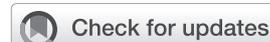


# Genesis 24:48–54 and the role of mediator(s) in the marriage practice in Awkunanaw, Enugu State, Nigeria



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A middle person plays an important role in marriage practice especially in Igboland. This study remains significant in shaping cultural customs in Awkunanaw. This study aimed to analyse Genesis 24:48–54 within its original context and apply its exegetical insights to the cultural realities of Awkunanaw. The research design adopted is exegetical, using a narrative method of biblical exegesis to study the text. Data were collected and analysed qualitatively. The findings reveal that, in contemporary Igboland in general and Awkunanaw in particular, some middle persons have abused the trust placed in them, using their positions for selfish ends. In Genesis 24:48–54, Eliezer, the intermediary between Abraham's family and Bethuel's family in the marriage arrangement of Isaac and Rebekah, remained committed and faithful to his mission. The opposite, however, is often the case today. Many modern intermediaries in Awkunanaw exploit their positions for various ulterior motives. The findings indicated that such abuse of mediatory roles in marriage practices has jeopardised the cherished cultural heritage of the people. The current tendency to neglect the mediatory roles of adults and experienced elders in marital relations is a serious concern that needs urgent attention to ensure better preparation of young men and women for lasting marriages. The authors intended to discuss this issue in Awkunanaw through the lens of Genesis 24:48–54. This passage can serve as prototype of a good mediation in marriage, promoting healthy human relationship in Awkunanaw.

**Contribution:** The study offers middle persons in Awkunanaw the opportunity to improve their mediatory roles in marriage practices. Contemporary mediators can emulate Eliezer's idiosyncrasy to ensure preservation of cultural heritage and guide the younger generation more effectively.

**Keywords:** mediator; marriage practice; role, young women; young men; Genesis 24:48–54; Awkunanaw.

## Introduction

Marriage transactions in traditional Igbo society usually involve a mediator – also referred to as a middle person – who is entrusted to liaise between the families of the groom and the bride to ensure a successful marriage. In Genesis 24:48–54, Eliezer served as the intermediary between the families of Abraham and Bethuel in arranging the marriage between Isaac, the son of Abraham, and Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel. Walvoord and Zuck (1983) observe that the account of Abraham's servant Eliezer, who was tasked with finding a wife for Isaac, exemplifies the concept of a middleman in Old Testament marriage customs. Similarly, Douglas and Zuck (1994) note that Eliezer facilitated the meeting between Rebekah and Isaac, acting as a mediator to ensure that the marriage was arranged in a way acceptable to both families.

In traditional Igbo culture, marriage is a carefully structured process involving intermediaries who act as mediators, negotiators, and facilitators between the families of the bride and the groom. The middle person plays a vital role in ensuring that cultural protocols are followed, communication remains respectful, and agreements are mutually satisfactory (Ottenberg 1959). Uchendu (1965) asserts that such mediators help to mitigate tensions, ensuring that neither family loses face during negotiations. Their participation signals the consent of both lineages, reinforcing social cohesion. By ensuring adherence to *omenala* [customary practices], including the proper payment of the bride price and ritual exchanges, these intermediaries safeguard the integrity of the marriage process. However, this important role has increasingly been neglected in contemporary times.

From time immemorial, the people of Awkunanaw have witnessed successful marriage transactions facilitated by trusted and reliable intermediaries. According to Ugwuewo (2023:137), ‘an intermediary, known as *onye na-efi otuwa* or *onye otuwa*, is a common component of Awkunanaw marriage arrangements’. This person is someone the young woman’s family trusts and who serves as a liaison between the families of the prospective bride and groom. *Onye na-efi otuwa* may refer to a person who is regarded as trustworthy, having a solid reputation, and admirable qualities. Such an individual may be married or unmarried and, as Nnaji (n.d.) adds, must be a close family friend or relative, male or female, and – most importantly – someone held in high esteem and trusted by both families, particularly the young women’s family. The involvement of a middle person has contributed to the success of many marriages, ensuring that all necessary processes, including the verification of the suitor’s identity and other formal requirements, are properly fulfilled.

However, the declining attention given to the crucial and critical mediatory role in Awkunanaw has contributed to the breakdown of marriages in recent times. This study therefore seeks to examine Genesis 24:48–54, with the aim of using its exegetical findings to address marriage practices in Awkunanaw in relation to the significant role of the middle person.

The research design adopted for this study is biblical exegesis, specifically employing the narrative method. The narrative approach is appropriate for studying Old Testament texts, which are largely story-based. It provides a chronological account of events while exploring the world and perspectives of the characters within the narrative. As Obiorah (2015:96) explains, ‘the need of this method is to investigate how the narrator engages and draws the readers into his narrative world’. The narrative method is thus particularly suitable for this study, as the passage under consideration presents a sequential account of Eliezer’s mediation between the families of Abraham and Bethuel concerning the marriage of their children, Isaac and Rebekah.

## Hebrew text of Genesis 24:48–54

The Hebrew text of Genesis 24:48–54 reads as follows:

48 ואקד ואשמתנה ליתנה ואברך את־יהוה אלהי אברך־ם אשר  
הנחני בקרר אמת לקחת את־בת־אחי אדני: לבנו  
49 ועתה אם־ישלכם עשׂים חסד ואמת את־אדני הגידו לי ואם־לא  
הגידו ואפנה לי על־ימין או על־שמאל  
50 וישעו לבן ובתואל ונאמרו מיתהוה איך הדבר לא נקבל  
דבר אליך רע: או־טוב  
51 הנה־ירבקה לפגוד קח וגו' ותהי אשה לבן־אדניך כאשר  
דבר: יתנה  
52 ויהי כאשר שמע עבד אברהם את־דבריך וישתחו ארצה: ליתנה  
53 ויצא העבד פלי־כסו וכלי זקב ובגדים ותנו לרבקה ולמגדת  
נתנו לאחיה: ולאמיה  
54 ויאכלו וישתו הוא והאנשים אשר־עמו ונלינו ונקוממו  
בבקר ויאמר שלתני: לאדני

## English translation of Genesis 24:48–54

The English version of Genesis 24:48–54 reads:

<sup>48</sup>And I bowed low and worshiped the LORD, and blessed the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who had guided me in the right way to take the daughter of my master’s kinsman for his son.

<sup>49</sup>Now then, if you will deal loyally and truly with my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so that I may turn either to the right hand or to the left.

<sup>50</sup>Then Laban and Bethuel answered and [they] said, ‘The thing [matter] comes [comes out] from the LORD [Adonai]’; we have no power to speak to you anything bad or good.

<sup>51</sup>Behold, Rebekah is before you, take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master’s son, as [whom] the LORD [Adonai] has spoken [to].’

<sup>52</sup>And it took place as when Abraham’s servant heard their words, that he bowed himself to the ground to the LORD.

<sup>53</sup>And the servant brought out vessel of silver [money] and vessel of gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekah; and he gave excellence [precious gifts] to her brother and to her mother.

<sup>54</sup>And they ate and drank, he and the men who are with him; and they stayed through the night. When they rose in the morning, he said, ‘Send me to my master’.

## Sitz-im-Leben of Genesis 24:48–54

Genesis 24:48–54 recounts how Abraham’s servant secured Rebekah as a wife for Isaac. This episode reflects the intersection of patriarchal custom, covenantal promise, and Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) legal tradition. According to Speiser (1964) and Hamilton (1995), the narrative aligns with the practices of early second-millennium BCE semi-nomadic tribes, in which marriage served as an alliance between families rather than merely a union between individuals. The Nuzi tablets and Mari texts document treaty and bride-price [mohar] customs are similar to those seen in the servant’s negotiations with Rebekah’s brother Laban (vv. 50–53). Matthews (2005) further observes that the communal decision-making structures of Mesopotamian clans are reflected in Laban and Bethuel’s authority over Rebekah’s marriage (v. 51).

The servant’s repeated emphasis on Yahweh’s guidance (vv. 48–49) underscores the fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant (Gn 12:1–3) and corresponds with the Yahwist source’s focus on divine promises (Von Rad 1972). According to Wenham (1994), Rebekah’s incorporation into Abraham’s family is symbolised by the giving of jewellery and garments (Gn 24:53) – gestures reminiscent of later Israelite covenantal rites.

Moreover, the narrative legitimises Isaac’s lineage by tracing Rebekah’s ancestry to Nahor’s Aramean clan (Gn 24:10), thus

reinforcing the kinship networks vital to Israel's tribal identity (Alter 1996). Sarna (1989) adds that the narrative serves as a didactic model for post-exilic communities, exemplifying hospitality through Rebekah's act of drawing water (Gn 24:18–20) and piety.

## Close reading of Genesis 24:48–54

In biblical studies in general, and in Old Testament scholarship in particular, close reading often refers to the contextual analysis of a selected biblical text or passage. It involves a detailed explanation or the biblical pericope, giving meticulous attention to syntax, grammar, context, and the specific use of words and expressions in the original language(s).

## Ecstatic mood for finding the proxy wife (Gn 24:48–49)

The opening statement of this pericope indicates that Eliezer was successful in the proxy marriage mission entrusted to him as the middle person. His personal thanksgiving to the LORD is expressed in causative terms. The Hebrew phrases used by Eliezer to thank the LORD for a successful task include *וַיְבָרֵךְ*, *וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה*, and *וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה*.

The verb *וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה* derives from the Hebrew root meaning 'to bow down' or 'to kneel', probably signifying reverence before the Supreme Being. *וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה* stems from the Hebrew root meaning 'to bow down to make declaration in worship of the Supreme Being', while *וַיְבָרֵךְ* comes from the Hebrew root 'to bless, especially the name of the God'.

The reason for Eliezer's thanksgiving is expressed in the subsequent phrase, 'who had led me by the right way to obtain the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son'. According to Wenham (1994), the servant gave thanks to God for his unwavering love and faithfulness to his master and then asked whether Rebekah's family would respond in kind. Geber (2018) likewise observes that Eliezer's mission – to secure a wife chosen by God for Isaac through a proxy marriage – was remarkable. Having faithfully undertaken the journey to Mesopotamia, Eliezer rejoiced in its divinely granted success. His words of gratitude to the LORD reveal genuine joy, inspired by the fulfilment of his mission.

Eliezer's request to Laban's family arose from his confidence in the success already accomplished through divine guidance. He anticipated a favourable response from Laban regarding Rebekah's marriage to Isaac. In this narrative, Eliezer exemplifies the qualities of a trustworthy and selfless intermediary in a proxy marriage. His foremost concern was his master Abraham's interest, and he resisted personal pressure or selfish ambition, fulfilling his mediatory role with wholehearted faithfulness.

## The first meeting and conversation of proposed in laws (Gn 24:50)

Verse 50 of this study text constitutes a distinct literary unit. It opens with Abraham's servant Eliezer, encountering for the first time the household of Rebekah's father Bethuel. This verse and its surrounding context mark the beginning of dialogue between the two parties. At this point, Eliezer is afforded the opportunity to outline the purpose of his long and demanding journey (Ugwuewo 2023).

The Hebrew phrase *וַיַּעַן לָבָן וּבְתוּעַל* [Then Laban and Bethuel answered] suggests a continuation of conversation. The Hebrew conjunction *wi*, used as *wa* because of its form in the text, is most often translated as 'and' better rendered as 'then' in the context of this passage. The use of the Hebrew word *וַיַּעַן* in the text authenticates this claim. Bethuel and Laban's willingness to engage in dialogue, already evident from their keen interest in Eliezer's account, prompted them to respond promptly to their visitor. Their readiness to participate in the conversation was what prompted them to speak to their visitor.

The term *וַיַּעַן* may be interpreted as an acknowledgment that the story narrated by Eliezer is regarded as the very word for *וַיַּעַן*.

Calvin (2002) comments that:

They assert that it would be illegal for them to present any opposition, even though they are persuaded by the man's words that God was the author of this marriage. They proclaim that the thing is from the Lord because he made his will evident through the most obvious indicators. (p. 44)

The Hebrew verb *וַיֵּצֵא*, best translated here as 'comes out', rather than merely 'comes' (as found in the New Revised Standard Version [NRSV] and New American Standard [NAS]), reinforces this conviction. Thus, the clause *וַיֵּצֵא מִיְהוָה* implies that Bethuel and Laban were persuaded that the events narrated by Eliezer were divinely ordained. The marriage arrangement was understood to originate directly from the divine source, with the verb *וַיֵּצֵא* conveying a strong allegiance to this idea. Henry (1996) offers two interpretations of the Hebrew clause *וַיֵּצֵא מִיְהוָה*:

They first place a great deal of trust in his integrity, as it seems to be guided and determined by Infinite Wisdom. It would be good if honesty were so widely accepted among people that taking a man at his word could be considered as much a sign of good character as it is of caution. Secondly, they place a greater trust in God's providence, and thus silently give their consent. (n.p.)

The final sentence in verse 50, *וְאֵי-טוֹב רַע אֲלֵיךָ דָבָר נוֹכַח לֹא* [we cannot speak to you bad or good], signifies total acceptance. It is crucial to note that Bethuel and Laban were not convinced merely by Eliezer's eloquence, but by their inner conviction that the matter he presented bore unmistakable divine approval. They concurred with his account without resistance or persuasion. However, it is to consider critically the purpose of the expression *טוֹב-אֲרֵרַע* [bad or good] in the

text. These two opposing terms are interchangeably used in Hebrew grammar to convey contrasting terms such as 'bad and good', or 'unpleasant and pleasant'. While רע can denote 'bad, calamity, distress, misery, or evil', טוב conveys meanings such as 'good, pleasant, good tiding, agreeable, good thing, welfare'. The narrator carefully employs these two words to achieve a specific purpose. The use of these two Hebrew adjectives speaks volume of Bethuel and Laban's decision to refrain from disputing or interfering with a matter they perceived to be divinely ordained. They could neither offer him an unfavourable response that might suggest that his mission had failed, nor a favourable one that would imply that they already know the mind of יהוה even before Eliezer embarked on his journey. These men await the eventual outcome of Eliezer's mission – success confirming God's approval, failure signifying rejection. Their consent, therefore, is expressed not through words but through silent acknowledgment. In this regard, Henry and Scott (1997) note that Bethuel and Laban's major concerns were both temporal and spiritual: if the proposed marriage accorded with godliness, it must surely be a success.

## Proxy marriage arrangement (Gn 24:51)

In this passage, the discussion of Eliezer's primary purpose in visiting Bethuel's household continues. The Hebrew particle הִנֵּה meaning 'behold' or 'lo', functions as an interjection. Okwueze (2013:269) notes that 'the frequent use of הִנֵּה in the different narratives in the Hebrew Bible suggests a direct address. It presupposes the physical presence of both the narrator and the listener'. Within the context of this text, the term denotes a direct response from Bethuel's family to Eliezer, affirming the physical presence of both parties in the marriage negotiations. It highlights that, in this arrangement, the proxy representatives of both families were personally engaged – none were absent from the transaction. Following הִנֵּה, the Hebrew verb לָקַח appears, here used in the *Qal* stem and in its perfect form, which typically expresses the simple past tense in Hebrew. The root לָקַח carries a range of meanings, including 'take (take to, or take for a person)', 'take away', 'lay hold of', 'seize', 'take a wife', 'marry'. In this context, it is best translated as 'take for a person'. In the present text, however, the verb appears in the imperative form קַח (*qah*), signifying that Bethuel grants Eliezer authority to take Rebekah as a wife for Isaac – subject to Rebekah's consent. Carson (1994) remarks that the servant exemplifies both loyalty and persuasive discourse, representing his master's interests faithfully in word and deed.

Rebekah is introduced as Isaac's wife and Esau and Jacob's mother. Abraham's insistence that his son marry within his kinship circle gave rise to the Old Testament account of Rebekah, which forms the basis for a significant narrative analysis of the entire book. Upon inquiring about Rebekah's name and her family background, the servant discovered that she was the granddaughter of Abraham's brother Nahor,

thereby identifying her as Abraham's own descendant (Youngblood & Bruce 1997).

Based on the foregoing, Rebekah's admirable character is what makes her truly remarkable. While she possessed natural physical beauty, it was her moral and spiritual character that distinguished her from others. In her relationships, Rebekah displayed both strength and vulnerability, embodying a complex yet virtuous personality. She was a good, hardworking, and responsible daughter in her father's household as well as a trustworthy sister. She was modest, hardworking, friendly, and hospitable, showing kindness and consideration even to strangers. Her conduct reflected the moral instruction she had received at home, which she vividly demonstrated when she encountered Eliezer on the road. Above all, she was a devout worshipper of יהוה.

The phrase לְבָרֵךְ אֶת־בְּנֵי אֲדֹנָי [and let her be your master's son's wife] further clarifies Eliezer's role as Abraham's servant. Eliezer's presence in Bethuel's household was not motivated by personal intention but by his solemn commission to fulfil his master's directive. The use of the Hebrew term אֲדֹנָי suggests that Eliezer possessed no independent authority to act otherwise. The term אֲדֹנָי, commonly translated as 'lord', can denote the superintendent or head of a household within the Jewish family system. Obiorah (2014) notes that Sarah, Abraham's wife, acknowledged and accepted her husband's authority over the family by using the phrase אֲדֹנָי, which means 'my lord'. It is employed to identify a person who enjoys great social esteem. The term can also describe a governor, ruler, or proprietor. However, יהוה (commonly rendered LORD but pronounced *Adonai*) is distinct from אֲדֹנָי. Whereas יהוה refers to God as the Supreme Lord of the universe whose authority is absolute, אֲדֹנָי applies to human authority, limited to the household or a particular social domain. Therefore, the servant held no right to challenge his master's authority or to question his chosen means of accomplishing his purpose.

## Relief of Eliezer, Abraham's servant (Gn 24:52)

At this point, Abraham's servant is approaching the moment of fulfilment after completing his journey to secure his lord's interest. His joy is not self-centred; rather, it arises from the knowledge that his master would be pleased with the successful outcome of the mission. The phrase שָׁמַע עַבְדְּךָ אֲבִרָהָם מֵאִת־דִּבְרֵיהֶן [Abraham's servant heard their words] places particular emphasis on the 'words' being spoken. These words have a profound impact on the hearer – eliciting both response and motivation. The words are indeed living words. McGee (1997) attests that 'the words Eliezer heard are the earnest guarantee of the words of יהוה. He [*Eliezer*] is justified by faith and he had the peace of God'.

The internal satisfaction that followed prompted Eliezer's spontaneous act of worship to יהוה as recorded in the text. Spontaneous worship of יהוה is a defining feature of the patriarchal religion of the Old Testament. It is possible that

Eliezer learned this practice from his master Abraham. Although, the narrative does not specifically mention that Eliezer build an altar, his immediate worship of יהוה clearly reflects the style of patriarchal religion. In correspondence to this view, Echeta (n.d.) affirms that:

The altar was a highly significant object of devotion during Abraham's time and the remainder of the patriarchal era, and it was primarily built in honor of theophany, or God's manifestation. This worship method was introduced by Abraham, the great patriarch, and persisted throughout the patriarchal era. Patriarchal religion was impromptu and unstructured. (p. 47)

Elieser's act of bowing down in worship before יהוה, as recorded in the text, is attestation that he acknowledged the presence and manifestation of יהוה.

## Ecstatic mood of merriment (Gn 24:53–54)

When Eliezer's message was accepted by Bethuel's family, he (Eliezer) expressed his happiness by the giving of gifts. It appeared that he had prepared well in advance based on the way he presented the items. From the outset, he was ready to fulfil his mission. The list of objects mentioned in the text, including jewellery of gold and silver, clothes, and expensive decorations, confirms the preparedness of the giver. This supports the usage of מוציא, best translated as 'brought out', as the most appropriate rendering in the context. The above-mentioned products were quite luxurious.

The Hebrew phrase קְלִי־כֶסֶף needs further explanation in this study. The two words occur in a construct relationship within the text. The term קְלִי means 'utensil' or 'vessel', while כֶסֶף means 'silver' or 'money'. The word קְלִי designates a vessel used to hold an item. In the context of this text, it is a container, not an item itself. By contrast, כֶסֶף refers to an item – whether a monetary item or its equivalent.

The next event closely related to the preceding event occurs in verse 54a. Following Eliezer's presentation of precious gifts to Bethuel's family, the household responded by offering a sumptuous meal to Eliezer and his team. The Hebrew compound clause וַיֵּשׂוּ וַיֹּאכְלוּ [and they ate and drank], found at the beginning part of verse 54, conveys an atmosphere of joy and celebration. It is uncommon to eat and drink in sorrow; such actions typically accompany pleasant occasions in the life of an individual or family at a particular point in time. The preparation and presentation of the meal by Bethuel's household therefore signify that Eliezer and his men were welcomed and that his mission had been accepted.

## Exegetical deductions

The following deductions are made on the findings of this exegesis:

- Eliezer's mission to the Bethuel household to find a wife for Isaac was entirely free from self-interest.

- The parents of the young woman in the passage were well acquainted with the background of the mediator (middleman) and with that of the proposed proxy suitor for their daughter. The mediator himself knows and understands the customs of the land.
- Rebekah's parents used discernment in determining whether their daughter's marriage was a divinely ordained. This exegetical conclusion is supported by the Hebrew expression employed in the study, הַדָּבָר מֵיהוָה [the matter or the stuff comes from יהוה], which affirms that the marriage plan originated from a divine source (Gn 24:50).

## The roles of mediator(s) in marriage practice in Awkunanaw

First and foremost, a mediator must demonstrate the quality of impartiality. Mediators are expected to remain neutral and unbiased, ensuring that all family members feel heard. In addition, a mediator must be an attentive listener – able to understand the true interests and concerns of all parties involved. Effective mediation also requires creative problem-solving skill; mediators should encourage families to work collaboratively in developing their own solutions. Such a person must be familiar with the culture of the land. Furthermore, mediators must be well acquainted with the customs and traditions of the people they are helping (Nwankwo 2021).

One of the major roles of a mediator in marriage practice is pre-marital mediation and guidance. Traditionally, in African societies, including Nigeria, marriage is understood as a union between two families and not just two individuals. Therefore, families play a significant role in the process, with senior family members or elders frequently serving as mediators. In some African cultures, mediation begins at the initial stages of the so-called 'love negotiations'. This suggests that, even before any formal agreement is reached, respected figures may provide guidance to the prospective couple and their families (Green 1964). In Igboland, for instance (Nwosu 2013):

a mediator is *Umunna* [kinship group's] delegate who conducts due diligence on the bride/groom's family, assessing character [*agwa*], health [*ahụ ike*], and lineage [*obiri*], including history of "aru" [abominations] or mental illness [*isi mgbaka*]. Mediators can easily achieve this entrusted duty through the assistance of elder male relatives [*ndi okenye*] or professional investigators [*onye nyocha*]. (p. 46)

Traditional mediators are deeply rooted in cultural customs and values. Their emphasis lies in the reconciliation and preserving of family unity. The dowry or bride price forms a significant component of many Nigerian marriages, and mediators play a crucial role in negotiating the terms of the dowry, ensuring fairness and mutual respect between both families (Eze 2017). On some occasions, the letter of intent is also delivered through a mediator. In some Nigerian cultures, the groom writes a letter of intent to the bride's parents, which is read aloud by a family member. This process frequently involves mediators, who ensure proper

communication and acceptance of the proposal. According to Onah (2010), in Awkunanaw, the mediatory role also encompasses ceremonial mediation. In this context, mediators participate in *ihe omume emume* [ritual facilitation] and *igba afa* [betrothal]. A mediator presents gifts [*ihe onyinye*] and is entrusted with *idu ulo* [wife-taking]. The mediator also oversees the bride's symbolic resistance [*igba mgba*].

Another significant role of a mediator in marriage practice in both Nigeria generally and Awkunanaw particularly is conflict resolution within marriage. Respected community elders often intervene in marital disputes according to cultural customs. Mediators provide a neutral environment in which couples can discuss sensitive issues openly and honestly, without fear of judgement. Mediators help couples to express their feelings clearly and respectfully, thereby improving dialogue and reducing misunderstandings (Uchendu 1965).

Moreover, mediators can assist couples to recognise emotional wounds and identify the underlying causes of recurring conflicts. The goal of mediation is often to restore social equilibrium and harmony within the community. Such mediation is often guided by communal values, emphasising togetherness and a holistic view of life. In Awkunanaw, a mediator – referred to as *onye nkuzi di na nwunye* [marriage counsellor] – advises couples and therefore assumes an advisory role. To ensure stability of the marriage, the *Nne di* [husband's mother] may also intervene as a mediator in conflicts between husband and wife (Ibeanu 2015).

## Application of the mediatory ethos of Genesis 24:48–54 in the context of marriage mediation in Awkunanaw

Firstly, Rebekah's parents used discernment in determining whether their daughter's marriage has a divine approval. Their agreement to the marriage plan rested solely on the recognition of divine intervention. From the outset, they affirmed that it was the LORD who initiated the marriage arrangement. This exegetical insight is derived from verses 50–51 of the studied text. It is therefore recommended that parents in Awkunanaw emulate the example set by Rebekah's parents. The parents' primary concern in the passage stemmed from their belief that יהוה was actively involved in the process; consequently, they found no reason for dispute. In the contemporary context, parents of young women should likewise seek the divine will concerning their daughters' marriage and acceptance of prospective suitors. In Ugwuwewo (2023) words:

Most times, the factors that motivate parents to decide approval of their daughters' choice of marriage and acceptance of suitor(s) of their daughters are not farfetched from avarice and gluttony. (p. 131)

The exegetical deduction serves as a warning to modern Awkunanaw parents to refrain from such practices, thereby sustaining peace and social development of the community.

Secondly, the parents of the young women in the studied text were well acquainted with the background of the proposed proxy suitor for their daughter. The marriage mediator also possessed a clear understanding of the culture of the land. Abraham, being the kinsman of Bethuel, was a familiar figure. He was a man whose family background was well established and trusted. Considering this, modern Awkunanaw parents are to adopt a similar practical approach. Any suitor who seeking to marry a daughter in Awkunanaw should have his background thoroughly investigated. This is especially important, particularly in the current age, when corruption and other immoral practices are rampant.

A typical marriage arrangement in Awkunanaw involves a mediator (middle person), commonly called *onye na-aji otuwa* or *onye otuwa*. This individual, trusted by the family of the young women, serves as a channel of communication between the families of the prospective bride and groom. The *onye na-aji otuwa* may be either a man or woman of good reputation and upright character, whether married or single (Ugwuwewo, Obiorah & Odo 2024). The essential qualification is the level of trust placed in this person, especially by the family of the bride.

In the studied text, Eliezer is the equivalent of *onye otuwa* or *onye na-aji otuwa*. The exegesis concludes that Eliezer's mission to the Bethuel household to find a wife for Isaac was not driven by selfish interest. Rather, he undertook a herculean task of fervent dedication to prayer, seeking יהוה's intervention and assistance. *Onye otuwa*, also known as *ndi otuwa* in the plural, should emulate Eliezer's example in any marriage transaction in which they are involved. They must remain impartial in their assessment of the marriage arrangement, ensuring peace and maintaining transparency between both families.

In the text, Eliezer is portrayed as a man of generosity. Throughout his journey, he demonstrated honesty, with his main concern being the fulfilment of his master's will without delay. The foregoing remains a prototype for *ndi na-aji otuwa* in Awkunanaw. Their role in any marriage arrangement must be carried out without any ulterior motives if the union is to be successful. Eliezer's attitude in the marriage by proxy in the study stands as a challenge to *ndi na-aji otuwa* in similar mediatory roles in contemporary Awkunanaw.

## Recommendations

Based on this study, the following recommendations are introduced:

- Marriage mediators should emulate the example of Eliezer to achieve a common goal of a successful marriage. They should also provide wise counsel to young women and prospective suitors, with special regard to the sanctity of the marriage relationship.
- Strict regulations should be established to prevent parents and guardians from exploiting their daughters as commodities or objects of profit through proxy marriage arrangements.

- Parents and guardians must be acquainted with the background of any suitor before consenting to their daughter's marriage.
- Middle persons should conduct themselves with transparency and integrity when communicating and mediating between both parties in marriage by proxy.

## Conclusion

This study highlights the enduring cultural and theological significance of the middle person in marriage negotiations, drawing parallels between the biblical narrative of Genesis 24:48–54 and contemporary practices in Awkunanaw, Enugu State, Nigeria. The middle person in marriage by proxy (*onye na-eji otuwa* in Awkunanaw dialect), like Abraham's servant in Genesis 24, functions as a trusted mediator who ensures adherence to cultural protocols, facilitates constructive dialogue, and upholds familial honour throughout a marriage transaction. While Genesis 24 primarily reflects male agency through Abraham's servant, Awkunanaw practices recognises both men and women as intermediaries in marriage negotiation.

The middle person's role also reflects divine providence, as seen in Genesis 24, where God's guidance secures a successful union. Likewise, Awkunanaw elders invoke ancestral blessings [*igo ofo*] to sanctify unions. Although urbanisation and Western influences continue to challenge some traditional customs, the Awkunanaw community still values and upholds intermediaries to honour and facilitate successful marriage transaction.

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## CRedit authorship contribution

Chisom S. Ugwu: Writing – original draft, writing – review & editing. Amarachi S. Ugwu: Methodology. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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## Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its listed references.

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