LIKE ARROWS IN THE HAND OF A WARRIOR
(PSALM CXXVII)

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Although Ps. cxxvii has been analyzed frequently in general commentaries on the Psalms, and also in several more specific studies,¹ the simile of the arrow in vv. 4,5a has not often been examined in detail. This article will focus upon the psalmist's use of the arrow image, and suggest how it may serve as a thematic link between the two wisdom utterances in vv. 1,2 and 3-5.²

The simile in Ps. cxxvii 4,5a is integrally connected with the remainder of the saying in vv. 3-5. The literal reality of bânim as the nahâlat yhwh (v. 3) is illustrated by the warrior's arrows representing bêné hane'sûrim (v. 4). The paronomastic geber (v. 5), likely chosen with allusion to gibbôr (v. 4), continues the figure into v. 5a, with ʾašpâtô answering to hîssîm. However, the final line, lô ʾyêbôšû ki yêdabberû ʾet ʾyêbîm basâšâr, reverts to the literal level of v. 3. It would then seem reasonable to expect that the simile illuminates both the giving of sons by Yahweh in v. 3 and their stalwart stance before the enemies in the gate in v. 5.

The exegesis of the figure raises several questions. For example, what is the significance of hîssîm in this comparison? How is mîlî ʾet ʾašpâtô to be understood? In v. 4 the psalmist employs hîssîm in

² R. E. Murphy, “A consideration of the classification ‘Wisdom Psalms’”, SVT'9 (1962) pp. 164, 167, concludes that Ps. cxxvii shows wisdom influence, but he does not include it among the wisdom psalms. However, J. K. Kuntz, “The Canonical Wisdom Psalms of Ancient Israel”, in J. J. Jackson and M. Kessler (ed.), Rhetorical Criticism (Pittsburgh, 1974), pp. 190-1, rightly claims: “If Psalm 127 does not lend itself to easy classification, its extended and impersonal observation (Spruch) in vss. 1-2 and 3-5, its simile in vs. 4, and its ʾašrê formula in vs. 5, to say nothing of its content in celebrating the safe home and ample family, speak for its legitimacy as a wisdom psalm.”
the hand of the warrior to refer to children who have been born while their father is young (benē hannḕeūrîm). The implication is that the father has had ample opportunity to rear the sons and to prepare them for life. When he reaches old age, his sons are ready to take their place, and to assume his place, within the sphere of human society.

1. The Question of the Unity of Ps. cxxvii

Many commentators have agreed with C. A. and E. G. Briggs's assessment that "Ps. 127 is composed of two independent Pss.: v. 1-2, v. 3-5; which have no manner of connection in thought". For instance, A. Weiser claims: "The psalm clearly falls into two parts which are quite unrelated as far as subject-matter is concerned" but which have been combined in the extant text because of their similarity as wisdom sayings. On the other hand, the unity of the extant psalm has been argued along several lines. M. J. Dahood demonstrates a pattern of phonological and semantic parallels between vv. 1 and 5. L. C. Allen sees the psalm as a chiasmus constructed around the double blessing by Yahweh, lehem hašāsābîm and benē hannḕeūrîm. The references to the house which Yahweh builds (v. 1) and the sons which he gives (v. 3) are viewed by some as thematic links unifying the psalm, a juxtaposition attested also in the Sumerian Hymn to Nisaba.