to play her prophetic role in re-directing human race aright whenever there is growing concern as we are experiencing today.

The Church's foremost working tool is the deposit of her faith, Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, for both contain the divine plan for all of us and transmit what God has revealed about himself. Marriage in a lawfully constituted family is prominent in this repertoire of God's words. The two accounts of creation at the beginning of the Book of Genesis reveal God's plan on this. Human beings, created as male and female (Genesis 1:27), participate in perpetuating and preservation of creation (Genesis 1:28). Procreation of human beings is intended in an indissoluble union between a man and a woman. This was affirmed by man in these words: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2:23), and the concluding explicatory observation of the narrator: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (*New Revised Standard Version, 1993; Genesis 2:24*). Jesus in his teaching sealed and confirmed this Old Testament teaching: "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matthew 19:6). What God joins together, as we read in the Bible, is one man and one woman. The grace that accompanies the indissolubility of this union is intrinsic in the divine act of joining them. It rests on those bound by this marriage bond to recognise this grace and uphold it, bearing in mind that "the family is a divine institution that stands at the foundation of life of the human person as the prototype of every social order" (*Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004: 211*).

Psalm 128 chosen for this study succinctly articulates in a clearly Wisdom language the status quo of an ideal family that has recognised the inherent divine gift in their midst and has set it aglow in the life of all its members. This text features in the annual liturgical Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph and as a key prayer in the celebration of marriage. The choice of Psalm 128 in this contribution has been inspired by its liturgical use and its teaching on ideal family that proffers solution to the general concern many express about the state of family in our society today. The paper focuses on the study of this Biblical text, which is a poem and a Wisdom text, with the intention to elicit from it features of the ideal family depicted therein.

## 2. The Text of Psalm 128

- 1 A Song of Ascents Happy is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways.
  - 2 You shall indeed eat the fruit of the labour of your hands; happy are you and it shall go well with you.
  - 3 Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the inner part of your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table.
  - 4 Thus shall the man be blessed, who fears the Lord.
  - 5 May the Lord bless you from Zion; may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life.
  - 6 May you see your children's children.
- Peace be upon Jerusalem!

The Hebrew text of Psalm 128 does not manifest outstanding textual issues when read with some ancient versions. In verse 2, for instance, what has been identified as an emphatic (Briggs, 1986) *kî* is omitted in the Septuagint. Actually, acting as an adverb here, this particle accentuates the verb (*tô'kêl*) that follows it. The sense of the phrase could read: you will *certainly* eat the labour (“produce of” intended) of your hands. This adverbial nuance strengthens the meaning of the blissful state of the God-fearing person carefully coded in the phrase *'ašrê* (“happy is...”) in verse 1. Again in verse 2 the rare expression *'ašrêkâ* with pronominal suffix of the second person masculine singular on *'ašrê* occurs again in Deuteronomy 33:29 where it is predicated of the People of Israel: “Happy are you, O Israel!” (cf. also Isaiah 32:20 and Qohelet 10:17). In Psalm 128:2, its apposition, *w'êtôb lāk* “it shall go well with you”, embodies the meaning of *'ašrêkâ*. Another word that needs attention in verse 3 of our Psalm is *š'tilê*, masculine plural construct of *šātil* which occurs only here in the entire Hebrew Bible (Brown, 1979) with the meaning “transplanted shoot or slip”. It is construed in Psalm 128 with olive, hence the rendition “olive shoots” as a simile for the children of the God-fearer depicted in our text. Again *kî* in verse 4 is omitted in a good number of Hebrew manuscripts, Septuagint, Syriac and in St. Jerome’s translation; it is also observed that many modern translations seem not to take notice of it. Could this particle have the same emphatic function as in verse 2? The answer seems affirmative here even though the phrase, *hinnēh kî* in our text is another *hapax legomenon*. It has been observed that *kî* “is used sometimes with adverbs and interjections to add force or distinctiveness to the affirmation which follows” (Brown, 1979: 472). Basing on its supposed emphatic value in verse 4, *hinnēh kî* heightens the divine blessing on the God-fearer of our text: he shall be surely blessed. Subtle as the points of emphasis might appear, the writer of our poem has its focus with which readers could come to grips in a close look at its structure.

A cursory reading of Psalm 128 will not fail to observe an alternation between parts of the text that are constructed in third person masculine singular (verses 1 and 4) and parts that that in second person masculine singular (verses 2 - 3 and 5 - 6). In verse 1, the use of the participles *yārēh* (“he who fears *God*”) and *hōlēk* (“he who walks”) adds vividness to the declaration expressed by *'ašrê* (“happy is...”) at the beginning of the text. It is an alternation between declaration and direct address. Some scholars deduce from this the presence of a soloist and a choir, with priestly blessing in verses 5 - 6 (Ravasi, 1997; Amzallag & Avriel, 2010). It is instructive to note the repetition of the phrase *y'ērē' YHWH* (“who fears the Lord”) in verses 1 and 4 which are the declarative parts of the Psalm.

The first declaration in verses 1 is followed by the contents of what is declared, stated in verses 2 - 3. A closer reading of these contents perceives more segments for, although both are linked by their common feature as explanation of the blessedness proclaimed in verse 1, they exhibit levels of blessings. Thus, verse 2 can be differentiated from verse 3 in their specific contents. Verse 2 focuses on human labour, and using a metonym—a figure of speech by which one name or noun is used instead of another, to which it stands in a certain relation—(Bullinger, 2003), the poet wishes that the God-fearer will live to enjoy the fruit of his labour; while in verse 3 the poet reflects on how the blessing extends to the family of this righteous person. In fact, these two verses can be described as *intra* when compared with the second major segment of the poem. It is *intra* because it concentrates on the inner life of the ideal righteous person. This is confirmed by the phrase *b'yark'êtê bêtēkâ* “in the innermost part of your house”, or simply “within your house”. One also observes the word, *'ašrê* (“happy is...”), that links the declarative statement of verse 1 and verses 2 - 3.

In the same manner, the second declaration (cf. verse 4) is made explicit by its proper contents in verses 5 - 6. A similar format found in verses 1 - 3 occurs in this second part of the song. The word that links the declaration in verse 4 to verses 5 - 6 is the root *brk*, used as *divine passive* (*y'borak* “he will be blessed”) in verse 4, and is clarified in verse 5 where the active form (*y'bārek'kâ*) of this root is used and accompanied immediately by its subject (YHWH); we can translate this (*y'bārek'kâ*) as “may the Lord bless you”. In verses 5 - 6, one finds a common characteristic of all the Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120 - 134), which is *anadiplosis*, also called *terrace pattern*. It is reduplication, the beginning of a sentence, line or clause with the concluding, or any prominent word of the one preceding (Watson, 1995). The word used for this *anadiplosis* in verses 5 - 6 is *ûr'ēh* (“may you see...”) at the second stich of verse 5 and the first of verse 6. This identified literary style is also *anaphora* for the repetition of the phrase occurs at the beginning of the two consecutive lines (Bullinger, 2003). Unlike verses 1 - 3 that is *intra*, verses 4 - 6 are *extra*. It is on blessing from outside the house of the righteous person, who fears YHWH. The blessing he experiences in the innermost part of his house extends to the wider society of which his house is micro-society. This second part of the Psalm takes up again some of the key words of the first part: *bānēkâ* “your children” and *tôb* “prosperity”. With this, the Psalm can be divided into two major parts:

verses 1 - 3 and verses 4 - 6 (Ravasi, 1997; Girard, 1994). There are, however, some (*The New Revised Standard Version*, 1993; Terrien, 2003) who perceive a tripartite structure in Psalm 128; that is, verses 1 - 2; 3 - 4; 5 - 6).

The literary genre of Psalm 128 is clearly marked by the first word, 'ašrê (“happy is...”), that begins it; therefore, it is generally categorised as a Wisdom Psalm, or Psalm influenced by Wisdom, as some prefer to call it (Murphy 2002). This word, 'ašrê (“happy is...”), is a characteristic of Old Testament Wisdom Literature, whose aim is pedagogical, to teach from human experiences (Crenshaw, 1998). Each of the Old Testament Wisdom writings has a specific message to convey. They “deal with daily human experience in the good world created by God” (Murphy, 2002: 1). What could be the goal of the author of Ps 128? The initial phrase of this Psalm gives its readers an interpretative clue as to its meaning. One who fears the Lord and walks in his ways is proclaimed happy. The rest of the text explores the reason behind this interjection. Other features of Wisdom writings in our Psalm include the fear of the Lord; many children as blessing from God; use of similes; illustrations from nature; rewards and retributions (Bullock, 2001). Actually, what Wisdom Psalms and Old Testament Wisdom Books have in common is mostly the opposition between pious and godless, an opposition seen in many parts of the Book of Proverbs (Westermann, 1989). Psalm 128 subtly makes this comparison, even without employing any of the common Hebrew words that depict the godless.

Besides being a Wisdom Poem, Psalm 128, as we can read from its superscription, *šîr hamma'âlôt* (A Song of Ascents), is a Pilgrimage Psalm in the collection of Psalms 120 - 134. With the exception of Psalm 132 these Psalms are short. They are known for their varied expressions of trust in God and belief in Jerusalem as the source of blessings and symbol of national unity. One of the characteristics of Pilgrimage Psalms is their focus on the family, its agricultural pursuits, hopes and joys (Zenger, 2005). Other features of this group of Psalms include courage, optimism, homely similes, and Aramaisms (Goulder, 1997). Psalm 128 shares these features with other Psalms in this group as it combines the traits of Songs of Ascents and Wisdom Literature. Other Songs of Ascents like Psalm 127 and 133 have also been identified as Wisdom Poems (Hermann & Begrich, 1998; Obiorah, 2010; Obiorah, 2011). In fact, there is a well calculated concatenation between Psalms 127 and 128; both share some themes in common, especially that children are a gift from God and a reward for good deeds. One notes in particular the phrase, 'ašrê (“happy is...”) in both texts. “The placement of Psalm 128 after Psalm 127 is enlightening. Beginning where Psalm 127 ends (“happiness”), Psalm 128 shares much with its predecessor, including its four emphases (household, city, labor, and children), terms (“eat”, “fruit”), and the focus on reward (Segal, 2012). It has also been argued that there is a cumulative course movement to which each of the Pilgrimage Songs contributes (Mannati, 1979). According to this, Psalms 128 - 129 respectively contribute blessing and curse to this course movement, and it is true of Psalm 128 for it is all about blessing and happiness of one who fears the Lord.

A related question often asked when reflecting on the genre of a text like ours is about the life situation that engendered its composition. There are some who surmise that it was performed in the worship service with priests and singers, particularly as pilgrims ascended the Jerusalem Temple (Hermann & Begrich, 1998). This could be true of Psalm 128 from its genre as a Song of Ascents and also from its alternating structure described above. This notwithstanding, its sapiential character could make it defy any specific *Sitz im Leben* for Wisdom sayings transcend boundaries and are relevant at all times.

### 3. Reading Psalm 128 Closely

Every Biblical text bears its interpretative value in conjunction with other texts of the Bible. One arrives at their integral meaning when studied in the entire context of the Divine Revelation. Psalm 128 shares its text and contents with some other traditions in the Bible. Firstly, it is a Wisdom poem with the characteristic features of Old Testament sapiential and didactic writings. Secondly, it belongs to the group of Songs of Ascents which have their distinctive marks. Thirdly, our Psalm contains prominent elements of Old Testament traditions on family and its expectations. Fourthly, Old Testament teaching on retribution is also represented in our text. With these sketched out milieux and basing on its interrelated bipartite structure seen above, we begin our study of the text of Psalm 128 with much emphasis on what it conveys about family. The first part (verses 1 - 3) of Psalm 128 focuses on the blessing of the family and happiness of the God-fearer; while the second part (verses 4 - 5) is on how this household blessing relates outside. The hinge that holds both together is fear of the Lord, which is presented in the text as a prerequisite for this divine gift.

### 3.1. Blessing within the Family (Verses 1 - 3)

When *'ašrê* (“happy is...”) is predicated of an individual, often in Wisdom writings like Psalm 128, the content of the blessing, that is, what merited such proclamation of blessedness, is proposed to all to emulate. This means that the person of whom the proclamation is made has achieved concrete act that necessitated the recognition. The use of *'ašrê* (“happy is...”) is very frequent in the Psalter; occurring about twenty-six times out of forty-five times it appears in the Hebrew Bible. Its significance, especially in the Psalter is that it pronounces happiness on someone or some group of individuals for their fortunate state of life and sometimes for an already realised situation in life which very often has to do with their right relationship with God. The proclamation of *'ašrê* (“happy is...”) on persons also functions as an implicit exhortation, for in proclaiming blessedness on persons, the speaker indirectly recommends the good actions that merit for the bearers of *'ašrê* (“happy is...”) their fortunate life (Obiorah, 2004).

In the first part of Psalm 128 (verses 1 - 3), as well as in the second part (verses 5 - 6), the act that deserve this recognition and exhortation is stated in participial phrases, adjacent to each other in almost a distich synonymous parallelism: *kol-y<sup>e</sup>rē* *YHWH* “everyone who fear the Lord” and explained in the next stich as *hahōlēk bidrākāw* “who walks in his ways”. It belongs to *traditional* Wisdom (Flores, 2013; Abulad, 2013). The fact that the two verbs in these stichs are constructed as participles means that the person being described here bears these actions as his habit. His life is to fear the Lord which also means to walk in the ways of the Lord. Furthermore, there is sense of an aphorism in this strophe; it is a general dictum that happiness is the lot of anyone who fears the Lord. What does it mean to fear the Lord? In Psalm 112:1, the author explains it as delighting in the commandments of the Lord; that is, keeping his commandments: “Happy are those who fear the Lord, who greatly delight in his commandments” (Psalm 112:1). The expression “Fear of the Lord” in Psalm 128 is another sapiential tag besides the proclamation of happiness at its inception. It is a frequent phrase in Old Testament Wisdom Literature particularly in the axiom: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom” (Proverbs 1:7). The aspect that is emphasized in Psalm 128 is fear of God as devotion to Torah (Fuhs, 1990), for “ways” of the Lord, as we read in our text, is a synonym of Torah. “Strict adherence to Yahweh and his will is the issue, in accordance with the life and theology of the period” (Gerstenberger, 2001: 349).

Verses 2 - 3 of Psalm 128 state the reward of such fundamental option in a person; it is a decision that is vital in the entire life of the righteous. Psalm 128 “celebrates the domestic happiness granted to the upright, in accordance with the teaching of the sages on earthly retribution” (*The New Jerusalem Bible*, 1990: 947). The Reward for righteous deed or retribution could be understood in the sense that Psalm 1 has presented it. The simile for the God-fearer in this portrays his fate. Whoever enters into the realm of the divine becomes like all those within it. The tree planted by the riverside, according to Psalm 1, cannot but be like all other trees in this ambient; they are ever green.

In verse 2 the first aspect of this retribution is that the righteous person will be able to enjoy the fruit of his labour, for it is the lot of those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways. Those who keep the commandments of the Lord have their reward beginning here on earth and they will live to see it realised in their lifetime. This is part of the blessing for obedience as delineated in Deuteronomy 28:11-14. Psalm 128:2b uses a metonym to accentuate this when it employs the noun *y<sup>e</sup>g<sup>a</sup>* which primarily means “labour”. Furthermore the presence of emphatic *kî*, translated as “certainly” lays more emphasis on this reward that the righteous person will inevitably obtain because he has made a fundamental option to walk in God’s ways. “Walking in the ways of the Lord is receptivity to the blessing of the Lord” (Mays, 1994: 404). The second stich of verse 2 elucidates what the first expresses as eating the labour of one’s hands. It means, according to this stich, to be happy, *'ašrēkā*, and more especially in the phrase *w<sup>e</sup>tōb lāk* translated by some as “it shall go well with you” (cf. *The New Revised Standard Version*, 1993); literally, “happiness shall be yours”. In other words, both expressions—*'ašrēkā* and *w<sup>e</sup>tōb lāk*—are further emphases on the initial *'ašrê* (“happy is...”) at the beginning of the Psalm.

The righteous, *y<sup>e</sup>rē* *YHWH* (“who fears the Lord”), has his reward in his domestic life, in the recess of his house. The poet outlines this in a four stich strophe of verse 3 beginning first with the wife and then the children, presenting this family as an ideal. The wife is likened to a vine, *gēpen*, which bears fruit, *pōrīyāh*. One notes the unusual construct form *'eš<sup>e</sup>kā* instead of *'iš<sup>e</sup>kā* of *'iššāh* (wife); this form is another *hapax legomenon* in the text. She is not merely a vine but vine that is fruitful. We have here a symbol derived from the agricultural life of the people. Vine like many other trees and crops in the Bible are symbolic of the real life of the psalmists’ contemporary situations.

Vine is one of the seven species with which the land of Israel is blessed (Deuteronomy 8:8). It is a symbol of the People of Israel. In Psalm 80:8-13, for instance, Israel is a vine that God brought out of Egypt, drove out the nations because of his people, planted it and cared for it. Isaiah 5 employs the symbol of vineyard to describe God's unconditional love for his people, in spite of their unfaithfulness. "Theologically speaking, the grapevine, its fruit, and the luxuries that it produces, such as grape juice, grape honey, and grape cakes (often with other typical products), are viewed positively as visible signs of the blessing of Yahweh and of the fruitfulness he brought about in the land Israel inhabited" (Hentschke, 1997: 58-59). Generally in the ancient Near East a wife is often described as a vineyard in which a man plants seeds that bring forth children (Vamosh, 2007). Vine symbolises the vitality and beauty of the wife who achieves a close and harmonious relationship with her numerous children who are depicted as olive shoots (Rogerson & McKay, 1977).

The wife of the righteous man is like vine filled with its fruits in the innermost parts, *y<sup>e</sup>rēkā*, of his house. The noun *y<sup>e</sup>rēkā* used in the plural indicates here the intimacy that exists in the family; this is the fertile soil that makes the woman what she is, for she could not have been fruitful in a chaotic condition. The fruitfulness of the woman calls to mind the ode to a capable wife in Proverbs 31:10-31, which is "a paean of praise to women's success at what we now call "multi-tasking" essential to the survival of the biblical household" (Vamosh, 2007: 6). From the text of Proverbs 31:10-31, particularly verse 20, one also perceives that the happiness of the family is also due to the "fruitfulness" of the wife. For the author of Psalm 128, this is part of the blessings of the righteous, who fears God and walks in his ways. He begins to enjoy his reward even from this world. An aspect of this reward is the gift of a fruitful wife. It is also observed that in giving their daughter in marriage, parents and relatives in their matrimonial blessings wish that the bride be fruitful. Thus, Rebecca's relatives prayed for her in these words: "May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads" (Genesis 24:60).

Using another symbol in form of a simile, the psalmist expatiates further on the joy of the family of the God-fearer in our Psalm. The children of this righteous person are like tender and healthy saplings in his house, for "it is a universally valid truth that blessing dwells only in a house in which the fear of God reigns and provides the inner strength and unity of the members" (Weiser, 1962: 769). The children in such a happy home are like *š<sup>e</sup>tilē zētīm* "shoots of olive tree" (It is not "branches of olive" as we read in some translations, especially in our liturgy); in other words, they are potential full-fledged olive trees with all the rich features of this symbolic Biblical plant. "Offshoots that surround an olive tree grow both from the roots and the trunk of the tree" (Hareuveni, 1989: 83). Olive tree, *zayit*, is one of the seven species with which the land of Israel is blessed (Deuteronomy 8:8). It is ever-green even when other trees wither and exfoliate in extremely harsh weather. Thus the righteous who takes refuge in God's house compares himself to olive tree in these words: "I am like a green olive tree in the house of God" (Psalm 52:8). Olive is known for its longevity; it is believed that olive can reach the life span of about one thousand years. Its tree radiates with beauty, especially when it is laden with fruit: "A green olive tree, fair with goodly fruit" (Jeremiah 11:16). The shoots of olive sprout from its roots and protect the trunk, and, if it is cut down, they ensure its continued existence (Feliks, 1996). "The young green olive trees in the comparison symbolize the vital strength of the growing children. It is an idyllic picture that the psalmist paints here. He wants to describe the rich blessing of the family in an inner joy (Kraus, 1993). All these features of olive are understood in the simile that portrays the children of the righteous.

The rich symbol of shoots of olive is completed in the phrase that follows it: *sābīb l<sup>e</sup>šulhānekā* "around your table". In this text, table is reminiscent of Psalm 23:5 and Proverbs 9:1-2 as well as the fruit of one's labour mentioned in verse 2 of Psalm 128. The members of the family of the righteous stay together around one table. We have here a sign of communion, peace and harmony. The picture of the children around the table carefully concludes the proclamation of blessings on this righteous person which begins with his being able to eat the fruit of his labour (cf. verse 2). This obvious inclusion further confirms the bipartite structure of the Psalm into verses 1 - 3 and verses 4 - 5. In the first part of the text, the blessings of the righteous are expressed by botanical similes of vine and olive tree which are part of the staple products of Palestine. The author of Psalm 128 is an optimistic believer in the principle of God's retribution (Van Niekerk, 1995). God generously rewards all who trust in him for he is nobody's debtor (Allen, 2002).

### 3.2 Divine Blessing from Family to the Society (vv. 4 - 6)

This second segment of Psalm 128 concentrates on the blessing of the righteous person by the Lord and in a place where he shares in common with other people; in this case, it is Zion also called Jerusalem. The righteous

in our text still retains his designation as “he who fears the Lord”. There is, indeed, some continuity in the two parts of the Psalm, because the exclamatory phrase introduced by *hinnēh kī kēn y<sup>e</sup>borak gāber* “thus indeed shall the man be blessed” (verse 4) links the preceding verses 1 - 3 to this second part. The righteous who fears the Lord is proclaimed happy in the first part because of the fundamental option he had made to adhere to God’s ways. He is richly blessed by a good fruitful and harmonious family, bestowed on him as a reward of his good life. Similar blessings are enunciated in the second part introduced with some emphatic particles that are probably employed here to accentuate the supposedly priestly blessings that follow in a cultic setting.

There are considerable similarities between the contents of verses 4 - 6 and the seven elements of Old Testament formula of blessings (Ravasi, 1997). First, YHWH is the source of blessings; he blesses from Zion where he dwells; this forms the background of the theology of Zion Songs in the Psalter (cf. Psalms 46, 48, 76, 84, 87 and 122). Psalm 128 clearly specifies this when it says in verse 5a *y<sup>e</sup>bārekēkā YHWH miššyôn* “may the Lord bless you from Zion”. Second, the first content of blessing is always communitarian; it concerns the common good. It inserts the person into the society in which the person belongs. In the same way, the first content of the divine blessing invoked on the righteous of our Psalm is stated in verse 5b as *ʔūb y<sup>e</sup>rūšālam* “prosperity of Jerusalem”. The same is wished on his behalf in the first part of the Psalm. His personal prosperity or wellbeing has value when understood in the context of the common good. Third, blessing is not partially given; it involves the whole life of a person: *kol y<sup>e</sup>mē hayyēkā* “all the days of your life” (verse 5c). The personal history of the faithful and that of the community are under God’s paternal care. Fourth, the second content of blessing is family and personal fertility, gift of children to the person and his family: *ʔr<sup>e</sup> ʔh-bānīm l<sup>e</sup>bānēkā* “may you see your children’s children”. Besides this meaning, it is worth noting that to know one’s grand children is a sign of longevity (Proverbs 17:6; cf. Genesis 50:23; Job 42:16). Fifth, blessing is not vague and intangible; rather, it is a lived experience; thus the use of the verb of experience *r<sup>h</sup>* “to see, experience”. Sixth, blessing is also presented as peace, *šālôm*, which can be used as a final liturgical greeting. It has social, spiritual, corporal and messianic dimensions. All these aspects of *šālôm* qualify Psalm 128 its position among the Songs of Ascents. Seventh, the backdrop of blessings, particularly in Psalm 128 is that of retribution. One’s faithfulness to God attracts divine blessing. He fears YHWH and walks in his ways and he is in turn rewarded for this.

These seven elements of blessings elicited from Psalm 128 have social dimension which has its root in personal disposition towards God. There is a pendular movement in this because a person does not live in isolation; he lives his faithfulness to God in a society and the society also contributes to this personal endeavour. “Thus the destiny of the Holy City and the personal fate of the believer are intimately twisted together: an unmistakable sign of early Jewish theological thinking” (Gerstenberger, 2001: 351). The effect of the personal life of an individual is manifested in all aspects of his life, represented in Psalm 128 as one’s labour and family life. This personal life is the *raison d’être* for the beatitude that proclaims in our Psalm the happiness of family life in the context of Jerusalem and of Israel (Alonso Schökel & Carniti, 1993). Again, “the final blessing (verses 5 - 6) is, however, broader in scope, and suggests that the prosperity of the nation itself rests on the foundation of a sound family life” (Sabourin, 1974: 385).

The botanic symbols of vine and olive typifying the mother and the children respectively in Psalm 128 are both symbols of the People of Israel. This explanation clarifies further the relationship between family and society. In fact, in Ezekiel 19:10, Israel’s nation is called mother and symbolised as vine: “Your mother was like a vine in a vineyard transplanted by the water, fruitful and full of branches from abundant water”. Similar image is used to describe the mother in the family of the YHWH fearer in Psalm 128. The symbol of olive for the children of the righteous seen in Psalm 128 is also attributed to Israel in Jeremiah 11:16 (cf. Isaiah 17:6). Therefore, the image of mother/sons of the first part of our Psalm is reproduced in the second part in that of Jerusalem (often understood as mother in the Old Testament) and Israel as son. “The mother image melds into Zion/Jerusalem (feminine terms) and the ‘children’ into the People of Israel” (Segal, 2012). Like many other Songs of Zion, Psalm 128 shows dominant movement toward the centre which is Zion and Jerusalem, with city and the house as additional such images of the centre. “The blessing enjoyed by the family will overflow into the general prosperity of Jerusalem and Israel” (Rogerson & McKay, 1977: 128); for the family is “an invaluable asset, the natural setting in which life grows and develops and a school of humanity, love and hope for society” (Synod of Bishops, 2014: 31). All these make the link between family and nation in the two segments of Psalm 128 more realistic and disproves the argument of some who aver that the second part of this Psalm is a mere gloss that renders it more appropriate for public use (Briggs, 1986).

#### 4. Dialectic on “Fear of the Lord” in Psalm 128 and Contemporary Theories on Family

Fear of the Lord entails unreserved obedience, spurred on by faith, to all aspects of God’s law, without any exception. In Psalm 128, happiness is proclaimed on the person who fears the Lord. Part of his reward is peace and unity in his house. Although these are divine and unconditional gifts, human beings dispose themselves for them. Psalm 128 describes this disposition as fear of the Lord, explained in another way as walking in the ways of the Lord. This is a key concept in this Psalm for it first links the two parts of the Psalm and makes a precise transition from the first part to the second. “God’s blessing in the family is based on the fear of the Lord. Thus, a satisfying home is based upon the fear of the Lord” (Cole, 2013).

The divine mandate, the first given to humankind, in Genesis 1:28 “be fruitful and multiple, and fill the earth and subdue it”, in the first account of creation, is complemented or rather explained in the second account (cf. Genesis 2:24): “Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh”. The complementarity in these two texts lies in the fact that the fulfilment of the first command in Genesis 1:28 should be in an established institution alluded to in Genesis 2:24. It implies that this procreation intended in the divine mandate should be between a man and a woman joined by lawful bond of marriage. “In creating man and woman, God instituted the human family and endowed it with its fundamental constitutions” (*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994: 2203). A close reading of Genesis 2:24 in its immediate context reveals that this union of a man and a woman is indissoluble. This is deducible from the aetiological story succinctly narrated in the creation of our primordial parents in Genesis 2. Jesus, referring to this in Matthew 19:1-9, conveys his uncompromising assertion of the sacredness and indissolubility of marriage: “So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matthew 19:6). Jesus clarifies or puts aright the use of writ of dismissal permitted by the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 24:1), which Jesus’ interlocutors cite to contend their point.

Jesus’ argument follows the law of creation: God created male and female and gave them the command of procreation (Genesis 1:28). In Genesis 2, creation of our first parents is creation of a couple, male and female. From these, the institution and nature of human family is lucidly stated. The seed of God’s design for human family has been sown and the Creator expects us to follow it duly in fulfilling his mandate of procreation. The sin of our first parents must have blurred human view from perceiving clearly this divine intention, like in many other natural and divine laws. Family, without confusing extended family system practised in some parts of the world, should consist of a man and a woman, and children as God’s blessing to their union. Similarly, procreation should be according to the order established by the Creator: male and female in a lawful union. This obviously excludes polygamy, which “is a radical denial of God’s original plan” (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004: 217), “because it is contrary to the equal personal dignity of men and women who in matrimony give themselves with a love that is total and therefore unique and exclusive” (John Paul II, 1982: 19). Anyone who infringes on this law, that is, the union of one man and one woman violates the Creator’s plan for human family, which Jesus convincingly affirmed.

Unfortunately, this natural and divine order of procreation and family values has been contravened to an alarming point in our contemporary society. All forms of ideologies that militate against family and procreation today contradict both the divine and natural law. Undue clamour in favour of *same-sex* union by some individuals, groups and states impels many people to raise an eyebrow at the motive of the enthusiasm of those who defend such unnatural way of forming a human family. It is first against natural law and far from God’s design for marriage; the Creator intended the human family to be between a man and a woman. It would be a great challenge to humanity today to justify same-sex union; the growing number of those involved in it makes it an enormous concern in the context of evangelisation. The ideal family presented in Psalm 128 reflects the primordial design of God for human family. It is between the two complementary genders created by God: “male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). It is one man and one woman that are joined together in conjugal love, according to God’s plan (Genesis 2:24), and not two persons of the same sex.

The phenomenon of *single mothers or fathers*, individuals, who want to have children outside wedlock abounds. Some young women find means of either bearing their own children by engaging in temporary inordinate relationship that cease as soon as they achieve their aim; some illegally adopt children. In the same way, some men do the same to evade forming their own families which they consider wearisome or unfashionable. It is all about the culture of false freedom, which has its repercussions on the society. In Psalm 128 family formed



according to God's plan for human beings is a micro-society or replica of society. "By synecdoche, the family (Psalm, 128:3-4) stands for the city (Psalm, 128:5), which in turn stands for the nation (Psalm 128:6)" (Miller, n.d.). This is embedded in the use of the same symbol for the members of this family and the larger society of the People of Israel.

Closely related to the above are many cases of *cohabitation*. A man and a woman decide to live together without any form of formal and approved agreement. Often they lack, mutual love, which is the essence of marriage. They see each other as object of self gratification, which can be discarded at any time that each of the partners ceases to supply this satisfaction. This, indeed, is another way of going against the divine plan for human family which should be rooted in a genuine love for each other. The Lord grants this love to those who fear him and walk in his ways.

The harmony and peace of the family in Psalm 128 is a lesson for a society that records very high rate of *divorce* or disunity of various kinds that make life unbearable for parents and children alike. Many cases of separation even after very few years of marriage actually defile God's intention for man and woman forming one body. Jesus affirmed this indissolubility of marriage (cf. Matthew 19:1-9). All these have their adverse effects on human society for the condition of any society is determined by the quality of families that make up such society. This is because, "the family, as a community of persons, is thus the first human 'society'" (John Paul II, 1994: 7). It is in this nucleus of human society that all the treasured moral values of society are nurtured. If families are in disarray, as we are wont to experience today, the society suffers and humanity loses sight of its essence in divine plan.

While Psalm 128 celebrates the joy of fertility and of family with many happy children, the practice of *abortion* of unwanted children, particularly by couples duly and lawfully married, appears a gross contradiction of natural law and of God's plan for human family. It is contradictory to God's plan for human family, for the conjugal union stipulated in Genesis 2:24 is at the service of the command of procreation in Genesis 1:28. When life is destroyed for selfish reason by those who should produce and protect it, marriage loses its fundamental motive and becomes incongruous and strange to its nature. "Fear of the Lord" aids human beings in perceiving the absurdity of this action.

As we reflect on the status of family in our day and the message of Psalm 128, there is urgent need for a redirection in the current understanding of family and marriage. In order to sustain and keep alive God's plan for human family, it is indispensable to make a fundamental option that ought to be a constant guide; it is the "fear of the Lord".

## 5. Conclusion

Psalm 128 forms an essential part of both Jewish and Christian celebrations of marriage, and it is also the responsorial Psalm for the feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. The Church uses it in this way in her liturgy because she finds in this Psalm some elements of her teaching on human family which are her interpretation of God's design stated in the Christian *deposit of faith*: Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture. Psalm 128 in its contents articulated in its bipartite structure provides a solution to the various understanding of family today and at the same time gives the reason why we have such misconceptions on human family. Human beings have drifted from the original plan of God because of noncompliance to his laws. Its repercussions are manifested in many forms of self-alienation and deformed concepts of family and marriage. Loss of the sense of the sacred has precipitated into absence of the fear of the Lord, which Psalm 128 presents as an indispensable element for a happy family.

Family, according to Psalm 128, is where a society is bred and nurtured. Moral values expected in a society should have their origin in family; therefore, the health of a society depends so much on how family is understood and lived. This is clearly highlighted in the two part structure of Psalm 128. The similes of vine and olive predicated of the wife and children of the God-fearer in the first part of the Psalm are symbols of Jerusalem, who is mother, and the people of Israel respectively. The good qualities represented by these symbols are realised in those who have made the fundamental option to walk in the ways of the Lord.

Our families today will be able to regain their lost values and enjoy the blissful state of the God-fearer of Psalm 128 if they retrace their steps back to God. This is an enormous task of evangelization. It has to be able to lead human beings back to God in order to save all from self-destruction prompted by lack of reverential fear of God. The extent human beings have gone in straying away from God demands a renewed and assiduous teach-

ing of the rudiments of faith and ongoing formation of the faithful in both faith and morals.

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