

# **“Get Her for Me, for She Pleases Me Well:” Interpreting the Samson Marriage Narrative in Judges 14 in Light of Parental Role in Mate Selection in Nigeria**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Judges 14 speaks to the Nigerian context on the role of parents in the marriage process. Unlike in the traditional African society where the choice of spouses was determined by parents and the family, in Nigeria today, parents have little involvement in their children’s choice of marriage partner. Applying narrative reading and the descriptive approach, the article examines this text in light of the significance of parents’ role in choosing marriage partners among Nigerian Christians. The study finds that due to the influence of Christianity and modernisation, Nigerian parents now play little role in the choice of their children’s marriage partners and that this is one of the factors responsible for the rampant marriage failures in society. It concludes that to curb the high rate of marriage instability among Nigerian Christians, the church in Nigeria should review its marriage theology to emphasise the role of parents in mate selection, using the Samson story as a literary instrument.*

**KEYWORDS:** The Samson marriage narrative; narrative reading; African traditional marriage; parental role; Nigerian Christians

## **A INTRODUCTION**

In historical-critical exegesis, the book of Judges belongs to the corpus of Joshua-Kings, commonly referred to as the Deuteronomistic History (DH), the final edition of which was compiled seemingly “during the period of the exile.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tremper Longman and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 153; cf. Thomas C. Römer, *The So-called*

The book is in three parts—a prologue (chapters 1:1–2:15), the main part which contains the narratives on the judges (3–16) and an epilogue (17–21). Significant in the study of the book of Judges in recent times is the application of the modern literary approach, which emphasises the literary quality of the biblical narrative but pays little “attention to questions of historical reference.”<sup>2</sup> In this regard, it has been recognised that the literary genre contained in the book is “biblical narrative,”<sup>3</sup> having all the features of a narrative, including “a narrator, a scene, a plot, major and minor character.”<sup>4</sup> Anderson asserts that it is possible to interpret the book of Judges as a literary unit, applying methods taken from literary studies which differ from those used in the historical-critical studies; that is, “strategies of interpretation according to which the book is meaningful regardless of its pre-history and authorship.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, modern literary criticism's purpose resides in applying the text to the reader's life and circumstances. According to Mann, applying the text to the present time is seen already in the activities of the Deuteronomistic Historians.<sup>6</sup> The “writers, editors and redactors [gave] shape to the past in literary form ... in order to speak to the present.”<sup>7</sup>

To this end, adopting narrative analysis, a method in the modern literary approach, this article examines the Samson marriage narrative in Judg 14 in light of the significance of the role of parents in the choice of marriage partners in Nigeria.

As expressed by Oosthuizen, narrative reading does not question the text for its historical veracity but rather “invites the reader to explore the dimensions of the narrative” in its final form.<sup>8</sup> The significance of the narrative approach, therefore, is that it engages the text in its canonical form, the thrust of which is an “attempt to harmonise the findings of historical criticism on the one hand and

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*Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction* (London: T&T Clark, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Longman and Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 40; cf. Megan B. Moore and Brad E. Kelle, *Biblical History and Israel's Past* (Grand Rapids: WmB. Eerdmans, 2011), 169.

<sup>3</sup> Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature and Get More out of It* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 84.

<sup>4</sup> Elisha K. Marfo, “Double Deliverance: A Narrative Study of Judges 3: 12–30,” *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 1 (2018): 76.

<sup>5</sup> Greger Anderson, *The Book and Its Narratives: A Critical Examination of Some Synchronic Studies of the Book of Judges* (Sweden: Orebo University, 2001), 16.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas W. Mann, *The Book of the Former Prophets* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2011), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Mann, *The Book of the Former Prophets*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Michael J. Oosthuizen, “The Narratological Approach as a Means of Understanding the Old Testament,” *Old Testament Essays* 7/4 (1994): 85.

the needs of [modern] believers ... on the other hand.”<sup>9</sup> In line with the concern for modern believers’ needs, Cranford states that narrative criticism focuses “on the narrative flow of ideas in the text,” exploring its possible impact on the reader.<sup>10</sup> Hence, in this study, the emphasis is not on the historicity of the Samson marriage narrative but on the implications of Samson’s attitude in the choice of his marriage partner for the modern Nigerian reader. For the discussion of the roles of parents and the family in partner selection in Nigeria, the descriptive method is applied. As used here, it simply means to “describe a phenomenon and its characteristics.”<sup>11</sup>

The study is significant in Nigeria in the context of the role of parents in the marriage process. In contemporary Nigeria, marriage instability has become a social problem of relatively higher magnitude than it used to be, and many have identified the inadequate involvement of parents as one of the reasons for this development.<sup>12</sup> The article begins with an exegesis on the Samson marriage narrative in Judg 14 and then examines the significance of the parental role in the choice of marriage partners in Nigeria.

## **B THE SAMSON MARRIAGE NARRATIVE: AN EXEGESIS OF JUDG 14<sup>13</sup>**

In Judg 13, Samson is the son of Manoah, a Danite of Zorah and his unnamed barren wife (13:2). The narrator does not state that Manoah’s wife prayed for a child as in the case of Hannah, for example, but that in a theophany, Yahweh promised her that she would have a son (vv.3–5). He would be a “Nazirite from the womb”<sup>14</sup> and a deliverer of Israel from the Philistines. Chapter 13 ends with the fulfilment of God’s promise: Samson is born and the spirit of Yahweh is upon him (vv.24–25).

<sup>9</sup> H. A. J. Kruger, “The Canon Critical Approach as a Means of Understanding the Old Testament,” *Old Testament Essays* 7/4 (1994): 183.

<sup>10</sup> Lorin L. Cranford, “Modern New Testament Interpretation,” in *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture* (2nd ed.; ed. B. Corley, S.W. Lemke and G.I. Lovejoy; Nashville: Broadman Press, 2002), 159.

<sup>11</sup> Hossein Nassaji, “Qualitative and Descriptive Research: Data Type versus Data Analysis,” *Language Teaching Research* 19/2 (2015): 130.

<sup>12</sup> Christian Media in Nigeria, “Rate of Divorce among Christian Couples Alarming,” <http://www.christianmediang.com/2015/10/rate-of-divorce-among-christian-couples.html>; Cleric Laments Rising Cases of Divorce in Churches, *The Guardian*, May 14 2018, <https://guardian.ng/news/cleric-laments-rising-cases-of-divorce-in-churches/>.

<sup>13</sup> This exegesis focuses on the verses that relate directly to Samson’s marriage, though with illustrations from chapter 16.

<sup>14</sup> Michael J. Smith, “The Failure of the Family in Judges, Part 2: Samson,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162 (2005): 426.

To the contrary, the first action recorded of the spirit-filled, God-appointed Israelite deliverer is that he finds a wife—and that among the enemies he is commissioned to fight. Hence, when Samson announces to his parents his intention to marry a woman from Timnah, they reject the proposition on the grounds that she is one of the “uncircumcised Philistines” (14:3). To his parents, “Samson’s intention is a startling shattering of the expectation of holiness,”<sup>15</sup> a divinely appointed Nazirite considering intermarriage with the Philistines of all peoples! It was “simply a cultural and ethnic issue.”<sup>16</sup> It is also possible that Samson’s parents were not unaware that intermarriage was unlawful for the Israelites (Deut 7:1–3) and had led them to serve the gods of the Gentiles (Judg 3:6). Samson, however, will not be denied of his desire, insisting that they should get the woman for him because “she pleases me well” (v.3). Thus, Samson does not judge the appropriateness of marrying a Philistine from the perspective of the Torah but “bases his decision entirely on the evidence of his own eyes.”<sup>17</sup> Samson’s parents could not dissuade him from his strong desire; despite their reservations, they supported him, albeit unwillingly.<sup>18</sup> Smith comments that on the part of Samson’s parents, giving in to his wish was not just the condoning of an unwise decision; “it was participation in a moral error.”<sup>19</sup>

Although Samson was not patient enough to follow his request, he “follows contemporary convention [in asking] his parents to arrange the marriage.”<sup>20</sup> In the ancient Near Eastern patriarchal extended family system, the groom’s father arranged marriage with the bride’s parents.<sup>21</sup> According to Fitzhenry, among the Hebrews, “brides were usually chosen by the bridegroom’s father.”<sup>22</sup> The Hebrew marriage consisted of two ceremonies separated by an interval of about one year: the betrothal and the wedding. It was during the betrothal (Heb. שֵׂרָא) that “the groom or his father pays the bride’s price

<sup>15</sup> Mark Greene, “Enigma Variations: Aspects of the Samson Story (Judges 13-16),” *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991): 64.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, “The Failure of the Family in Judges,” 429.

<sup>17</sup> Greene, “Enigma Variations,” 64; cf. Anderson, *The Book and Its Narratives*, 164.

<sup>18</sup> Elie Assis, “The Structure and Meaning of the Samson Narratives (Judg 13–16),” in *Samson: Hero or Fool? The Many Faces of Samson* (ed. E. Eynikel and T. Nicklas; Leiden: Brill, 2014), 4.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, “The Failure of the Family in Judges,” 429.

<sup>20</sup> “Enigma Variations,” 64.

<sup>21</sup> Colin G. Hamer, “Marital Imagery in the Bible: An Exploration of the Cross-Domain Mapping of Genesis 2:24 and Its Significance for the Understanding of New Testament Divorce and Remarriage Teaching” (PhD. Thesis, University of Chester, UK, 2015), 66.

<sup>22</sup> Sharon L. Fitzhenry, “Jewish Marriage, Biblical Divorce, and Remarriage: Discovering ‘Except for a Word of Fornication’ in the Old and New Testaments,” 2015, 1.

[https://lifelongunion.weebly.com/uploads/1/0/1/6/10162923/jewish\\_marriage\\_biblical\\_divorce\\_and\\_remarriage\\_draft.pdf](https://lifelongunion.weebly.com/uploads/1/0/1/6/10162923/jewish_marriage_biblical_divorce_and_remarriage_draft.pdf); cf. Hamer, “Marital Imagery in the Bible,” 67.

[Heb. מֵהָר].”<sup>23</sup> There are illustrations of this custom in biblical traditions. For instance, Gen 24 contains some processes of the Hebrew marriage, “including the negotiations within the bride’s family”<sup>24</sup> and the payment of the מֵהָר.

However, in Judg 14:4, the narrator does not judge Samson’s marriage proposal with a Philistine woman the same way as his parents but rather sees it as Yahweh “seeking a pretext to act against the Philistines.”<sup>25</sup> Not knowing God’s secret, Samson’s parents see him as acting according to his personal impulses, which conflict with God’s intentions, but in the judgement of the narrator, his actions “concur with God’s intentions [in that] Samson acts as God’s instrument.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, Samson’s proposition was part of the divine plan. Here, the modern reader is confronted with the theological dilemma of “the relationship between divine sovereignty [and] human responsibility,”<sup>27</sup> that is, in God’s decision to lead Samson into a wrong action to save his people from their enemies. However, this problem is explicable based on the understanding that biblical narrators often do not see issues outside the divine plan; for them, Yahweh’s hand is in all human events. A relevant example here is in 2 Sam 24 where, according to the narrator, God leads David “to take a census, and then punishes him for doing so.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, Klein is right that in Judg 14:4, “the narrator introduces his [own] understanding of Yahweh’s *modus operandi*,”<sup>29</sup> Samson’s desire for the Timnite woman is not justified by God but attributed to him by the narrator. In line with this position, Stone opines that in Judges, “the occasional *afflatus* of the spirit is itself diverted and perverted.”<sup>30</sup> Attributing Samson’s uncontrolled desire for women to the spirit of God is part of this perversion.<sup>31</sup> It seems more reasonable to say that Samson represents a character who is particularly loose with women. After all, his affair with the Gazite prostitute (16:1–2) is not linked to any divine motive. This means that Samson’s “sexual rendezvous demonstrated his foolish impulsivity based on lustful sight.”<sup>32</sup> Samson’s affair with the Gazite prostitute thus indicates “that the incident at Timnah was not a one-off error in judgement” but rather a persistent

<sup>23</sup> Fitzhenry, “Jewish Marriage, Biblical Divorce, and Remarriage,” 3.

<sup>24</sup> Sarah Shectman, “What Do We Know about Marriage in Ancient Israel?,” in *Reading a Tendentious Bible: Essays in Honor of Robert B. Coote* (ed. M. L. Chaney et al; Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2014), 170.

<sup>25</sup> Anderson, *The Book and Its Narratives*, 164.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Greene, “Enigma Variations,” 64.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 68; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 116.

<sup>30</sup> Stone, “Judges, Book of,” 604.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Crisp, “Samson’s Blindness and Ethical Sight,” *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 9/1 (2019): 239.

weakness of character.<sup>33</sup> His encounter with Delilah (16:4–20) was the climax of Samson's sexual misdemeanour.<sup>34</sup> The episode reveals that his moral state had become so degraded<sup>35</sup> that "now womanizing had become a fundamental aspect of his character."<sup>36</sup> Samson's insistence on marrying the Philistine Timnite is thus best understood against his innate propensity for women and not in terms of the leading of the spirit of Yahweh. As will be seen below, it was this uncontrolled desire for women that led to his doom.

Samson's parents went with him to Timnah to get him his heart's desire (14:5, 10). However, the marriage arrangement ended in disaster before it was properly consummated, as the Timnite woman's commitment, like that of Delilah who came after her, was not to Samson but "to their own countrymen and for their own personal pleasure or safety."<sup>37</sup> At the wedding party, Samson posed a riddle to his Timnite guests to be solved within seven days, or they would have to pay him dearly for not finding the answer (14:12–14). On the seventh day, the Timnites approached Samson's wife to divulge the secret, threatening to burn down her father's house if she did not (v.15). Perhaps, out of her desire for safety,<sup>38</sup> after pestering Samson for a while, the Timnite woman managed "to elicit Samson's secret from him."<sup>39</sup> After a little hesitation, Samson succumbed to his wife's cajoling and told her the answer to the riddle. Thereafter, the woman divulged the secret to those threatening her life (14:15–18). Samson then killed some Philistines in order to obtain their garments to pay those who got the answer to his riddle (v.19). That was the end of the marriage with the woman who had pleased Samson so well, for after this event, he went back home "without consummating the marriage."<sup>40</sup> When next Samson went to see his wife, she had been given to another man (15:1–2).

How Samson's Timnite wife elicited the secret from him is best compared with the tactics employed by Delilah, another woman he later fell in love with (16:4–20). After his encounter with the prostitute at Gaza, Samson got hooked on Delilah, a woman from the Valley of Sorek (v.4). Meanwhile, the Philistines relentlessly sought to capture Samson, their archenemy (16:2), and some of their lords struck a deal with Delilah on how he might be over-powered, promising

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<sup>33</sup> Greene, "Enigma Variations," 70.

<sup>34</sup> Marco Derks, "'If I Be Shaven, Then My Strength Will Go from Me': A Queer Reading of the Samson Narrative," conference paper presented at International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, London, July 6, 2011, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Crisp, "Samson's Blindness and Ethical Sight," 239.

<sup>36</sup> Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth* (vol. 6, The New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 453.

<sup>37</sup> Smith, "The Failure of the Family in Judges," 432.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Assis, "The Structure and Meaning of the Samson Narratives," 3.

<sup>40</sup> Smith, "The Failure of the Family in Judges," 431.

her "a large sum of money."<sup>41</sup> Samson loved Delilah, but her "commitment was to the Philistines and the money."<sup>42</sup> The narrator shows her desperation to deliver on the deal as she pestered Samson, just as the Timnite did. Similar to the scene at Timnah, Samson gave some false "explanations of his strength."<sup>43</sup> After three unsuccessful attempts, Delilah resorted to "emotional blackmail [using] the same tactic of incessant complaint"<sup>44</sup> as the Timnite: "How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me?" (v.15). In this way, Delilah "takes advantage of his [emotional] weakness."<sup>45</sup> It appears that Samson's sexual desire was "stronger than his instinct"<sup>46</sup> to live. Hence, he gave in to her blackmail, a situation expressed metaphorically by the narrator as ותקצר נפשו למות (and his soul was vexed to death). The verb קצר means to be impatient, vexed, or grieved; in some passages, such as the one under reference, it indicates vexation.<sup>47</sup> The term here, therefore, describes Samson's "emotional state,"<sup>48</sup> arising from the intensity of Delilah's pressure on him. Some English versions translate קצר as 'tired' (e.g., the New Revised Standard Version, NRSV), but Today's English Version (TEV) seems to give the best expression of the narrator's conception of Samson's state of mind in the rendering "He got so sick and tired of her bothering him about it." Therefore, to stop her from pestering him and possibly to respond "to Delilah's earlier complaint 'your heart is not with me,'"<sup>49</sup> Samson told her all his heart:

A razor has never come upon my head; for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If I be shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man (v.17, RSV).

Delilah got it—the whole secret! She quickly invited the Philistine lords, who came with "the money in their hands" (v.18) and seized Samson, completely powerless. Thus, as in Timnah, Samson "finds himself thoroughly deceived." As Smith describes, the man "who had incredible strength over other men"<sup>50</sup> was defeated by a woman.

This analysis demonstrates that disregarding his parents' wish, Samson married the wrong woman, who turned out to be a betrayer, divulging her husband's secrets. If Samson's Timnite wife was in the same shoes as Delilah,

<sup>41</sup> Anderson, *The Book and Its Narratives*, 169; cf. v.5.

<sup>42</sup> Smith, "The Failure of the Family in Judges," 432.

<sup>43</sup> Anderson, *The Book and Its Narratives*, 169.

<sup>44</sup> Greene, "Enigma Variations," 73.

<sup>45</sup> Assis, "The Structure and Meaning," 9.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Jack P. Lewis, "קצר," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; ed. R. Laird Harris et al.; Chicago: Moody Publisher, 1980), 809.

<sup>48</sup> Greene, "Enigma Variations," 73.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.; cf. v.15

<sup>50</sup> Smith, "The Failure of the Family," 435.

she would have betrayed her husband to his killers. The Samson marriage narrative is thus relevant in the Nigerian context of the importance of the role of parents in the choice of marriage partners. In the section below, this article examines the significance of this role.

### **C SIGNIFICANCE OF PARENTAL ROLE IN MATE SELECTION IN NIGERIA**

In most traditional African societies, marriage was not seen as merely a union of one man and one woman but "regarded as an alliance between two families."<sup>51</sup> Abraham states that in African tradition marriage "is the joining of two families through the union of one man and one woman."<sup>52</sup> Deezia affirms that among the Ogoni of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, "contracting marriage [was] not just the business of the couple"<sup>53</sup> but of the two families concerned. Ojua et al. affirm that in the past,

Marriage was not just the business of the couple but that of the extended families involved .... [Sometimes,] the entire family and the community was involved. Marriage was seen as a [factor] of cohesion and cementing of a bond between two extended families, compounds and communities.<sup>54</sup>

Writing about the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria, Awolalu and Dopamu similarly assert that marriage is a family affair regarded "as something that will unite the families of both husband and wife,"<sup>55</sup> making them into one large family. According to Mbiti, this African view of marriage was built on the understanding that a person does not exist by himself/herself; "he (*sic*) exists because of the existence of other people."<sup>56</sup>

The first step in the marriage process, therefore, is the decision that a young man is ripe for marriage. Sandhya notes that in the developing countries of the world, "parents play a major role in choosing marriage partners for their

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<sup>51</sup> Smt Sandhya, (S.J.), "Parental Influence on Mate Choice Criteria," *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 15/2 (2013): 1.

<sup>52</sup> William Abraham, "Sources of African Identity," in *Africa and the Problem of Its Identity* (ed. A. Diemer; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1987), 22.

<sup>53</sup> Sunday B. Deezia, "II-II Wa (Traditional Marriage): Towards the Typologies of Marriage in Ogoni Traditional Philosophy," *UJAH: Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities* 21/1 (2020): 112.

<sup>54</sup> Takin Ojua, Felicia E. Lupata & Chiemezie Atama, "Exploring the Neglect of African Family Value Systems," *American Journal of Human Ecology* 3/3 (2014): 44; cf. Jonah Abah, "The Impact of Christianity on Igala Traditional Marriage," *UMA: Journal of Philosophy and Religious Studies* 10 (2015): 3.

<sup>55</sup> Omosade J. Awolalu and Adelumo P. Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan, Onibonoje Press, 1979), 178.

<sup>56</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 57.



children."<sup>57</sup> Among most ethnic groups in Nigeria, it was the parents of a young man, particularly his father, who took the decision that he was old enough to have a wife. Among the Yoruba, when the parents noticed that their son was mature enough to get married, they made arrangements to get a wife for him.<sup>58</sup> Bolaji adds that in Yoruba culture, marriages were mostly "arranged by the parents on both sides."<sup>59</sup> It was the same practice among the Igala of the north-central region. When the father of a young man who was old enough to marry noticed a particular young woman, he would approach her father "to ask for his daughter's hand in marriage."<sup>60</sup> Ogoma explains that in the past, the belief of the Yoruba was that a man did not know when he was ripe for marriage. The parents, after observing some "fundamental changes in their son would determine when it is time to marry."<sup>61</sup> This buttresses the traditional belief among many ethnic groups that the elders are wiser than the children and can always "forecast what the child cannot see no matter how smart the child may be."<sup>62</sup> Sometimes, parents began the search for a wife "without the knowledge of their son"<sup>63</sup> just as the girl whose hand was being sought in marriage might not be informed initially.<sup>64</sup> But both the suitor and the young woman had no option, as they must obey "the dictates of their parents."<sup>65</sup> Similarly, among the Nupe, also of the north-central region, young people could not reject whomever their parents chose for them "even if they [did] not know each other."<sup>66</sup> It is important to mention that it is not in all places that wives are chosen by parents. For instance, in some parts of Igalaland, such as Ankpa and Olamaboro areas, the choice of marriage partner was determined "by the individual [man] intending to marry."<sup>67</sup> It was the responsibility of the young man to search for a young woman to marry. When he found one, he informed his parents and the process of marriage would begin in earnest. After the young woman had been identified by either the parents of the young man or himself, the next step was for the young man's parents to approach the parents of the young woman "to ask for their daughter's hand in marriage."<sup>68</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Sandhya, "Parental Influence on Mate Choice Criteria," 1.

<sup>58</sup> Eburn D. Ogoma, "Reflection on an African Traditional Marriage System," *Journal of Social Sciences and Public Affairs* 4/1 (2014): 97.

<sup>59</sup> Labanji S. Bolaji, cited in Agnes E. Maliki, "Determinants of Mate Selection Choice among University Students in South-South Zone of Nigeria," *Edo Journal of Counselling* 2/2 (2009): 168.

<sup>60</sup> Abah, "The Impact of Christianity," 3.

<sup>61</sup> Ogoma, "Reflection," 97.

<sup>62</sup> Hannatu K. Ali et al., "An Investigation on the Forgotten Aspects of Cultures and Influence of Western Education among Communities in Niger State, Nigeria," *International Journal of Education & Literacy Studies* 6/3 (2018): 35.

<sup>63</sup> Ogoma, "Reflection," 97.

<sup>64</sup> Abah, "The Impact of Christianity," 3.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Ali et al., "An Investigation on the Forgotten Aspects of Cultures," 33.

<sup>67</sup> Abah, "The Impact of Christianity," 6.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

If the girl's parents were willing to give her out to the suitor, the request was granted only in principle. That was because marriage could not be entered into until thorough investigations of both families were carried out by the parents.

Among most ethnic groups in Nigeria, conducting prenuptial investigations was the most crucial stage in the marriage process. In the past, doing investigations on the choice of a marriage partner actually meant consulting the oracle. There is a Yoruba saying, "*Bi oni ti ri, ọla ko ri bẹẹ lo mu ki babalawo d'ifa ojoojumọ*,"<sup>69</sup> which means that the reality of today is different from that of tomorrow, hence, the *Ifa* Priest consults his oracle on a daily basis. For this reason, the parents of the intending couple would consult the *babalawo* (*Ifa* Priest) to ensure that there was "no record or trace of serious disease or crime or both"<sup>70</sup> in the family their son/daughter was about to marry into. As Abah puts it, the investigations were to reveal whether either of the families had "hereditary diseases; if either family's forefathers were outcasts, or had some other bad character."<sup>71</sup> The Igbo family of southeast Nigeria would want to find out:

[I]f the girl was an *osu* (outcast) because an *osu* was not allowed to marry a *diala* (freeborn); was from a respectable family and had good character; whether her family had any blood disease including epilepsy or had some undesirable family traits such as stealing, barrenness, promiscuity, curses and hereditary sicknesses, etc.; whether there was a history of sudden death and so on.<sup>72</sup>

The Tiv of north-central Nigeria used to make prenuptial investigations into a prospective bride's family background to determine whether she was from a wicked family, for example. It was believed that "such a woman might introduce the gene of wickedness"<sup>73</sup> into her husband's family.

After concluding all the investigations, the parents of the bride-to-be would declare their interest and willingness to release their daughter to the suitor's family for marriage. Once their consent was obtained in this way, the young man's parents would engage an intermediary, usually a trusted member of the family, to manage the rest of the process. The role of this person, the *alarina*, as the Yoruba call him, was to convey "the messages of the intending in-laws to the parents of the lady."<sup>74</sup> The Igala call this intermediary an *atogba*

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<sup>69</sup> Ogoma, "Reflection," 98.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Abah, "The Impact of Christianity," 3.

<sup>72</sup> Kenneth C. Nwoko, "The Changing Nature and Patterns of Traditional Marriage Practices among the Owerre-Igbo, a Subgroup of the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 33 (2020): 686.

<sup>73</sup> Mike Ushe, "The Effect of Christian Religious Education on Traditional Marriage Customs among the Tiv, Central Nigeria." *Global Journal of Human-Social Science: Arts & Humanities – Psychology* 15/6 (2015): 24.

<sup>74</sup> Ogoma, "Reflection," 97.

*oya* who is expected to be trustworthy and fair especially with respect to the payment of the bride price.<sup>75</sup> After all the requirements had been met, the intermediary would take the woman by the hand ceremonially and give her to the young man's father, who would, in turn, give her to the husband.<sup>76</sup> The Nupe refer to this final stage as *emikpe*, that is, the official declaration of interest or engagement, during which the boy's family "will send certain items such as rice, kola nut, chicken and little amount of money."<sup>77</sup> Among the Igala, it is an occasion for "feasting within the family circle"<sup>78</sup> in which food and drinks were moderately provided.

The significance of the role of parents in the marriage process in Nigeria resides in the desire for their children to marry the right persons in order to have enduring marriages. In this way, the kinship system gave "the moral backing in determining the [right] partners."<sup>79</sup> The investigations forestalled getting married to persons who had some form of hereditary diseases, generational curses or bad character and therefore "reduced the tendencies for the breakup as a result of [later] discovery."<sup>80</sup> Ojua et al. opine that:

[F]amily involvement in marriage arrangement acted as a social support and security for African marriages. During periods of material crisis that threatened to break such marriages, the family intervened ... to save the marriage. [Thus] ... the survival and stability associated with African ... marriages [are] linked to the concern and social support received from other family members.<sup>81</sup>

Unfortunately, the marriage process in Nigeria has lost the traditional emphasis on the parental role in the choice of partners. Consequently, failed marriages, as in the case of Samson and his Timnite wife, are a major social concern. Christianity and modernisation are often seen as the major factors in the neglect of parental role in the marriage process in Nigeria, as in other parts of Africa. According to Deeza, with the advent of the two, "the traditional marriage system has been sacrificed on the altar of modernization."<sup>82</sup> The integration of Christian marriage into African culture became "a means of delimiting the strength of traditional marriage."<sup>83</sup> For example, the Christian teaching "that God

<sup>75</sup> Abah, "The Impact of Christianity," 7.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ali et al., "An Investigation," 33.

<sup>78</sup> Abah, "The Impact of Christianity," 7.

<sup>79</sup> John C. Nwaogaidu, "Conversion and Influence of Christianity on African Traditional Marriage Rituals," Paper presented at the 4th International Conference on Social Science, Humanities and Education in Berlin, Germany, 15–17 December 2020, 148.

<sup>80</sup> Nwoko, "The Changing Nature and Patterns," 686.

<sup>81</sup> Ojua et al., "Exploring the Neglect," 47.

<sup>82</sup> Deeza, "Towards the Typologies of Marriage," 128.

<sup>83</sup> Nwaogaidu, "Conversion and Influence of Christianity," 146.

has a rightful partner for everyone"<sup>84</sup> conflicts with the role of parents and the family in the African setting. Thus, with the influence of Christianity and modernisation, the choice of marriage partners is no longer based on parents and family decisions but "on faith in God, beauty, love and charm, educational background and status."<sup>85</sup> Whereas marriage was a family affair in the traditional setting, now "Christians see marriage as a private affair"<sup>86</sup> between the individuals concerned. These factors embolden some Christian youths to defy their parents' wish in the choice of life partners,<sup>87</sup> so much so that sometimes "parents may or may not be informed" of their decision to marry.<sup>88</sup> This is the influence of the Western concept of marriage as a union of a man and a woman joined together by love; it is a practice in which a man meets a woman anywhere "and love begins."<sup>89</sup> The current trend is thus characterised in many instances by "spouses marrying in defiance of parental consent."<sup>90</sup> As in the case of Samson, in some instances, parents are drawn in willy-nilly and if they refuse to be drawn in, "the church and the court are ready to"<sup>91</sup> conduct the wedding. Some churches interfere in the choice of future partners so much that they disallow inter-denominational marriage.<sup>92</sup> Hence, Deeza observes that sometimes in place of parents and family members, "pastors and church elders now drive the marriage processes."<sup>93</sup> One trend is that, where the church or court is adamant on parental consent, "parents are rented or hired for the purpose of the marriage."<sup>94</sup> There is now a method by which "marriages are contracted through the social media."<sup>95</sup> As in many parts of the world, some Nigerians now shop for marriage partners on the internet and get married through that process.

The implications of ignoring the parental role in the choice of marriage partners are enormous. As mentioned earlier, many writers have attributed the rampant failure of marriages and "the high rate of divorce"<sup>96</sup> to this neglect. Hence, Nwaogaidu states that the chances of stability of marriage are reduced if

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>85</sup> Abah, "The Impact of Christianity," 10.

<sup>86</sup> Deeza, "Towards the Typologies of Marriage," 128.

<sup>87</sup> Nwaogaidu, "Conversion and Influence of Christianity," 146; Abah, "The Impact of Christianity," 10.

<sup>88</sup> Ogoma, "Reflection," 100.

<sup>89</sup> Ojua et al., "Exploring the Neglect," 48.

<sup>90</sup> Aylward Shorter, *African Culture, an Overview: Social-Cultural Anthropology* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), 94.

<sup>91</sup> Ogoma, "Reflection," 100.

<sup>92</sup> Matthew Ojo, "Religion and Sexuality: Individuality, Choice and Sexual Rights in Nigerian Christianity," *Africa Regional Sexuality Resource Centre* 4 (2005): 8.

<sup>93</sup> Deeza, "Towards the Typologies of Marriage," 128.

<sup>94</sup> Ogoma, "Reflection," 100.

<sup>95</sup> Deeza, "Towards the Typologies of Marriage," 129.

<sup>96</sup> Ojua et al., "Exploring the Neglect," 48.

marriage is not built on the consent of parents and family members.<sup>97</sup> The traditional prenuptial investigations and their value of ensuring "the success and stability of marriage"<sup>98</sup> are lost and the outcome is the instability in many Nigerian homes today. It is noteworthy, however, that some Christian parents still engage the services of traditional diviners in the choice of partners for their children, just as they do for other life issues, while many others consult pastors, prophets and prophetesses for the same purpose.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, the implications of ignoring the parental role may not be in the area of traditional investigations but in the non-involvement of parents in probing the nature and character of the family and person their children are entering into marriage with.

## **D CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Samson's disregard for his parents' guidance in his marriage resulted in the failure of that marriage, as he ended up marrying a woman who turned out to be a betrayer. This article found this story relevant to the role of parents and the family in mate selection in the Nigerian context. In traditional African society, marriage was a family affair, never considered merely as the union of a man and a woman. Hence, in Nigeria, it was the parents of a young man who made the decision that their son was old enough to marry and began the process of getting a wife for him. In the marriage process, neither the boy nor the girl could decline the parents' wish. One important role of the parents was in conducting pre-marriage investigations about the background and character of the family their daughter or son would marry into. Family involvement acted as a social support and security for the marriage and thus ensured stability. However, due to the advent of Christianity and modernisation, marriage is no longer seen as a family affair, as parents play little or no role in the choice of their children's marriage partners. In Nigeria today, this trend is a major factor in the breakdown of marriages and the high rate of divorce, particularly among Christians.

The Samson marriage narrative is thus relevant and can be employed as a remedy for marriage instability among Nigerian Christians. The church in Nigeria needs to review its marriage theology to emphasise the role of parents in mate selection. Currently, most denominations have doctrines on marriage. Some conduct induction courses for intending couples, requiring counselling

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<sup>97</sup> Nwaogaidu, "Conversion and Influence of Christianity," 148.

<sup>98</sup> Ogoma, "Reflection," 100.

<sup>99</sup> Alexander I. Abasili, "Seeing Tamar through the Prism of African Woman: A Contextual Reading of Genesis 38," *Old Testament Essays* 24/3 (2011): 566; Bimbo Amole, "Of Christianity, Infertility and Ethics in Nigeria," *Academia*, 2011. [https://www.academia.edu/1438243/Of\\_Christianity\\_Infertility\\_and\\_Ethics\\_in\\_Nigeria](https://www.academia.edu/1438243/Of_Christianity_Infertility_and_Ethics_in_Nigeria).

before they are "joined in the church."<sup>100</sup> Many churches also hold adult and youth classes on marriage, while all give wedding sermons reflecting their marriage theology. More than before, these courses and sermons should lay emphasis on the need for parental involvement in the choice of partners, using the Samson story as a literary instrument, among other biblical texts. In this way, the church will be utilising the Samson marriage narrative to speak to the context of the high rate of marriage failures in contemporary Nigerian society arising from non-parental and family involvement, among other factors. Specifically, a marriage theology which draws on the Samson marriage narrative would prompt the church to identify various ways parents can participate in the choice of their children's marriage partners in modern times. While one would not recommend the old methods of prenuptial investigations by consulting the oracle, the Samson example indicates that parents need to probe the character of the family and individuals that their children wish to marry. When it is discovered that the family and especially the prospective partner, has traits of bad behaviour that may threaten the marriage in the future, the Samson experience shows that it is better to abort the plan. Nonetheless, in applying the Samson marriage narrative to contemporary Nigerian contexts, parents should be reminded that guiding their children in the choice of future partners does not translate to choosing husbands or wives for them. This warning becomes necessary in view of cases in which some parents try to compel their daughters to get married to certain men for selfish reasons.

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<sup>100</sup> Ime N. George and David E. Ukpong, "Combating the 21st Century Family Challenges in Nigeria for Social Stability through Family Counselling Services," *Developing Country Studies* 3/4 (2013): 54.

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