

Hannah's prayer for a male child: Interpreting 1 Samuel 1:11 in the Nigerian context



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Studies have shown that a preference for male children is prevalent in many parts of the world, including Africa. In Nigeria, with its patriarchal family structure, a preference for sons has become an institutionalised way of life. Hence, the Hannah narrative in 1 Samuel 1 is of high relevance in Nigeria. The story of Hannah's barrenness has often been employed to encourage childless Christians to have faith in God for children, but not many have paid attention to her request specifically for a male child in verse 11. To this end, Hannah's prayer for a male child is examined in this article against the context of the strong desire for male children in Nigeria. The article employed the historical-critical and descriptive methods. Apart from the exegesis of 1 Samuel 1:11, using the descriptive approach, the author interacted with and utilised relevant material on preference for male children in Nigeria. The research found that Hannah's request for a son is consistent with the pattern of the narratives of barren mothers in the Old Testament in which all asked for male children. Hannah's specific request for a male child is therefore a reflection of the preference for sons in ancient Israel, which derived principally from the fact that, in that society, male children were greatly desired for the purpose of the perpetuation of the husband's lineage, as well as for land inheritance. Understanding Hannah's prayer for a son in this way, makes 1 Samuel 1:11 relevant in Nigeria where people prefer male children for similar reasons. In view of the fact that the preference for sons has a fatal effect on female children, as well as their mothers, it amounts to women abuse, which makes it an issue of pastoral significance in Nigeria. 1 Samuel 1:11 is thus relevant in the context of marital conflicts among Nigerian Christian couples arising from male child preference. To this end, teaching to illuminate this preference for sons should form an integral part of the marriage theology of the church in Nigeria.

Contribution: The article is a contribution in the field of marriage theology, in that it identifies the preference for male children as a possible factor for marital disharmony among Nigerian Christian couples.

Keywords: Hannah's prayer; son preference; inheritance; Nigerian Christians; marriage theology.

Introduction

The Hannah narrative in 1 Samuel 1 has been widely studied and preached in the context of infertility. It is usually employed to inspire hope in persons who desire to have children. It is in this manner that Hannah's story has been written about by several Nigerian scholars (e.g. Abasili 2015:581–605; Ademiluka 2019:1–10), but not many Nigerian Christians have paid attention to Hannah's request specifically for a male child. Hence, this article focuses on Hannah's prayer for a male child in 1 Samuel 1:11 against the background of the strong preference for male children in Nigeria. From time immemorial, the preference for male children has been prevalent in many parts of the world, notably in 'an arc of countries from East Asia through south Asia to the Middle East' and Africa (Ben-Nun 2016:9). As defined by Agbor (2016):

[*Male child preference*] is a socially determined bias in a patriarchal society where couples prefer to raise a child who has the culturally accepted characteristics, status and economic potential associated with the male gender. [It] often influences behaviour and may result in gender biases that negatively affect girls and women's welfare, health and survival. (p. 5)

Several reasons are given for the preference for sons, among which are the following: 'they have a higher wage-earning capacity, especially in agrarian economies; they continue the family line; and they are generally recipients of inheritance' (Ben-Nun 2016:9). Since antiquity, man has been trying various techniques for sex-selection including 'choosing a special day, time and posture for sexual intercourse, special diet, charms and amulet and prayers, etc.' (Ben-Nun 2016:11) in an effort to have male children. In countries such as East and South Asia, including China, South Korea and

India, the preference for sons has resulted 'in substantial levels of excess female child mortality [resulting particularly from] ... sex-selective abortion' (Ben-Nun 2016:9; cf. Gupta et al. 2004:1, 3). In Nigeria, as in most parts of Africa, the patriarchal family structure with a strong preference for sons has become a part of 'institutionalized values and therefore formed part of the way of life of the people' (Agbor 2016:4). Preference for male children is so strong in Africa that:

In some African contexts 'sonlessness' is almost treated like childlessness. In such a patrilineal society, women with female children but without a male suffers, to a large extent, the plight of a childless woman. (Abasili 2015:599)

According to Mbiti (1969:143), if a woman bears 'only daughters, it follows almost without exception that her husband will add another wife' (cf. Milazzo 2014:7).

The aim of this article is to examine Hannah's prayer for a male child in 1 Samuel 1:11 with a view to assessing the significance of this aspect of the narrative in the context of the prevalent desire for male children in Nigeria.

The target population is Nigerians, especially Christians who practise the preference of sons over daughters. This article employs the historical-critical exegesis for the study of the text, and the descriptive method¹ for the analysis of the preference for male children in Nigeria. It begins with Hannah's prayer for a male child in 1 Samuel 1:11, from where it proceeds to examine the motive behind male child preference in ancient Israel. The article also discusses the nature of male preference in Nigeria and, finally, the pastoral relevance of the text in Nigeria.

Hannah's prayer for a male child

In the Hannah narrative, Elkanah, the Ephraimite, has two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. The latter has children, and the former does not. Because of Hannah's barrenness, Peninnah continually taunts her. Every year Elkanah, together with his family, would go to the tabernacle at Shiloh for an annual festival. At this particular festival, Hannah's purpose is to ask God for the gift of a child. 1 Samuel 1:11 reads thus:

And she vowed a vow and said, 'O Lord of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thy maidservant, and remember me, and not forget thy maidservant, but wilt give to thy maidservant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head' (Revised Standard Version [RSV]).

However, the concern of this article is with the subject of Hannah's prayer, namely the gift of a child, which is expressed in Hebrew as זרע אנשים [lit. the seed of men]. According to Kaiser (1980:252), the root זרע refers literally to the action of sowing seed in the fields (Gn 26:12; Is 37:30). As a noun, as used here, it denotes 'sowing, seed, offspring'. The usages of the noun fall into four basic semantic categories, namely the time of sowing or seedtime (Gn 8:22; cf. Lv 26:5); the seed as that which is scattered or as the product of what

is sown (Gn 47:19, 23; Lv 11:37–38; Nm 24:7; Dt 28:38; Is 55:10; Am 9:13); the seed as semen (Nm 5:28; Lv 15:16, 32; 22:4; Jr 31:27), and 'the Seed as the offspring in the promised line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob' (e.g. Gn 3:15). The concern here is זרע as a child which is close to Kaiser's view of seed as semen. Thus, it is similar to the use in Numbers 5:28 where זרע appears in terms of making a woman pregnant with seed. In Leviticus, זרע frequently refers to semen as discharges outside sexual intercourse (15:16, 32; 22:4) or euphemistically as having intercourse with a woman (15:18; 18:20). In Jeremiah 31:27 an expression close to 1 Samuel 1:11 is found in terms of the Lord sowing the houses of Israel and Judah with the seed of man in the latter days.

Most English translations agree with the RSV that, by אנשים זרע, Hannah asked specifically for a son. The King James Version (KJV) gives it the unusual expression of 'man child'; the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) indicates it as a 'male child', while all of the New International Version (NIV), English Standard Version (ESV) and New American Standard Bible (NASB) translate the term as 'a son'. Most interpreters also agree that זרע אנשים refers to a son (e.g. De-Whyte 2014:179; Payne 1994:298). But Carasik (2010:434) differs, arguing that there is no indication in the passage suggesting the gender of the child Hannah requested for: 'What Hannah wants is a child, plain and simple.' Carasik, however, fails to take due cognisance of Hannah's vow to make her child serve the Lord in the temple – a function rarely said of female children (De-Whyte 2014:185).

Hannah's vow to dedicate her child finds support in the ancient Near East. For instance, among 'the Hittites, people with fertility problems vowed that if the gods gave them children they would return them by allowing them to serve in the cult' (De-Whyte 2014:185). Children who were thus dedicated were usually sons (De-Whyte 2014:185).

Nonetheless, when Hannah's story is studied in the context of the narratives of barren mothers in the Old Testament (OT), her vow to dedicate the child to Yahweh was only partly the reason for asking for a son. Her story, like those of Sarah (Gn 16:1–4; 21:1–2), Rebecca (Gn 25:21–26), Rachel (Gn 30:1, 22–23), and Samson's mother (Jdg 13:2–5), 'employs the motif of a woman who is barren for a long while and then gives birth to a child of special destiny' (Berlin 2004:227). It is important to note that in all the cases these special women gave birth to children who became extraordinary national figures and were *all sons* (Moss & Baden 2015:59). Therefore, without her vow Hannah would still have asked for a son; the narrator was familiar only with a culture of barren women asking for and being given sons. Hannah's request for a male child, then, reflects the nature of ancient Israelite society in which male children were preferred to females as part of the patriarchal perception which thought of humankind predominantly in terms of males (Ackerman 2016:1; Robinson 2016: online). In the section below, this article examines the reason why Hannah's society preferred male children to females.

1. Used here simply to mean to 'describe a phenomenon and its characteristics' (Nassaji 2015:130).

The motive behind male child preference in ancient Israel

The narrative of Abraham and Sarah as a childless couple gives a hint as to the reason behind male preference in ancient Israel. According to the narrator in Genesis 15:2–3, Abraham feared that if he died without a child of his own, his servant, Eliezer, would be his heir. The Hebrew word rendered by most of the English translations in Genesis 15:3 as ‘heir’ is the *qal* active participle of the verb יָרַשׁ [to inherit; be an heir; take possession of; etc.] (Hartley 1980:409). In Israel’s history, the root came to be used in relation to God’s promise to Israel of an inheritance, that is, ‘a land where they could develop into a holy nation’ (Hartley 1980:409; cf. Gn 15:8; Ex 6:8). A close synonym of the root is נָחַל [to inherit or to possess], usually used in reference to land inheritance as a permanent possession (Coppes 1980:569). As will be seen below, in ancient Israel only male children were entitled to land inheritance except where there were no sons. Therefore, in Genesis 15:3, the narrator definitely had in mind a son as an heir to Abraham. Hence, Meyers (1988:78) notes that Israelite inheritance laws were male-skewed. This attitude was in keeping with the pattern among Israel’s neighbours whereby as far as:

Property rights were concerned a woman was always a victim. In special circumstances where she was accorded equal rights with the man, it was either because there was no son or she was in a unique position like that of a priestess. (Ndekha 2013:40)

The crucial reason for the preference of sons to daughters in the ancient Near East and in Israel, particularly, is the issue of inheritance. According to De-Whyte (2014), in the ancient Near East:

Male children were preferred over and above female children [*due*] to their labour potential. [*Moreover, m*]ale children provided security for their mothers when their fathers died, so that the woman would not be a destitute widow. (p. 31)

The author is, however, quick to point out that more than the immediate economic and security reasons, the matter of inheritance was paramount. Viewed from the perspective of inheritance, ‘the definition or purpose of marriage in the ANE was a union that perpetuated the husband’s lineage’ (De-Whyte 2014:31). The continuation of lineage was achieved through the birth of sons whose existence ensured the continuation of ‘the husband’s line and the retention of family land and wealth’ (De-Whyte 2014:33). There are indications that generally women were not entitled to an inheritance, except in cases where there were no male children. For instance, certain ‘law codices and legal documents [*from*] southern Mesopotamia in the second half of the third millennium B.C.E. [*indicated that*] if the deceased had sons, the daughters generally did not inherit’ (Altman 2019:n.p.). In Israel, the inheritance law was exclusively related to ‘the laws of apportioning holdings in the land. The Torah hardly deals with laws of inheritance that are not connected to the issue of apportioning ancestral holdings’ (Altman 2019). This point is buttressed by the fact that the Hebrew term commonly rendered ‘inheritance (נַחֲלָה) ... is a specific allotment or

entitlement, usually of land, that has continuity with the past and ties with a sacred heritage’ (Ndekha 2013:39).

Coppes (1980:569) explains that this noun ‘connotes that which is or may be passed on as an inheritance, that which is one’s by virtue of ancient right, and that which is one’s permanently’ (cf. Gn 31:14).

The basic law of intestate succession is contained in Numbers 27:1–11. In the narrative, Zelophehad had no sons; so, after his death, his daughters demanded to be given their father’s inheritance, and Yahweh made Moses to comply with their demand (cf. Jos 17:3–6). Subsequently, the Lord set out the ‘law of intestate succession’ in Numbers 27:8–11 (Hiers 1993:125). According to this regulation, if a man died without a son, his inheritance should pass to his daughter. If he had no daughter, it should pass to his brothers. If he had no brothers, his inheritance should go to his paternal uncles. Otherwise, the deceased’s inheritance should be given to his kinsman that was next to him among his relations. As Ndekha (2013:41) observes, this ‘may have reflected [*Israel’s*] tightly knit clan structure whose foremost goal was the preservation of land inheritance by not allowing it to pass to another clan’ (cf. Ahiamadu 2005:22). The intent to keep inheritance within the clan is seen further in the provision that daughters who inherited ‘were not allowed to marry outside their father’s clan or extended family’ (Hiers 1993:129; cf. Wells 2019: online; Nm 36:5–9). Therefore, going by this law, sons were the sole heirs, unless there were none, but the text does not make clear the status of sons that were eligible for an inheritance. As Hiers (1993:125) rightly observes, from the biblical traditions, sons emerged from men’s intercourse with ‘concubines, their wives’ maids, by slaves, and by harlots’. Citing Judges 11:2, Wells (2019) believes that ‘a man’s principal heirs were the sons born to him by his wife or wives [*excluding those*] by other women [*such as*] concubines, slaves and prostitutes’. Hiers (1993:125), however, calls attention to the fact that the so-called illegitimate sons might be heirs barring any ‘steps being taken to prevent their doing so’. For instance, the phrasing of the Abraham cycle earlier referred to (Gn 15:2–3), ‘implies that a slave born in the house of an otherwise childless father would be counted as a son’, and thus eligible to inherit (Hiers 1993:127). Similarly, Judges 11:1–2 seems to imply that if Jephthah was not driven away by Gilead’s legitimate sons, he would have inherited along with them (Hiers 1993:127).

The role of the first-born son in the apportioning of inheritance is not mentioned in Numbers 27, but Deuteronomy 21:15–17 seems to suggest that he was allotted a double portion while the others had one each. The law states that if a man has two wives of whom he loves one and dislikes the other, and each of them gives him a son and the firstborn is that of the wife he dislikes, he may not exchange the firstborn with the son of the woman he loves. He shall maintain the right of the firstborn by giving him a double portion of the inheritance. Hiers (1993:144) acknowledges that the impression that the firstborn

received a double portion of his father's inheritance may be inferred from this passage, especially in view of the reference in Deuteronomy 21:16 to the day a man assigns his possessions as an inheritance to his sons. But at the same time, he believes that this passage does not support the claim that firstborn sons were given any special recognition in the sharing of an inheritance, his premise being that no other biblical texts make reference to such a tradition. Hence, for Hiers (1993):

What Deuteronomy 21:15–17 says, in effect, is that a man may not ignore his obligation to provide his first-born son with a double portion just because he dislikes that son's mother. (p. 144)

However, this statement has not in any way countered the fact that the firstborn received a double portion. Moreover, as Hiers himself has noted, Deuteronomy 21:16 affirms that the firstborn was given a double portion of his father's inheritance. Wells (2019) may therefore be right when he states that 'the eldest son received two shares [of inheritance] and other sons one each'. Similarly, Fachhai (2007:99) opines that 'Deut 21:17 maintains the rights of the primogeniture, according to which the firstborn was to inherit twice as much as his brothers.'

Hannah's prayer for a son, then, is best understood against this background of preference for male children in ancient Israel, particularly for the purpose of land inheritance. It is in a similar context that the text is relevant in Nigeria; hence, in the section below, this article examines the nature of male child preference in this African country.

The nature of male child preference in Nigeria

In Nigeria, as in Africa at large, marriage is constituted primarily for the purpose of procreation. Mbiti (1969) states that in Africa:

The supreme purpose of marriage is to bear children to build a family [hence] if there is not yet a child in the marriage people do not consider it to be a marriage. (p. 132; cf. Baloyi 2017:3; Egede 2015:65)

In fact, in the traditional setting, the birth of the first 'child marked the consummation of a sustained and crisis-free marriage' (Ojua, Lukpata & Atama 2014:44). Uchendu (1965) aptly depicts the connection between marriage and childbearing in Africa when he states that 'a woman's glory is her children, and to have children, she must have a husband' (cited in Ntoimo 2012:1). For the African, for one to die without having children means to 'be completely cut off from the human society, to become an outcast and to lose all links with mankind' (Mbiti 1969:133). According to Ojua et al. (2014:44), children were so valued in the traditional African society that a 'marriage without children was seen as a curse from the gods and it was a very good reason strong enough for divorce or polygyny'. The natural passion for children and childbearing is depicted in many facets of the African culture. The Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, for instance, have sayings which indicate that children are the most valuable possession. They would say:

Omo l'okun, omo n'ide; enia t'o wa saye ti ko bimo, aye asan lo wa [A child is a coral bead; a child is silver; a person who has none has not lived a fulfilled life]. (Makinde 2004:167, [author's own translation])

This saying equates a child with *okun* [beads] worn by kings and chiefs as a symbol of royalty and authority. It therefore means 'that a child confers on his or her mother the power to exercise authority in her husband's home' (Makinde 2004:167). For a woman, then, it is only her children that assure her of a matrimonial home. Comparing a child with silver also depicts the preciousness of children. That a child is thus the greatest possession one can have, is seen more clearly in the Yoruba saying, '*Eni ti o fun ni l'omo ti pari oore*' [He or she who gives one his or her [daughter] to be one's wife has given the best gift' (Makinde 2004:167, [author's own translation]).

It is important to note, however, that Africans' strong desire for children is indeed for male children (Baloyi & Manala 2019). Agbor (2016:4) observes that in Nigeria, as in other parts of Africa, 'strong preference for sons [has] become institutionalized and ... formed part of the way of life of the people'. Writing on the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, Oforchukwu (2010:38) states, 'For an Igbo man, producing children, especially male children, is important to continue the family lineage; otherwise, the family would become extinct.' As Abasili (2011:567) puts it: 'for an Igbo man ... to die without a male child is a calamity; it is tantamount to a descent into oblivion, to be forgotten by both the living and the dead ... He is not admitted into the status of an Igbo ancestor after his death' (cf. Milazzo 2014:7). That is why, in Africa, even if a woman has children, but bears 'only daughters, it follows almost without exception that her husband will add another wife' (Mbiti 1969:143; cf. Egboh 1972:436). Igbelina-Igbokwe (2013) states that frequently men:

Take second wives because of their first wife's inability to bear an heir. Therefore a woman with no sons ... lives in constant fear of losing her marriage ... to another who may be brought in to correct her 'inadequacies'. (n.p.; cf. Milazzo 2014:7)

Whereas the male child is looked upon as the upholder of the lineage, girls are 'perceived as expendable commodities who will eventually be married out to other families to procreate and ensure the survival of the spouses' lineage by bearing sons' (Igbelina-Igbokwe 2013).

In the African society, there were immediate socio-economic reasons for the preference for male children apart from sustaining the family line. Writing on the Isoko of southern Nigeria, Edewor (2013:55) states that, apart from retaining the family name, in the past. Male children stayed:

... permanently in or near family compound or residence, provision of old-age security and serving as a source of defence and social prestige to parents. When young, male children render assistance to their parents in terms of helping on the farm, helping parents in their businesses, running errands and, to a lesser extent, performing some household chores.

Agbor (2016:6) observes that to most Nigerians, sons give some 'social and psychological satisfaction to parents [in the

sense that] the more male children a mother has, the more blessed she is regardless of the means to sustain the children'. Nonetheless, most authors emphasise that 'to most people, children are precious but sons are essential' (Agbor 2016:4). This is because in Africa, as in ancient Israel, male children are strongly desired for 'the perpetuation of the family line' (Agbor 2016:6; cf. Edewor 2013:55; Isiugo-Abanihe 1994 cited in Milazzo 2014:7). The traditional thought is that '[w]hen a man dies, he needs somebody to bear his name, so that his name does not die' (Ogoma 2014:96). In most African communities, the practice of lineage perpetuation is both patrilineal and patrilocal. According to Gupta et al. (2004):

Patrilineality includes passing on the main productive assets through the male line, while ... patrilocality includes a couple residing at the man's home, which goes hand in hand with inheritance especially in peasant societies where land is the main productive asset that is inherited ... Women are the biological reproducers, but it is through the father that a child acquires a social identity and is incorporated into the social order. (pp. 7–8)

Thus, as in ancient Israel, in Africa, perpetuation of lineage is closely linked to inheritance. For example, in Igbo society:

Only a male child can perpetuate the family name and lineage ... In addition, only a male child has the right of property inheritance from his father, otherwise his father's property will be inherited by another male next-of-kin. (Abasili 2015:599)

Regarding inheritance, the Igbo has a custom that is similar to that of ancient Israel, whereby:

Inheritance rights of women are only recognized subject to certain customary celebrations ... if the deceased had no male issue, his brothers or their sons will inherit him except his daughter performs the *Nrachi* ceremony and assumes the position of a man [*which means*] ... she remains in her father's house unmarried but has children in the name of the father. (Nnadi 2013:138)

Among the Yoruba, a male child is superior to the female in matters of inheritance, irrespective of age. However, it is not impossible for single female children 'to inherit property, but this is not always the case for married women because of the belief that they in their entirety belong to their husbands' (Familusi 2012:301). In view of the fact that 'only males have the control of family landed property' (Wusu & Isiugo-Abanihe 2006, cited in Milazzo 2014:7), every woman greatly desires to have sons, 'because they represent the only way through which [*she*] can inherit part of [*her*] deceased husband's property' (Milazzo 2014:7).

Preference for sons is manifest in many areas of Nigerians' lives right from the birth of a child into a family.

No doubt, some Nigerians prefer to have a girl as their first child. For the Yoruba, for instance, it is a signal that such a couple 'will experience *owo ero*' [lit. hand of ease] (Makinde 2004:169), 'which ensures ease and success in [*their every*] undertaking' (Abiodun 1989:7). Nonetheless, in most cases when the first issue is a girl, anxiety begins to mount 'for only

a male child as the next child' (Dadwani, Koringa & Kartha 2019:2539). The level of reception a new baby gets from the friends and relatives of its parents is determined by its sex. Among the Yoruba when a new child is born, after congratulating the parents for a safe delivery, the next thing is to ask about the gender of the child. Generally, 'the birth of a baby girl does not receive the kind of enthusiastic reception that is usually given to that of a baby boy' (Familusi 2012:300). As expressed by Raji et al. (2016):

The birth of a baby boy is received with great joy; the rites are more elaborate and the mother receives huge compliments for giving birth to a male child. The dad enjoys great pride and respect with the assurance of the protection of his assets and continuity of the family line. The birth of a girl, on the other hand, is less ceremonial with reduced value attributed to the mother and the child. The reception ritual is minimal and less colorful. (p. 58)

Among the Benin people in the midwestern region, when female children are born, they:

... are derogatorily referred to as 'half current', a vernacular terminology used to depict the perceived notion of less virility required to birth girls, and a direct cultural allusion to [*their*] inferior status. (Osezua & Agholor 2019:412)

Sometimes, the names given to male children reflect the issue of preference; among the Igbo names such as Ahamefula, Ikemefule, Eziefule, Okezie, Obilor, Obiajuru, Okekemdi and Chimankpam all 'express the joy of the arrival of a male child [*and*] show the importance and value placed on the male child' (Nnadi 2013:137). This fact is shown, for instance, in the name Ahamefula which means 'my name is not lost' (Familusi 2012:301).

There is evidence of gender 'discrimination at each stage of life even after birth' (Dadwani et al. 2019:2538), particularly in the area of education. Some parents focus all their resources on the education of their sons, because they believe they rely on the sons for old-age support apart from 'continuity of family name and property inheritance' (Agbor 2016:4). Moreover, the thought that girls, upon marriage, join their husbands' families 'and take with them the benefits of education, makes parents to have little incentives to bear the costs of educating their daughters' (Edewor 2013:57). Evidence of this attitude may have been reflected in the 'disparity in the ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria in the year 2005' (United Nations 2006 cited in Olaogun et al. 2009:197). Ademiluka (2018:351) opines that the attitude of not attaching much value to female children may be one of the reasons why some Nigerian 'parents force young girls into early marriage' (cf. Ede & Kalu 2018:47), particularly in the northern parts of the country. According to the World Health Organization (WHO 2002:157), in northern Nigeria, for example in Kebbi State, children as young as 11 years old are given out in marriage.

Preference for male children has a lot of social implications for female children, marriage, family and, particularly, women. As seen earlier, this tendency influences the

behaviour of some parents, especially fathers, which often results 'in gender biases that negatively affect girls' and women's welfare, health and survival' (Agbor 2016:5). Igwe and Akolokwu (2015:4) identified consequences of male child preference to include different socialisation processes of the children, higher rates of mortality among young girls and gender disparities in education and health care (cf. Dadwani et al. 2019:2538). It may lead to girls growing up with psychological traits such as 'low self-esteem, having internalized feeling of inferiority and worthlessness' (Dadwani et al. 2019:2538). Furthermore, many couples have separated or divorced on account of wives not being able to bring forth male children. In the words of Agbor (2016:3):

[Many] marriages get dissolved for the sake of the absence of a male child. In many instances most men go for a second or more wives just for the simple reason of getting a male child'. In some cases, men look outside their matrimonial homes in search of male children. (cf. Raji et al. 2016:59)

Scholars have noticed that the desperation for male children in this way has often led to uncontrollable family size, as the many attempts to have sons lead to the birth of more girls (Agbor 2016:7; Gupta et al. 2004:2). Nevertheless, it is women who bear most of the effects of the attitude of preferring sons. Sometimes, a woman suffers the same 'negative social stigmatization' as a barren woman does (Agbor 2016:7). It is the wife who faces the threat or reality of divorce if she does not bear sons for her husband:

... because the birth of a boy is what is seen as her passport to remaining in her matrimonial home. [That is why] most women with only daughters often make several attempts at getting pregnant so as to have the golden male child, and some unfortunately lose their lives in the process. (Nnadi 2013:137)

Raji et al. (2016) put it aptly that:

The desire for a male child has resulted in a situation where husbands keep pressuring their wives to have more children, which in turn predispose [sic] the health of the wives to danger ... To avoid being divorced, most women give birth to [too] many children, [thereby] jeopardizing their lives. [Thus,] this practice is one of those issues that have contributed to high rate of maternal deaths in ... Nigeria. (p. 59)

The authors note further that, in Nigeria, male child preference accounts for 'female infanticide, sex-specific abortions, and pre-marital sex selection. [It is also responsible] for large families, high population, gender discrimination and low girl-child empowerment' (Raji et al. 2016:59).

It is important to note, however, that the gender-based perception about children is being altered in recent times.

Many Nigerians have come to the realisation that children are what one makes of them irrespective of gender, which has led considerably to a change in attitude towards the education of girls. For instance, in a study conducted by Agbor (2016:12) among the Efik of southern Nigeria, a number of the respondents said that they would not have any problem 'with having children of the same sex, because for them

whether males or females, children can only be what you make out of them'. Edewor (2013:60) found that among the Isoko, also of southern Nigeria, in recent times, 'parents have now realized that the education of female children could equally be as rewarding, in fact more rewarding than that of male children', unlike in the past, when only boys were mainly sent to school. They have realised that daughters' care for aged parents are of a higher quality than adult male children, perhaps in view of the fact that adult 'sons are normally saddled with a lot of responsibilities the moment they get married' (Edewor 2013:66). As Olaogun et al. (2009:197) put it, some Nigerians have realised that a girl who is well-educated with a well-paid job is more likely to take care of her parents in old age than an unemployed male.

Edewor (2013:62) asserts that, due to the changing perception of female children, the preference for sons is steadily declining in Nigeria. Due to daughters being more generally affectionate towards their parents than sons, some Nigerians now would, in fact, 'prefer to have more female children than male children' (Agbor 2016:10). Olaogun et al. (2009:197) may therefore be right when they postulate that 'education [and] employment ... are major factors that could in the future reduce the trend of son preference in Nigeria'.

Nonetheless, preference for sons is still prevalent, albeit with unclear motives. In modern times, the perpetuation of lineage for the purpose of ancestral land inheritance cannot be a reason why every individual member of a family would want to have male children. This is because continuous migration has moved a high percentage of people away from their country homes to the cities and abroad, with some Nigerians completely detached from their ancestral homes. Olaogun et al. (2009) aptly point out the irrelevance of male child preference today in view of the destabilisation of the traditional system by which people were kept bound to their ancestral homes. They (Olaogun et al. 2009) write:

[In the past] male children ... as heirs for the continuity of family name ... [were] more likely to dwell in permanent ancestral homes. [But nowadays] migration has ... drastically reduced the number of younger people residing in ancestral homes. [Moreover,] many of the younger people now desire to own houses rather than live in ancestral residences. This destabilization of the traditional system would explain why [many people now] would feel indifferent if they did not have a particular sex of child. (p. 197)

The claim that having sons will make one's name to be remembered when one is deceased is also invalid. In most cases people bearing family names as surnames do not have any idea about the origin of the surname. This means that most people are forgotten after their departure from the earthly scene. Individuals who have continued to be remembered positively by their communities after their death earn it by virtue of their significant contributions to such communities, and not because they had sons while alive. Therefore, in modern times, male child preference is nothing more than 'a product of patriarchal socio-cultural construction and ideology aimed at the devaluation and

degradation of the female child and consequently the womanhood' (Igwe & Akolokwu 2015:4). Regarding male child preference as a means of marginalising female children and womanhood, Nnadi (2013) asserts that:

The preference for male children results in the neglect of daughters, [and] in its extreme form ... leads to female infanticide ... it is also women who have to bear the consequences of giving birth to an unwanted girl child, consequences [which] can include violence, abandonment, divorce or even death. (p. 135)

As seen in the section below, it is in this regard that the issue of the preference for sons should be of pastoral interest in Nigeria, and for which 1 Samuel 1:11 is most relevant.

The pastoral relevance of 1 Samuel 1:11 in Nigeria

In Nigeria, the Hannah narrative in 1 Samuel 1 is regularly employed in preaching to encourage childless Christians to keep trusting in God for the fruit of the womb, but preachers rarely take cognisance of Hannah asking specifically for a son in verse 11; hence, they hardly relate this verse to the context of preference for sons.

Whereas, as this study has indicated, in Nigeria, preference for male children often brings about marital disharmony, leading to the collapse of many marriages. The work also showed that it is an aspect of women abuse and discrimination against female children. Recent studies revealed a high level of conflict among Nigerian couples (Amadi & Amadi 2014:133–143; Bammeke & Eshiet 2018:1–8) – many of whom are Christians, and sometimes the preference for sons is a major cause of the problem (Nwachukwu 1996:13–15; Oviawe 2006:27). Hence, from the Christian perspective, 1 Samuel 1:11 is relevant in the context of Christian marriage and family in Nigeria. It speaks to the situation of male child preference as an issue in Christian marriage, and should be so applied by the church. The verse should prompt the church to enlighten its members on the context of Hannah's prayer for a son. As the article has shown, apart from the desire to dedicate her son to Yahweh, she belonged to a society where, as in Nigeria, male children were preferred to females. Here, the church should situate Hannah's story in the context of the preference for sons in Nigeria, educating members on its adverse effects on female children, womanhood and the family at large. Christians should realise that the reasons often given for this attitude are no longer relevant in the contemporary world, as indicated in this article. The teaching against the preference for sons can be contextualised in the church's theology of marriage, incorporating it in all programmes and activities relating to marriage. It should be part of the induction courses which many denominations conduct for intending couples. In wedding sermons, new couples should be warned against the practice of male child preference. Apart from these occasions, it will be helpful to couples if the church organises regular teaching for them on sustaining marital harmony by identifying biased attitude

towards children on the basis of gender as a possible cause of marital conflict.

The church, as a matter of general policy, should include the teaching against the preference for sons in all its manuals for 'catechetical instruction and theological curricula' (The Lutheran World Federation 2002:13). Overall, Christians should be reminded that it is God who gives children (Ps 127:3), and they should be received with gratitude irrespective of sex. 'The sex of the child resides with God' (Nwachukwu 1996:15).

Conclusion

In Nigeria, the Hannah narrative in 1 Samuel 1 has often been employed by both scholars and preachers to inspire hope in people who would like to have children, but not many have paid attention to Hannah's request specifically for a male child as indicated in verse 11. This article found this verse relevant for the situation in Nigeria where the strong preference for sons is an institutionalised way of life for many people, including Christians. When Hannah's story is studied in the context of the narratives of barren mothers in the OT, it is clear that her desire to dedicate her child to Yahweh was only partially the reason for asking for a male child. In that context, Hannah's prayer for a male child reflects the patriarchal nature of ancient Israelite society in which male children were preferred to the female. This preference derived principally from the fact that in ancient Israel, as in the whole of the ancient Near East, male children were greatly desired for the purpose of the perpetuation of the husband's lineage, and only sons were entitled to inherit land, except where there were no male children. Understanding Hannah's prayer for a son against this background, makes 1 Samuel 1:11 most relevant in Nigeria where people have similar motives for the practice of male child preference. This article found that preference for male children has a fatal effect on female children and womanhood. Moreover, the reasons adduced for the practice are no longer relevant in modern times, which makes the attitude nothing more than a devaluation and degradation of female children and women. It is in this light that the preference for sons becomes an issue of pastoral significance in Nigeria, for which 1 Samuel 1:11 is most applicable.

The text thus becomes relevant in the context of marital disharmony among Nigerian Christian couples arising from the preference for sons. The verse prompts the church to make its members to come to the realisation that male child preference is a form of women abuse and discrimination against female children. To this end, teaching against the preference for sons should form an important aspect of the church's theology of marriage in Nigeria.

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Author's contributions

S.O.A. declares that he is the sole author of this article.

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