

Obiajulu's Children and the Wicked Sons of Eli (1 Sam 2:11–17)

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ABSTRACT

The two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas (1 Sam 2:11–36), served along with their father as priests at Shiloh in the tabernacle, where the ark of the covenant was housed (1 Sam 1:3). While in service, Eli's children became sons of worthlessness (*bānē-bāliyya'al*), dishonest, wicked and corrupt, as well as refused to know the Lord (*lō' yāqā'ū 'eṭ-'ādōnāi*) and his teachings. They were unrighteous, greedy, intimidating, immoral, and abusive to women at the entrance of the temple (vv. 12–22). Eli did little to correct them, leading to God's punishment. Some scholars have examined this narrative with Western historical models, lacking African stories, cultures, customs, and experiences, where there are similar incidences of children's misbehaviors and challenges of their upbringing in the African context. Using an African Biblical Hermeneutical approach with illustrative stories from Zain E. Asher's memoir, *Where the Children Take Us: How One Family Achieved the Unimaginable*, this work contextually examines 1 Sam 2:11–17, within the theological contexts of the Books of Samuel and Deuteronomistic History (Josh–2 Kings). It compares Obiajulu's disciplined and trained children (Obinze, Chiwetel, Zain, Kandibe) and the obedient boy, Samuel (vv. 18–22), with the consequences of the blasphemies and corruption of Eli's children (vv. 11–17). It proposes lessons that no matter how we perform our duties in the church, schools and families, sadness may still come if we neglect to train our children responsibly in righteousness, integrity, hard work, and in the fear of the Lord.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Unlike the story shared in Zain Asher's memoir, *Where the Children Take Us: How One Family Achieved the Unimaginable*, the narratives of the worthless sons of Eli in 1 Samuel 2:1–36 form a part of the stories we find in the 1 and 2 Samuel. The latter tells Israel's history from the foundation of the State, which spans from the close of the Judges to the establishment of the monarchy, including the reigns of Saul and David. While the former narrates the challenges, African parents go through to raise four successful and God-fearing children. In the biblical story, Eli had two male children, Hophni and Phinehas. Three of them served together as priests at Shiloh in the tabernacle, where the ark of the covenant was housed (1 Sam 1:3). While in service, unlike the good boy Samuel, who would serve an important transitory function during the period of the judges and the monarchy (vv. 18–21), the bad sons of Eli became sons of worthlessness (*bānē-bāliyya'al*). They became disobedient, wicked, bossy, irreverent, dishonest and corrupt. In verse 12, they refused to know the Lord (*lō' yāqā'ū 'eṭ-'ādōnāi*). They practiced unrighteousness using their authority and influence as priests to extort from the people. They engaged in greed, selfishness, meat stealing, arbitrariness, and abuse of women at the entrance of the temple. They indulged in all other forms of unimaginable immoral behavior (1 Sam 2: 1–22). Unfortunately, Eli, their father, and with all his good intentions, did very little to correct his children, resulting in God's punishment.

This narrative delights many scholars. As a result, some have engaged and studied the theological narrative of Eli's male children with western historical models (Birch, 2015, pp. 309–343; Branick, 2011, pp. 44–77; Cambell & O'Brian, 1998, pp. 572–607; Hertzberg, 1964; Hill & Walton, 2009,



pp. 257–276; Koenig, 2024; Planet, 2024). Such approaches have always lacked elements of African stories, cultures, customs, and experiences, which were used in this study. Since there are similar issues regarding the challenges of children's as well as parental responsibilities in Africa, this work examines 1 Sam 2:11–17 using the tools of African Biblical Hermeneutics (ABH) as the post-colonial-theological approach. This is done within the contexts of 1 and 2 Samuel and of the theology of Deuteronomistic History (Josh–2 Kings). While highlighting the transitory function of the good boy, Samuel, Elkanah, and Hannah's child, a comparison is drawn between the corruption of Eli's priestly children (Hophni and Phinehas) and the success story of Obiajulu's African children (Obinze, Chiwetel, Zain, Kandibe). Obiajulu's children exemplarily matured through enduring challenges and good and responsible parenting, as eloquently illustrated in Zain E. Asher's work, *Where the Children Takes Us* (Asher, 2022).

In this story, Zain Ejiofor Asher, a graduate of Oxford University and Columbia University in the United States and popular host of CNN's One World, describes the early challenges her family went through as Nigerian immigrants in the United Kingdom. After their father, Arinze's death in a tragic car accident, their mother, Obiajulu, was left to raise her and her three other siblings (Obinze, Chiwetel, and Kandibe). These were not without challenges, such as illiteracy, starvation, poverty, racism, bad neighborhoods, tribalism, violence, and the horrible Nigerian civil war. With discipline, and unlike Eli, Hophni, and Phinehas in the Books of Samuel, they matured into success because of their mother's tenacity, strictness, hard work, presence, and responsible parenting.

The consequences of Eli's sons' blasphemies and corruption (vv. 11–17) are argued and contrasted with Samuel's good manners and those of Obiajulu's children throughout the work. Finally, it proposes the lessons for parents, teachers, and religious leaders that no matter how we perform our duties in the church, schools, and families, sadness may still come if we neglect to train our children responsibly in righteousness and in the fear of the Lord.

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND CONCEPTS

As an approach, African Biblical Hermeneutics (ABH) is one of the concepts used in this study. This approach, according to David T. Adamo, is nothing less than “bringing real-life interest into the biblical text and then [assigning] a very important role to this life interest” (Adamo, 2015, pp. 31–52; Udoekpo, 2023). African Biblical Hermeneutics “is the principle of the interpretation of the Bible for transformation in Africa . . . that is vital to the wellbeing of our society” (Adamo, 2015, pp. 31532). It is an “African cultural hermeneutics,” “African biblical, transformational hermeneutics,” or “African biblical studies,” which involves reading the Christian Scriptures from an African perspective or worldview and culture (Adamo, 2015, pp. 31–33). Its task is “liberational and transformational.” That is, understanding the Bible and God in relation to the African experience and culture, promoting African culture and identity, and making biblical interpretation relevant to Africans' daily experiences (Adamo, 2015, pp. 33–34).

Justin Ukpong frames this approach as “inculturation hermeneutics” (Udoekpo, 2017, p. xxii, Udoekpo, 2022, pp. 16–23; Ukpong, 2002, pp. 17–32). That is, “a contextual hermeneutical methodology, or approach that seeks to make any community of ordinary people and their socio-cultural context the subject of interpretation of the Bible” (Ukpong, 2002, p. 18). It emphasizes the use of the conceptual frame of reference of the people doing the reading in the interpretation process and its characteristics. Its goal is consistent socio-cultural transformation, focusing on a variety of issues and situations, while its ethos is cultural diversity and identity in reading practice (Ukpong, 2002, p. 18). Even when we contextualize and appropriate, Robert Schreiter advises that “theology must not be reduced to context in a crude contextualism, for then it is likely to lose its critical edge as it becomes simply a product of its surroundings” (Schreiter, 1997, pp. 1–27). In other words, reading ancient Old Testament texts like the Books of Samuel in our African times—that is, using African Biblical Hermeneutics—can be challenging. But this becomes easier when we keep in mind that the Word of God, which became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14), is both timeless and without boundaries (Isa 40:8; 1 Pet 1:23–25).

By implication, the theological narrative in 1 Samuel 2:11–17 is capable of “entering into and finding expression in various cultures and languages, yet that same word overcomes the limits of individual cultures to create fellowship between different people” (Benedict XVI, 2010, p. 16). African Biblical Hermeneutics must be distinctively communal, existential, reflective, African, and comparatively evaluative in using Africa and African culture to interpret the Bible, as is the case in this study (Adamo, 2015, pp. 34–40; Mbuvi, 2023, pp. 3–111). Moreover, the terms “sons” and “children” (*bānim*), which occur about 4,850 times in the Hebrew Bible, can be used differently and metaphorically in biblical tradition (Carroll, 2001, pp. 123–124).

Here, Carroll (2001) extensively describes all the people of God as bearing the identity and role of a child in relation to God. Preeminently, “the king is “adopted” as son of God at his enthronement (e.g;

Locu., Pss 2:7; 89:26–27; 2 Sam 7:14).” But, Israel as a whole can be term a child and God’s “son” (Exod 4:22–23; Hos 11:1; Deut 1:31) and the image is associated with divine compassion and deliverance (Carroll, 2001; John 1:12–13; Gal 4:1–7; I John 3:1–2, 10; 5:19; Rom 8:14–17, 29). Israel, which all of us can identify with in one way or another, can be metaphorically seen as a child and God as a divine parent (Strawn, 2008, pp. 103–140). Here, Strawn argues that the limits, the potential, and ethical implications of such imagery and metaphor of God as a parent suggest that “human parents must strain to the highest and best levels . . . of parenting, care, and nurture of their children” (Strawn, 2023, pp. 189–224). Additionally, and in this study, “sons” and “children” (*bānim*) are used interchangeably to express “family or hereditary relationship, and particularly a son begotten by a father” (Bergman & Ringgren, 1975, pp. 145–147; Haag, 1975, pp. 147–159; Holladay, 1988, p. 42; Miller, 2008, pp. 47–48; Mounce, 2006, pp. 667–669).

Mounce (2006, p. 667) further stresses that sometimes the plural of *bēn*, that is, *bānim* can also mean “male children” (1 Samuel 2:11–17) or children of both genders (Gen 3:16; 5:4), that is, sons (*bānim*) and daughters (*bānôt*). Additionally, a brief background overview of our story in the Books of Samuel, comprising its text, composition, purpose, literary structure, and textual limitation, is imperative. This is designed to serve as a springboard for the working outline adopted in the rest of the exegesis that follows.

3. AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOKS OF SAMUEL

At the beginning of the narrative in 1 Samuel, Israel is presented as a loose federation of tribes, experiencing both external threats from the Philistines’ military power and internal threats from the corruption and wickedness of Eli’s children at Shiloh (1 Sam 2:11–36). At the end of 2 Samuel, an emerging monarchy, divine authority is established under David. In fact, 1 and 2 Samuel span the period of the transition from the Judges through the founding of the monarchy, including the reigns of Saul and David. They were originally one book, as attested by many scholars (Birch, 2015, pp. 309–316; Cambell & Flanagan, 1990, pp. 145–146; Hertzberg, 1964, pp. 17–18; Hill & Walton, 2009, p. 258). It was the LXX translators, perhaps while creating a scroll of more manageable size, who classified the books of Samuel and Kings as 1–4 Kingdoms. They also must have influenced Jerome’s Latin Vulgate. The Masoretic text (Hebrew) assumes a one-book arrangement and traditionally to date refers to these books as the Book of Samuel, perhaps in recognition of the significant role Samuel, the son of Elkanah and Hannah (unlike the children of Eli, Hophni, and Phinehas), played in the establishment of the monarchy (McCarter, 1984, pp. 3–4).

Its Hebrew text, with few inherent problems, has also been studied and extensively debated, of which the entire details are beyond the scope of this paper (Cambell & Flanagan, 1990, p. 145; McCarter, 1984, pp. 5–11). Its long history and layers of composition, influenced by the Deuteronomic theological perspective (Joshua–2 Kings), as argued by Lenoard Rost, Gerhard von Rad, Martin Noth and others, are believed to have covered the centuries from the beginning of the monarchy to the Babylonian exile and the post-exilic period (Branick, 2011, pp. 45–46; Noth, 1981; Rost, 1988; von Rad, 1966, pp. 166–204).

The major purpose of the books of Samuel is theological. They were written, among other things, to give us the history and theology of the establishment of the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7) and the development of the proper concept of divine authority (Dumbell, 1990, p. 50; Hill & Walton, 2009, p. 259).

3.1. Division, Context, Text and Delimitation

With regard to the Books of Samuel, there are as many literary structures and divisions as there are scholars (Birch, 2015, pp. 322–323; Cambell & Flanagan, 1990, p. 146). Vincent P. Branick is one of them. He divides it topically into the following seven structures (Branick, 2011, p. 47):

- a) 1 Samuel 1–7 (The last Judges, Eli and Samuel, and the Philistine Oppression)
- b) 1 Samuel 8–15 (Samuel and Saul, the Institution of the monarchy, and Saul’s rejection)
- c) 1 Samuel 16–31 (Saul and David; David befriended by Saul, later persecuted)
- d) 2 Samuel 1–4 (David, king over Judah after the death of Saul)
- e) 2 Samuel 5–12 (David, king over all Israel)
- f) 2 Samuel 13–20 (Rebellion against David)
- g) 2 Samuel 21–24 (Appendices).

Similarly, Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton broadly divide or structure the Books of Samuel into (Hill & Walton, 2009, p. 258):

- a) The Shiloh Traditions (1 Sam. 1:1–4:1a)

- b) The Ark Narrative (1 Sam. 4:1b–7:1)
- c) The Institution of the Monarchy (1 Sam. 72–12:25)
- d) The Reign of Saul (1 Sam. 13–15).
- e) David's Rise to Power (1 Sam. 16:1–2 Sam. 5:10)
- f) David's Successes (2 Sam. 5:11–9:13)
- g) David's Failure (2 Sam. 10–24)
 - 1. Men Acting against him: the Succession Narrative (2 Sam. 10–20)
 - 2. God Acting him: Appendix (2 Sam. 21–24).

In what precedes, 1 Samuel 2: 11–17 is located within the remote context of the last Judges in Israel (1 Sam 1–7), namely, within the context of the Shiloh traditions (1 Sam. 1:1–4:1a). These traditions introduce us to Samuel. With particular attention to vv. 11–17, they inform us that from birth, there was something unique about Samuel that was not going to be found in the rebellious children of Eli (1 Sam 2:11–36).

3.2. The Text of 1 Samuel 2:11–17

Verses 11–17, our specific text of focus reads are shown in [Table I](#).

At a glance, 1 Samuel 2:11–17 has a few minor textual issues, variations, expansions, human errors, a mixture of singular and plural expressions, and other rough edges. They are minor since they may not necessarily impede the theological meaning of the text. A good example is in verse 11a, where several other medieval manuscripts of the OT (*mlt*, *Mss*) use the proposition “*el*” (to, towards, unto), while the *MT* uses “*al-bêtō*” (“over,” “upon his house”) to testify that Elkanah went back to his house in Ramah (later on, *lō* (“to”) will be attested in *Mss* variants, in 1 Samuel 10:26, where Saul is said to have gone back to his house). In verse 13a, the *MT* simply attests “*et-hā’ām*” (“with the people,” or “to the people,” that is to say, “the custom of the priests with or to the people” ([Hertzberg, 1964](#), p. 32). While other several manuscripts including the *LXX*, *Peshitta* and *Targum*, just like in Deuteronomy 18:3, attest “*mē’et hā’ām*” (from the people), that is, “what was due to the priests from the people” ([Hertzberg, 1964](#), p. 32). Similarly, in verse 14, the *LXX*, the *Leningrad Codex* of the Hebrew OT, as well as several other medieval manuscripts of the Hebrew OT, including the *Targum*, *Peshitta* of the OT, and the *Vulgate* all testify “all” (*kōl*) that the fork brought out the priest would apportion to “himself” (*bō*). Noticeable, the *LXX*, *Peshitta*, *Targum*, and *Vulgate* all use 3rd person masculine singular pronoun “himself” (*bō*), while *kāḳā ya’āšū* (this is what they did) of v.14b is attested in the *MT*, and in another medieval manuscript of the OT. Perhaps it is a reminder that they were two male sons of Eli. The offense was committed not by one person or one child. Again, v.14b is further expanded by the *LXX* to read, “who came there to sacrifice to the Lord” (*thusai tō kuriō*). In verse 15, *wā’lō’ yiqqah* (for he will not take or accept) is attested in the 3rd person singular in the *MT*, while the *LXX*, followed by

TABLE I: WORKING TEXT OF 1 SAM 2:11–17

Masoretic text	English translation
11a). wayyēlek ‘elqānā hārāmātā, (b) ‘al-bêtō, wəhann’ar hāyā m’ešrēt ‘et-’ādōnāi, ‘et-pənē ‘elī hakkōhēn.	(a) And Elkanah went home to Ramah, (b) while the boy remained to minister to the ‘LORD, in the presence of the priest Eli.
12a). ūbənē ‘elī bənē bəliyyā’al (b) lō’ yādō’ū ‘et-’ādōnāi.	(a) It happened that the sons of Eli were wicked/scoundrels; (b) they/did not know/ had no regard for the LORD.
13a). ūmīšpaṭ hakkōhānīm ‘et-hā’ām. (b) kōl- ‘īš zōbēḥa zōbāḥ ūbā na’ar hakkōhēn, kəbāššēl habbāšār wəhammazēlēg šālōm-haššinnayīm	(a) Nor for the duties/claims/customs of the priests to the people. (b) When anyone offered sacrifice, the priest’s servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand.
14a). wəhikkā ḥakkīyyōr ‘ōbaddūd, ‘ō baqqallaḥat, ‘ō bappārūr kōl šer ya’āleh hammazēlēg yiqqah hakkōhēn bō. (b) kāḳā ya’āšū ləkōl-yiśrā’el habbā’īm šām bəšīlōh.	(a) And he would thrust it into the pan, or kettle, or caldron, or pot, all that the fork brought up, the priest would take for himself. (b) This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there.
15a). Gam bəterem yaqtirūn ‘et-haḥēlēb ūbā’ na’ar hakkōhēn wə’amar lā’īš ḥazzōbēḥ tənā bāšār lišlōt lakkōhēn (a)wā’lō’ yiqqah mimməḳā bāšār məbūššāl kī ‘im-ḥai.	(a) Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest’s servant would come and say to the one who was sacrificing, “Give meat for the priest to roast; (b) for he will not accept boiled meat from you, but only raw.”
16). wayyō’mer ‘elāw hā’īš qater yaqtīrūn kayyōm haḥēlēb wəqah-ləḳā ka’āšer tawweh nagāšēkā wə’amar, lō kī ‘attā tittēn (b) wə’im-lō’ lāqḥattī bəḥāzqōh.	(a) And if the man said to him, “Let them burn the fat first, and then take whatever you wish,” he would say, “No, you must give it now; (b) if not, I will take it by force.”
17a). wattəḥī ḥaṭṭa’ī hannō’ārīm gəḏōlā mē’ōd ‘et-pənē ‘ādōnāi, (b)kī nī’āšū hā’ānāšīm ‘et minḥat ‘ādōnāi,	(a) Thus, the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the LORD; (b) for the men treated the offerings of the LORD with contempt.

the *Pesshita*, *Targum*, and *Vulgate* prefer, “*kai ou mē labō*,” the subjunctive aorist active, 1st person singular of *lambanō*). The *MT* reads *ka’āšer* (according to which), while the other Hebrew manuscripts from *Qumran* attest *makul-’āšer* (from all you desire). In addition, the plural noun (*hā’ānāšîm*), “the men” of verse 17, is absent in other Hebrew manuscripts from the *Qumran* and the *LXX*. These minor discrepancies and variations notwithstanding, a brief highlight on the literary structure of verses 11–17, for the rest of the detailed analysis and exegesis, is imperative.

3.3. Literary Structure of Verses 11–17

Interestingly, after Hannah’s song (vv. 1–10), which I will consider in this context as a foreshadowing of Obiajulu’s sense of prayer, hard work, sacrifices, and the discipline she brought to bear on her children, narrated in *Where the Children Take Us*, the literary structure of this section is carefully crafted to contrast the wickedness of Eli’s children (*bānim*). It is the most fully developed portion of this section of Shiloh traditions. It focuses on the corruption of Eli’s children and the consequences that flow from their misbehavior (vv. 11–36).

In other words, verses 11–17 are drawn from the larger context of verses 11–36, and they concentrate on the terrible pattern of grave abuses as well as high disregard for the priestly office by Eli’s children. Verses 18–21 is a brief episode and interruption in the middle of this horrible story, which serves as an ironic conclusion to the prior story of Hannah (vv. 1–10), leading to the blessings of her household and Samuel, who grew up in fear of the Lord, (v. 21). While verses 22–26 narrate the ineffective attempt by Eli to control, educate, and discipline his children’s bad behavior, but was unfortunately ignored by them. Finally, verses 27–36 account for the consequences of the wickedness of Hophni and Phinehas. What follows is an exegetical and comparative analysis of verses 11–17 within the broader context of 1 Sam 2:11–36 and Obiajulu’s children.

4. A COMPARATIVE EXEGESIS OF THE WICKED ACTS OF ELI’S CHILDREN (VV. 11–17)

Our narrative interestingly begins in verse 11 with the story concerning a family, which we basically acknowledge as a “community of parents and children” (Udoekpo, 1997, pp. 1–3). It’s about the family of Elkanah, Hannah, and Samuel. Although Hannah is not mentioned in this verse, we are told Elkanah returns home to Ramah after carefully and intentionally dropping off his son, “the boy” (*hann’ar*), to minister Worship and serve (*leitourgeō-LXX*) the Lord in the temple, under the care of another family head, Eli the priest (v. 11). Eli’s family stories with his boys, “the young men” (*hannā’ārîm*, v. 17), unfortunately, will soon go a different negative or contrasting direction (v. 12). It is the opposite of Elkanah and Hannah’s upbringing of Samuel, “the boy” to know and fear the Lord. Samuel became a person of great impact, echoing and foreshadowing Zain Asher’s narrative tribute to her mother, Obiajulu, and siblings (Obinze, Chiwetel, and Kandibe), that:

Almost three decades later, the boy (“*hann’ar*”) once left for dead in that morgue had become an Academy Award nominee, the baby she carried in her womb, Kandibe, had never met her father, but followed in his footsteps by becoming a doctor in London. The daughter standing beside her now a global news anchor. And Obinze, then a troubled teenager, had landed on his feet as a successful businessman (Asher, 2022, p. 210).

Unlike Samuel, Obinze, Chiwetel, Kandibe and Zain, the sons of Eli (*ūḥanē ‘ēlî*) described in verse 12, were “the sons of *Belial* (*ēlî bānē bāliyyā’al*) who “*did not know the Lord*” (*lō’ yādā’ū ‘et-’ādōnāi*). In Theodoret J. Lewis’ observations, “*Bāliyyā’al* in Hebrew means wickedness and is often found in compounds expressing evil people. For example, we hear of “man of *bāliyyā’al*” and “sons of *bāliyyā’al*” (Lewis, 1992, pp. 654–656; McKenzie, 1995, p. 87). Statistically, the word itself, “*bāliyyā’al*” “occurs about 27 times in the Hebrew Bible” (Lewis, “Belial,” 655). Some of these occurrences are found in Psalm 18:5–6, 2 Samuel 2:5–6, Proverbs 6:11, and Judges 19:22; 20:13. This includes Deuteronomy 13:14, where the wicked ones who seduced Israel away from worshipping their God to adore other gods are described as “sons of *bāliyyā’al*”. So also are the evil sons of Eli in 1 Samuel 2:12, “who do not know the Lord” (*lō’ yādā’ū ‘et-’ādōnāi*).

The verb “*yādā’*” (to know), used here to describe Eli’s children’s disrespect before the Lord, expresses a wide range of meanings in the Bible that are connected to the idea of “knowing” or “understanding” (Mounce, 2006, p. 381). Its root “*yd*” and its derivatives, as noted by Botterweck, occur 1058 times in the Hebrew OT, and 51 times in the Aramaic sections (Botterweck, 1986, pp. 448–481). It is acknowledgeable by many, including William Mounce, that the epistemology of the OT “is far more holistic than that of the western philosophy . . . thus, knowledge gained through sensory experience and that which comes through intellectual apprehension is not distinguished categorically,

rather, both are viewed as valid and necessary of aspects of knowledge acquisition” (Mounce, 2006, p. 381). Mounce further explains that, “*yāda*” could be understood in four different ways by the Hebrews:

1. “*Yāda*” could be paired with verbs of perception (see, hear, learn) and used idiomatically to denote the process of gaining knowledge (Lev 5:1; Deut 4:35; 1 Sam 12:17; 14:38; 2 Sam 24:13; Isa 4:1:20).
2. “*Yāda*” is also used in connection with “heart (prov 27:23; Eccl. 7:22; 8:5; Isa. 42:25; 51:7; Jer 12:3). That is to say the heart (*lēb*) is the place of cognitive activity, for the ability to know is related to one’s heart.
3. Knowledge (“*yāda*”) as expressed in wisdom literature (Job 28:13; 28:23; Prov 1:7), for true knowledge of God is bound up with a relationship with God.
4. Knowledge in the sense of relationship, that is, sexual intimacy as in the case of Adam and Eve in Genesis 4:1 (McKenzie, 1995, pp. 485–488; Mounce, 2006, p. 382).

The fourth group, knowledge in the sense of relationship, to me, falls within the category of using “*yāda*” to denote one’s covenantal relationship with God rather than just mere cognitive ability. For instance, when Pharaoh said in Exodus 5:2, “I do not know the Lord,” he declared that he had no covenant obligation to him. Within the covenant context, Mounce (Mounce, 382) insists that knowing the Lord means “to acknowledge the covenant relationship” (Hos 6:6; Jer 31:34). Likewise, Mounce (“Know; Old Testament,” 382) maintains, “when God knows Israel (Deut 9:24; Hos 5:3–4; 13:5), it means that he has entered into a covenant relationship with her as a husband to his wife (Jer 31:32; Ezek 16:32).”

Patrick D. Miller, in his work, “*That the Children May Know: Children in Deuteronomy*,” written generally, in a covenantal way, gives an illustration (Deut 1:39–32:42) underlining not only who the children are, but what they are to know and learn. Miller’s covenantal list includes; the fear of the Lord, as we find in Wisdom Literature, God’s ordinances, community’s ethics, good character, rules, and honoring of their parents and elders (Miller, 2008, pp. 45–62).

Similarly, Solomon Ademiluka’s work, “*The Deuteronomists’ Accounts of the Delinquencies of David’s Children: Relevance for Contemporary Africa*,” stresses, among other things, that, just as emphasized were placed in ancient Israel, where Eli’s children were raised, on the need to discipline children in fear of the Lord, to know him, and respect their parents, in traditional Africa setting, the “development of good character in every person is right from childhood, and this is well represented in various aspects of traditional African culture” (Ademiluka, 2004, pp. 12–25).

It is in the light of this covenant relationship, of which the sons of Eli formed a part, that Israel’s, and their particular unfaithfulness and disregard to the Lord, as a whole, could be seen (Hos 5:4; Ezek 6:9; Isa 1:2; 1 Sam 2:11–36). In other words, unlike the faithful and obedient Samuel and Obiajulu’s hardworking African children, Eli’s male children (1 Sam 2:12) defiled their priestly calling, betrayed good character, and displayed total disregard for the Lord, refusing to know him (*lō’ yāda’ū ’et-’ādōnāi*). Of course, these are pockets and patterns of behavior that are prevalent in modern societies, including in Africa.

In verse 13, the sons of Eli were not interested in performing their customary duties of the priest to the people (*ūmišppaṭ hakkōhānīm ’et-hā’ām*). Rather, they stole what was offered to God. In Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg’s words, “They are concerned for their own profit and not for the correct performance of the will of God. Their preoccupation is with the maintenance of their privilege” (Hertzberg, 1964, p. 34) That is to say, like many modern children today, Eli’s children broke the customs of their times (Lev 7:31ff; Deut 18:3). It was customary that with many of the sacrifices brought to the tabernacle, a portion was given to God; a portion was given to the priest, while a portion was kept by the one bringing the offering. The priest was supposed to receive a portion of the breast and the shoulder. But, later, after the law of Moses was given, the priest was now to take whatever the fork brought out of the pot (Exod 29:27–28). The portion that was to be given to God was always to be given first. It was completely wrong for Eli’s children to hurriedly and with no patience and gentleness take the priest’s portion before they burned the fat. At that time, “fat” was regarded, of course, as the best part of the animal that should have been reserved for God. The idea was that the best goes to God. That is to say, God first. In their pride, Eli’s children took their portions raw before they burned the fat. By their actions, Hertzberg (I & II Samuel) stresses that they “put arbitrariness in place of law, human selfishness in place of the will of God. The fact that they acted while the meat was boiling is meant to show the greed which governed all their actions” (vv. 15–17; Hertzberg, 1964, p. 35).

Ironically, these were priests who were supposed to be role models, by their actions, to the lay people in the presence of the Lord (v. 17). Rather, they treated the offerings of the Lord with contempt, as evident in the rest of the narrative, they exploited the people (v. 22), abused women sexually before the tabernacle (v. 22). Unlike Samuel (v. 18–21), Obinze, Chiwetel, Zain and Kandibe, who all grew up respectfully, Eli’s children would not listen to their father’s admonition (v. 23–26). Unlike Obiajulu’s

children, particularly Chiwetel, whom we learn in chapter 6 (Asher, 2022, p. 75), that “more than once, she (that mother) handed Chiwetel a book before heading to the pharmacy on a Saturday and asked him to read it from cover to cover by the time she returned that evening” and he obediently did and followed the mother’s directives.

Eli did not fully listen to the directives of the man of God nor to God’s warning to remove or proactively restrain his children. This omission eventually led to their punishment with death the same day, making room for a true priest raised by the Lord. This is unlike Obiajulu, whom we learn from Zain Asher, that when Obinze, one of her children, “wouldn’t come some nights, Chiwetel, who was barely a teenager, would join my mother (Obiajulu) for long drives in the early hours searching the neighborhoods for him” (Asher, 2022, p. 75).

She knew that in Africa, “it is generally accepted that it is the responsibility of parents . . . to impart good character in the child” (Ademiluka, 2004, p. 20). Unlike Eli, for Obiajulu, “each day was a marathon of maternal responsibility: get the older kids to school and Kandi to daycare, ten hours on her feet at the pharmacy, cook dinner, put the baby to bed, study with me, and keep up with reading assignments for the boys. If she had any extra time, she gave it to Obinze” (Asher, 2022, p. 79). Consequently, Eli himself was charged with parental weakness and complicity in their apostasy (vv. 27–36), which was also communicated to Samuel thus:

Then the Lord said to Samuel, “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day, I will fulfil against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God and he did not restrain them.” (1 Sam 3:13, *NRSV*)

5. LESSONS FOR ALL—TODAY

Today’s children, especially African children, are faced with challenges of poverty, unemployment, inadequate educational and healthcare facilities, parental negligence, weak leadership, divorce as well as generally broken family structures (Udoekpo, 2020, pp. 7–23). Lovemore Togarasei and Joachim Kügler perfectly articulate these challenges in the following words:

Many children are therefore raised in single-often mother-headed families. There is also a new phenomenon in Africa of in-vitro fertilization (IVF) children, where the identity of the child’s father is not known. This phenomenon raises ethical questions that the church has to deal with. Even children born from ‘stable’ families are not spared from the trauma that accompanies childhood due to current socioeconomic developments. Many children are now born to professional parents who rarely have time for them. This makes the stage of childhood a time of crisis calling for reflection from multiple perspectives (Togarasei & Kügler, 2004, pp. 7–8).

Children from such divisive, negligent, and broken families may be guilty of immoral behavior and delinquencies, either by actively doing the wrong things, making bad decisions, or refusing to do right. Eli’s sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are described in verse 17 as “the young men” (*hannā’ārîm*), though not restrained by their parents, were guilty of doing strange and wrong things, unbecoming of clergymen anywhere. They refuse to know the Lord (*lō’ yādā’ū ‘et-’ădōnāi*). They stole part of sacrifices before the worshipping community had time even to offer them to the Lord in a customary way. By their customs and laws, eating up the flesh before the fat was burned was against the religious status quo (Lev 3:3–5). Treating God’s offering with contempt (vv. 12–17) and abusing women who served in the sanctuary (v. 22) is equally offensive in African culture. All these took root from Eli’s omission to discipline his children (1 Sam 3:13). By not paying attention to the sons’ worthless actions, Eli allowed his children to destroy their own lives and harm the lives of many other people in the community, including the women they abused. These unpleasant events can be very instructive to contemporary parents in Africa and beyond.

Obiajulu’s hard work, as described above, can also be a good example for African parents. In fact, “the primary and fundamental duty of parents, which we can say precedes all others, is a responsible assumption of parenthood” (Udoekpo, 1997, pp. 30–38). Even beyond the boundaries of African communities, some practical ways, from the perspective of this study, to make parental responsibilities effective, points equally suggested by Paul R. Grahl, include:

- a) Constant and caring communication between parents and children,

- b) Regular and well-prepared family meetings, such as family home evening, counsels, prayer, and scripture reading,
- c) Frequent family activities,
- d) Careful supervision and vigilance concerning the contents of movies, television programs, the internet, books, magazines, music, and other material so that the children can be alerted and guided past the ambushes and dangers found in the media (Grahl, 2023, pp. 1–5).

On the other hand, children can remain faithful to God and obedient to their parents in a poor environment that lacks some of the above-described structures. A good example is the obedient, contented, and faithful Samuel (vv. 18–26), who was raised and educated around the same context and culture where Eli's children, by choice and omission, were committing all the above crimes of disobedience, blasphemies and abuses (vv. 12–17, 22). Yet, Samuel faithfully served the Lord and remained happy with the little ephod and material support the parents were able to provide him. He grew in stature and in favor with the Lord as well as with his people and culture (v. 26). Same could be said of Obiajulu Justina Ejiofor. In spite of all that she passed through in life, such as genocide, famine, war-torn Nigeria, harsh neighborhoods of London streets that threatened the character of Obinze and others, racism, early loss of a husband, poverty, single parenting of troubled teenage children, her tenacity, presence, and good parenting saw her children (Obinze, Chiwetel, Zain, and Kandibe) through to success (Asher, 2022, pp. 38–53, 57–87, 88–104, 105–150, 167–186, 208–212).

6. CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion focuses mainly on the biblical theology of children. It exegetically and comparatively discusses the narrative of the wicked, worthless, and unethical activities of Eli's children in 1 Samuel 2:11–17, within the context of the Books of Samuel and DH. The analysis is done in the light of African Biblical hermeneutics. It uses and compares, as we saw, African stories and experiences portrayed in Asher's (2022) memoir. In this book, unlike Eli's bad children, Obiajulu's obedient, hardworking, and successful children (Obinze, Chiwetel, Zain, and Kandibe) are presented as role models for modern and contemporary children.

Similarly, the purity, contentment, humility, obedience, and listening -services of Samuel and his family-(vv. 18–21) are a contrast to the evils of Eli and his family. While Eli's children acted like “*bānē bāliyyā'al*” (sons of wickedness), refusing to know the Lord (*lō' yāḏā'ū 'et-'ādōnāi*), displaying greed, selfishness, abusing women in the sanctuary, taking the Lord's portion during sacrifices, focusing on their profits, acting with all kinds of arbitrariness (vv. 12–17), rejecting their father's rebuke (v. 25), Samuel lived patiently and obediently in the temple helping Eli in the priestly duties. Like the care and discipline Obiajulu gave to her children, Samuel's parents, Elkanah and Hannah, in their context, would bring him all that he needed within their limited means, including garments, the ephod, and other little robes. Compared to the above-described success of Obiajulu's disciplined children, Samuel was maturing in formation, fear of the Lord, and respect among his people. Ironically, this took place in the same culture and environment where Hophni and Phinehas were misbehaving (1 Sam 2:26).

In sum, no matter how well we may have performed our duties in the church, schools, and families as parents, grandparents, and teachers, unhappiness may come if we neglect to imitate Elkanah and Hannah, Arinze and Obiajulu in taking active responsibility in training, disciplining, and teaching our children in righteousness, hard work, resilience, selfless sacrifices, in the fear of the Lord, and in acquisition of his knowledge (*yāḏā'*). Well-trained children like Samuel, Obinze, Chiwetel, Zain, and Kandibe can definitely remain faithful and attain success, winning the Lord's favor and respect among their people in the most challenging and difficult circumstances of their culture.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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