


# Hannah's stigmatisation in 1 Samuel 1:6-8 in the modern Nigerian (Yoruba) context

**Author:**Solomon O. Ademiluka<sup>1,2</sup> **Affiliations:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

<sup>2</sup>Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Kogi State University, Anyigba, Nigeria

**Corresponding author:**

Solomon Ademiluka, solademiluka@gmail.com

**Dates:**

Received: 21 Mar. 2024

Accepted: 09 May 2024

Published: 30 Sept. 2024

**How to cite this article:**

Ademiluka, S.O., 2024, 'Hannah's stigmatisation in 1 Samuel 1:6-8 in the modern Nigerian (Yoruba) context', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80(1), a9810. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9810>

**Copyright:**

© 2024. The Authors.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Unlike Hannah, who eventually had a child, there are women today who remain childless. In the modern world, there are various reasons why women choose not to have children. Therefore, when interpreting the Hannah narrative in modern times, it is important to consider these evolving aspects of barrenness. This article applies historical-critical exegesis, narrative reading and a descriptive approach to examine Hannah's experience in the Nigerian context. It also evaluates African traditional beliefs on childlessness in light of modern realities. The study reveals that many women in pronatalist societies worldwide now choose to be child-free because of reasons such as difficulty finding marriage partners or financial instability. As these factors are also present in Nigeria, childless Nigerian women should embrace their situation and find happiness instead of succumbing to stigmatisation. To support these Christian women, the church in Nigeria must accept and teach the truth that not every woman needs to bear children.

**Contribution:** This article contributes to the discussion on Christian attitudes towards childlessness. It argues that the interpretation of Hannah's infertility in today's world should consider new circumstances, such as voluntary childlessness. In light of this argument, Nigerian women without children should embrace their situation and find happiness instead of succumbing to societal stigma.

**Keywords:** Hannah's barrenness; pronatalist societies; childlessness in Nigeria; child-free life; church in Nigeria; childlessness.

## Introduction

The narrative of Hannah's childlessness has been interpreted in the African and Nigerian contexts from several dimensions. Abasili (2015:581), for instance, interprets the narrative in light of the plight of childless women in polygamous African homes, making a clarion call for an 'informed and just response' to the ordeal of such women. Similarly, arising from his study of the narrative in the Nigerian context, Ademiluka (2019:1) urges the church in Nigeria to restrain their members from stigmatising barren women 'so as to reduce the psychological effects of childlessness' on them. In another article on Hannah, Ademiluka (2021a:7) notes that the main pastoral response to childless Christian women in Nigeria so far is to pray for and with them, encouraging them 'to keep trusting in God for the fruit of the womb'. However, beyond sympathising with childless women, the present research attempts to examine the provocations and agonies of Hannah (1 Sm 1:6-8) in the context of the prevailing realities in the modern world. While Hannah eventually had a child, in both the ancient and modern worlds, there have always been involuntarily childless women who never had children till they died. Moreover, in the 21st-century world, there are women who, for certain reasons, have chosen to remain child-free<sup>1</sup>. Hence, this article proposes that a scholarly interpretation of the Hannah narrative in modern times should necessarily speak to these evolving aspects of childlessness.

Involuntary childlessness 'is estimated to affect as many as 186 million people' all over the world (Inhorn & Patrizio 2015:411). In Schones' (2019:1) own estimation, infertility is a global health problem that affects the lives of about 10% of the world's population. In a research in south-western Nigeria, Adeyanju and Ayandiran (2013:48) observe that 'the prevalence of infertility was about 45%' in that region of the country. As expressed by Sule, Erigbali and Eruom (2008:226), about four 'million Nigerian couples [are] suffering from infertility'. As Inhorn and Patrizio (2015:411) rightly observe, even when male infertility contributes to more than half of the global cases, 'infertility remains a woman's social burden'. In Africa particularly,

1. The terms 'childless' and 'child-free' sometimes connote different conditions; but in this article, they are used interchangeably to refer to the condition of being without a child either voluntarily or involuntarily.

**Read online:**

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

the childless woman represents the 'public face of infertility' (Baloyi 2017:3; cf. Egede 2015:65; Mbiti 1969:133). This situation arises from the African patriarchal culture where the wife is believed to owe her husband the responsibility to produce children for him, and where a child is not born into a family, the woman must bear 'the brunt of childlessness' (Abasili 2015:588). Among the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria, the barren woman bears the brunt in the form of tormenting and harassment which usually come particularly from her husband's relatives, and most especially her mother-in-law. As in the case of Hannah who was tormented continually by Peninnah, her co-wife (1 Sm 1:6–8), affected Yoruba women usually respond with emotions that reflect the deep concerns of a childless African woman.

The factors underlying the maltreatment of childless African women reside in the desire for children and the beliefs associated with childlessness in traditional African society. Therefore, with illustrations from Yoruba practices, this article situates Hannah's experience in the context of childless Nigerian women with a view to appraising the African traditional beliefs on childlessness in light of modern realities. In other words, based on the Hannah narrative, the article attempts to probe the validity of the African belief that life is more or less worthless if one, particularly a woman, does not bear a child.

In historical-critical studies, the books of Samuel belong to the Deuteronomistic History (DH) which comprises the books of Joshua to Kings, the final edition of which is believed to be the 'work of editors-authors during the period of the exile' (Longman & Dillard 2006:153). The Deuteronomistic Historians (Dtr.) in 1 Samuel 1–3 fix the historical context of Samuel the prophet immediately after the time of the judges (Payne 1994:298). Critical scholarship, however, does not take this dating seriously, noting that the Deuteronomists in 1 Samuel 1–3 drew upon existing popular tradition relating to stories about the boyhood of Samuel. In these chapters, the sources available to them were not written documents but oral traditions, 'folk memories about prominent families in Iron Age Cisjordan' (Noll 2013:218). And because oral traditions are hardly transmitted in a fixed form, 'they can be highly unreliable' (Ademiluka 2019:2; cf. Noll 2013:218). Hence, little historical significance is attached to the Samuel narratives. Nonetheless, today many still believe that Old Testament (OT) traditions 'provide helpful information that enriches our understanding' of Israel's past (Longman & Dillard 2006:52, 169). For this reason, some scholars have adopted for the study of the OT, methods that depart from the historical-critical studies, that is, 'strategies of interpretation according to which [a] book is meaningful regardless of its pre-history and authorship' (Anderson 2001:16). Such methods come under what is called 'the modern literary' approach, which emphasises the literary quality of biblical narratives, paying little 'attention to questions of historical reference' (Longman & Dillard 2006:169). The purpose of modern literary criticism resides in the application of the text to the reader's life and

circumstances. According to Mann (2011:8), applying the text to the present time is seen already in the activities of the Dtr., the 'writers, editors and redactors [*who gave*] shape to the past in literary form ... in order to speak to the present'. To this end, this article applies narrative reading, a method under the modern literary approach, to the study of the Hannah narrative in 1 Samuel 1, focussing on verses 6–8. As expressed by Oosthuizen (1994:85), 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. 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 the needs of [*modern*] believers ... on the other hand' (Kruger 1994:183). In line with the concern for modern believers' needs, Cranford (2002:159) states that narrative criticism focusses 'on the narrative flow of ideas in the text', exploring its possible impact on the reader. Therefore, applying historical-critical exegesis and narrative reading, this article employs the Hannah story to encourage an informed and just attitude towards childlessness in modern times, with illustrations from Yoruba culture. Employing the descriptive approach, the work gathers and analyses relevant material for the discussion of childless Yoruba women's experience as well as the appraisal of traditional African beliefs on childlessness. The essay firstly undertakes an exegesis of the text, 1 Samuel 1:6–8, after which Hannah's experience is related to the Yoruba context. Secondly, the article appraises, in light of modern realities, African traditional beliefs about childlessness which warrant the marginalisation and stigmatisation of childless women. Finally, on the basis of the findings, the work recommends updating the pastoral attitude towards childlessness in Nigeria.

## Hannah's stigmatisation: An exegesis of 1 Samuel 1:6–8

The intention of the narrator in 1 Samuel chapter one is to introduce the story of the birth of Samuel. His father is Elkanah the Ephraimite. Elkanah has two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Peninnah has children, but Hannah has none. Yearly, when eating the ceremonial meal with his family at the annual Shiloh festival, Elkanah would give 'a double portion' to Hannah because he loved her (1 Sm 1:5, ESV; NIV; cf. Berlin 2004:227; Guzik 2001). The narrator must have introduced this special treatment by their husband as the 'source of rivalry between Hannah and Peninnah' (Mulzac 2009:211). Mulzac (2009) puts it succinctly thus:

Hannah lacks children, yet she receives Elkanah's generosity and affections. On the other hand, Peninnah is fertile, but receives nothing extra. This suggests that her 'usefulness' in Elkanah's eyes was because she produced children. Beyond this, she was 'useless'. Thus ... Elkanah's favoritism evoked Peninnah's persistent provocation. (p. 211)

Peninnah's provocations and Hannah's emotional response to them are graphically described in verses 6–8:

[6] And her rival used to provoke her sorely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. [7] So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. 8 And Elka'nah, her husband, said to her, 'Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?' (RSV).<sup>2</sup>

The two main verbs in verse 6 are *הִרְעִימָהּ* and *וּכְעָסָהּ*. The first is derived from the Qal root *כָּעַס*, meaning to be angry, but used here in Piel in which case it means 'to provoke the heart to a heated condition which in turn leads to specific actions' (Van Groningen 1980:451). Thus, in this passage *וּכְעָסָהּ* describes 'the high degree of provocation by Peninnah' (Ademiluka 2019:3). Perhaps, understanding the verb in this way, some translations add adjectives such as 'sorely' (RSV) and 'grievously' (ESV<sup>3</sup>) to qualify the provocations. *הִרְעִימָהּ* is from *רָעַם*, which in Qal means 'to tremble', 'to rage' or 'to be agitated' (Feyerabend 1959:323). Here it is used in Hiphil infinitive construct, meaning to 'provoke to anger', 'to offend' (Feyerabend 1959:323), hence many of the English translations render *הִרְעִימָהּ* as 'to irritate her'. In view of the use of Piel (intensive) and Hiphil (causative) in this way, Spendlove (2022:43) plausibly suggests that verse 6 may be reworked as: 'And her adversary also grieved her much, causing her to be depressed, because the Lord had shut up her womb'.

Peninnah's provocations took place every year when the family went for the annual festival at Shiloh, the 'malicious taunting' (Abasili 2015:589) which made Hannah to weep and refuse to eat (v. 7). Mulzac (2009:211) notes that Hannah's state of mind was reflected 'in her weeping and ... refusal to eat'. In this situation, not even Elkanah's kind words (v. 8) could assuage the depth of Hannah's despair. In fact, those words would rather aggravate her sorrow 'because he does not understand the deeper side of Hannah's personal pain' (Kim 2008:3):

His question shows that he was simultaneously solicitous and imperceptive. While, on one hand, he assured her that motherhood is unrelated to the value of her personhood, on the other, he placed her value only in relation to himself. (Mulzac 2009:211)

Hannah was thus in great distress, a situation which reflects some symptoms of depression, including bitterness, misery, irritability, 'loss of appetite, general distress, vexation and anxiety' (Stein 2010:492). Also applicable are 'frustration, powerlessness, helplessness, and hopelessness' (Kim 2008:3), all arising from Peninnah's provocations of Hannah because of the latter's infertility.

Hannah's emotional state on account of childlessness is best understood against her ancient Near Eastern background where the 'barren wife was likely to be despised by her husband, family and society at large' (Stein 2010:492). Mulzac (2009:209) adds that childlessness was believed to be 'a curse

2. Revised Standard Version.

3. English Standard Version.

and could frustrate a woman' as she considered herself worthless and insignificant. In Hannah's Israelite custom, a married woman had the responsibility to bear a child for her husband, 'otherwise she [*was*] viewed as a disgrace' (Kösternberger 2004:41). Not being able to bear a child for Elkanah, then, Hannah lived with 'the shame [*and*] stigma leveled against her' by her society (Kim 2008:3).

As shown in the section 'The stigmatisation of childless Yoruba women', Hannah's experience is relevant in Nigeria in the context of infertile women who still suffer tormenting and harassment similar to those of Hannah. In this article, however, illustrations are taken from Yoruba practices.

## The stigmatisation of childless Yoruba women

Among the Yoruba, as in African society at large, 'modernization has not weakened the deep-rooted tradition' of anxiously expecting a woman to have a child soon after the marriage ceremonies (Odukogbe 2020:1433). This expectation is often expressed in statements such as '*Eyin iyawo ko ni m'eni*', a prayer by the new wife's friends, relatives and other well-wishers that she should not experience 'periods of infertility' (Araoye 2003:192). Usually, if there are no signs of pregnancy within a few months after the wedding, everyone concerned begins to be worried, including the new wife herself and particularly her mother. As time passes by, the new couple begins 'to receive pressure' from relatives and friends inquiring about the condition of the new wife (Ademiluka 2019:5). Relating her own experience, a woman who had a delay in getting pregnant lamented, 'As each month passed, I felt like I was on a roller coaster of emotions' (Baldwin 2013:120). Among the Yoruba, the pressure comes principally from the new wife's in-laws, particularly the husband's relatives, the 'most conspicuous figure in this scenario' [*being*] the mother-in-law (Ademiluka 2019:5). To this end, Araoye (2003:193) asserts that the 'relationship between infertile women and their in-laws is usually strained'.

The most common form of reaction to infertility among the Yoruba seems to be the pressure on the man concerned to take another wife. Adeyanju and Ayandiran (2013:52) opine that this attitude is a 'culturally acceptable orientation among the Yoruba'. Thus, in many cases, polygamy is a response to a wife's infertility. Sometimes this arises from the common belief that *ori omo ni n p'omo wa 'ye*; that is, 'the presence of children [*born by another wife*] within the home can "attract" children to the infertile couple' (Araoye 2003:193). Nonetheless, oftentimes the marriage of another wife comes with the 'expulsion of the [*barren*] woman from the husband's house' (Okonofua et al. 1997:215). This can be with or without proper divorce, and can be carried out 'either by the husband himself or by his family' (Okonofua et al. 1997:215).

Koster-Oyekan (1999:22) affirms that most often a man, whose wife is unable to bear a child, is forced by his family to drive the barren woman away in order to marry another.



Another attitude is that where a man does not send away the infertile wife or take another woman, he may have children outside wedlock, and in many instances 'such children are not known to the barren woman until later in life', sometimes after the man's death (Koster-Oyekan 1999:22).

Among the Yoruba, there are other ways by which barren women are stigmatised by other women and made to realise that 'they do not essentially belong to the womenfolk' (Odukogbe 2020:1431). One of these methods is by giving barren women derogatory labels describing their childlessness, such terms including 'aje [witch], ako aja [male dog], agan [unproductive woman], agba ofo [empty barrel] and alakiriboto [infertile woman]' (Adeyanju & Ayandiran 2013:52). In some places, other women do not only avoid infertile women but also drive their children away from them because they believe barren women 'might harm their children because of their bitterness' (Okonofua et al. 1997:215).

As with Hannah, the maltreatment suffered by Yoruba women has psychological impact on them, such that their travails sometimes lead to 'distress and certain pathological conditions' (Ademiluka 2019:5). Because of their stigmatisation, some childless women weep continually, as they can be lonely, frustrated, ill and worried (Adeyanju & Ayandiran 2013:53). To some barren women, physiological and sexual feelings have no meaning anymore. For instance, a barren woman once expressed her own feelings, saying '[T]here is no point in having a uterus, there is no point in having periods, there is no point in sex' (Amole 2011). In a research by Esan et al. (2022:5) in south-western Nigeria, most of the participants confirmed that their infertility affected all areas of their lives, complaining of 'pain, frustration, stress and mockery'.

Thus, like Hannah, childless Nigerian women still succumb to stigmatisation, suffering provocations and agonies similar to those of Hannah. On the contrary, this article proposes that beyond sympathising with childless women, the Hannah narrative now has to speak to new realities in the subject of barrenness such as those that make childlessness a necessary choice for some people, and they need not submit to stigmatisation. Hence, in light of such realities, in the section 'Appraising African traditional beliefs associated with childlessness in light of modern realities', the article interrogates traditional African beliefs underlying the stigmatising attitude towards childless women.

## Appraising African traditional beliefs associated with childlessness in light of modern realities

As in Hannah's cultural milieu, in Africa, there exists a passion for children such that 'marriage is constituted primarily for the purpose of procreation' (Ademiluka 2019:4). According to Mbiti (1969:133), in Africa, the supreme purpose of marriage is to have children. If a marriage has not produced

at least a child, 'there is no guarantee that the marriage will endure' (cf. Baloyi 2017:7; Egede 2015:65). The natural passion for children and childbearing is depicted copiously in Yoruba traditions. They have sayings to the effect that children are an invaluable possession. For example, the saying *omo l'okun, omo n'ide* equates a child with coral beads [okun] and silver [ide] (Makinde 2004:167). To date, coral beads are worn by crowned chiefs as a symbol of royalty and authority, while in the past silver was perhaps the most precious possession a person could acquire. Equating a child with coral beads and silver, therefore, implies that a child is 'the greatest possession one can have' (Ademiluka 2021a:4). In fact, as far as the Yoruba are concerned, a woman who has no child 'has no reason for living' (Koster-Oyekan 1999:22). It is no surprise, then, that among this people, as in Africa as a whole, childlessness remains the most dreaded misfortune.

In academic discourse, scholars often identify certain traditional beliefs underlying the passion for children in Africa. It is claimed that the most important reason for wanting to have children, especially males, is for the continuation of the family lineage to save it from extinction (Ademiluka 2021a:4; Agbor 2016:4; Baloyi & Manala 2019; Oforchukwu 2010:38). The traditional thought is that '[w]hen a man dies, he needs somebody to bear his name, so that his name does not die' (Ogoma 2014:96). Among the Yoruba, male children are needed to inherit their fathers' property, as female children hardly qualify for inheritance (Famulusi 2012:301; cf. Okonofua et al. 1997:211). In African traditions, it is believed that both men and women need children 'to gain respect and status in the community' (Okonofua et al. 1997:211). For a woman, particularly, her status in the husband's family depends on the number of children she has (Okonofua et al. 1997:211). It is also claimed that some worry about who will bury them when they die, for a person without children 'has nobody to bury him/her' (Koster-Oyekan 1999:22). Some scholars found that some Nigerian Christians want to have children as a fulfilment of God's command that everybody must have children, apparently relying on passages like Genesis 1:28 (Iwelumor et al. 2020:303; Okonofua et al. 1997:211). Perhaps, the most frequently mentioned reason for the passion for children is that children constitute a source of defence and economic security for their parents, particularly in old age (Ademiluka 2021a:4). Hence, barren women's worry resides principally in 'the fear of what the future holds for them' when they can no longer fend for themselves (Amole 2011; cf. Koster-Oyekan 1999:22).

It is doubtful, however, if today a young woman aspires to have children because of any of these factors. For instance, it is doubtful if any young lady wants children because she aspires to perpetuate her husband's lineage for the purpose of inheriting the ancestral land. Such a reason is no longer important in the contemporary society where continuous migration has moved a high percentage of Nigerians to the cities and abroad, with most of them 'completely detached from their ancestral homes' (Ademiluka 2021a:7). While there is no space here to dwell on the claim that Genesis 1:28

compels every individual to have children, it must be mentioned that many scholars have argued that the phrase 'Be fruitful and multiply' in this text is not a divine command for every person to have children, but 'simply means that God gives children as a blessing to mankind' (Ademiluka 2020:7; cf. Magnuson 2000:28; Moss & Baden 2015:74). It is true that children usually take care of their old parents, but there are also instances of old parents who are not cared for by their children for varied reasons.

Thus, while these factors may lie in the background, they are not the immediate reasons why most women want to have children. Rather, in modern times, most young women want to have children because mandatory motherhood is the norm in pronatalist societies, that is, those societies that pressure 'adults to have children, particularly women' (Stahnke, Cooley & Blackstone 2023:65). More importantly, in many pronatalist cultures, a significant number of women now 'choose to remain childless' (Mynarska & Rytel 2020:7). Indonesia is a nation where pressure is still exerted on new couples to have children as soon as possible; and if a couple does not have children, 'their marriage is seen as flawed' (Utamidewi et al. 2022:916). Yet:

[S]ome women and married couples have decided not to have children as a result of the modernization and liberalization of some Indonesians' attitudes. [For them,] [h]aving children is not a must, but rather a personal decision and a mutual agreement between husband and wife. (Utamidewi et al. 2022:916)

Also in Canada, 'one in ten Canadians between the ages of 20 and 34 ... wants to be child-free' (Utamidewi et al. 2022:916). The Philippines is recognised as a 'family-centric country' where childlessness is considered taboo (Zapanta et al. 2023:667). Yet, in this country, more and more couples are choosing to remain child-free. In the United States of America, even though stigma against childlessness still exists, and the country 'remains pronatalist' (Stahnke et al. 2023:65), 'the number of couples choosing to be childless' has steadily been on the increase (Pelton & Hertlein 2011:41).

There are various reasons why some women and couples decide not to have children. Ill-health is one of those 'problems [that] have significantly impacted' a great number of women's ability to conceive (Zapanta et al. 2023:669). In this regard, infertility itself should be regarded as a health issue, even though oftentimes infertility is a symptom of certain underlying diseases. In their research in the Philippines, Zapanta et al. (2023:669) found a couple who decided not to have children because of the 'history of health complications in regards to pregnancy' in the husband's family. They feared that the woman 'might also suffer from similar conditions'. Some women had a desire to have children, but as 'their childbearing years ... were coming to a close' without life partners, they had a change of mind because they did not want to be single mothers (Settle 2014:6). This means that some women decided not to have children because of a delay in getting marriage partners. Some other women decided against motherhood because of 'financial instability' (Settle 2014:7). Such women felt they were not

making enough money to support raising children. A respondent in Settle's (2014:14) research declared, '[I]t's hard enough to keep yourself going, and to bring a child or children into the picture makes it much more difficult'. Similarly, most participants in a study by Zapanta et al. (2023) thought that:

[I]f they do not have the ability or lack the capacity to raise a child, creating one is unnecessary. Children are a lifetime responsibility; most informants define children as a sort of responsibility that they must invest time and attention as well as great amounts of resources in order to fulfill their needs. (p. 670)

In the same vein, according to some informants in a research by Utamidewi et al. (2022:918), women who decided not to have children for economic reasons are given the credit for 'preventing the birth of one person who would have been born below the poverty line'. Informants in Indonesia acknowledged that avoiding having children is a way of checking overpopulation in that population expansion 'is seen to have outpaced existing resources' (Utamidewi et al. 2022:919). Research has indicated that the population of the world is growing at a rate that is disproportionate to global health and 'the availability of food supplies'. Therefore, being child-free relieves 'suffering by lowering the load of an overpopulated globe' (Utamidewi et al. 2022:919).

Thus, with varying reasons 'couples all over the world are choosing to remain childless [with] ... being child-free becoming more and more normal' (Zapanta et al. 2023:667). The choice is still faced with stigmatisation from the community, but women who make it are 'applying different stigma management strategies to cope up with it' (Zapanta et al. 2023:667). Moreover, several married couples who decide not to have children 'still live happily and contentedly with each other' (Zapanta et al. 2023:667).

The reasons why women in other pronatalist societies choose to be child-free are equally applicable in the Nigerian context. Perhaps the most common factor in Nigeria is women's inability to conceive because of some underlying health conditions that defy solutions. From the study of the attitude of childless women in other climates, Nigerian women who find themselves in this situation are encouraged to make up their minds to live a child-free life and happily do so rather than succumbing to stigmatisation. In recent times, the inability to get life partners has become a significant problem for Nigerian women. This problem arises from the downward turn in the country's economy over the years as a result of which most male youths are rendered unemployed (Ademiluka 2021b:3). Without stable jobs, most 'young men do not have the necessary resources' to cater for family and, therefore, remain single (cf. Oderinde 2013:168; Zwang 2004:30). This situation drastically restricts the volume of men from which ladies can choose life partners, which results into late or non-marriage for many Nigerian women (Ntoimo 2012:2; Oderinde 2013:168). Moreover, the unemployment situation does not encourage marriage and childbearing among young Nigerians as many of them still have to depend on their parents for most of their needs, even as university

graduates. Having children in this condition will become a burden with implications such as poor health, inadequate education and low standard of living for the children (Okogu 2011:129). Women in this situation will be adding to 'the number of people ... who will only suffer in the future' if they bear children (Zapanta et al. 2023:673). Hence, from this study, Nigerian women who find themselves in situations that do not support childbearing are better encouraged to live happily without children, and without submitting to stigmatisation. Finally, Nigeria is among the countries where being child-free by some women will help to relieve the world of the problem of overpopulation. It will be a most significant decision in contemporary Nigeria where the rate of food production 'cannot match the demand of the increasing population' (Adebayo 2012:136).

Thus, as in ancient Israel, Nigerians have a strong desire for children so much that it is unthinkable for a woman not to have children. However, the reasons usually given for this passion are no longer tenable as the immediate reasons why most women want to have children. Rather, most Nigerian women now aspire to have children because society considers it mandatory, as it is in pronatalist cultures. It is an evolving reality, however, that in many pronatalist societies all over the world, some women now choose to be childless. As the reasons for the choice to live a child-free life are applicable in Nigeria, these women's choices could serve as an encouragement to Nigerian women to have a change of attitude towards childlessness. Instead of submitting to stigmatisation, 21st-century Nigerian women in Hannah's situation before she bore a child should accept their condition and live happily. Perhaps, with the encouragement from childless women across the globe, today Peninnah's pestering would have had an insignificant effect on Hannah. On the basis of this proposition, the section 'Updating the pastoral attitude towards childlessness in Nigeria' recommends the need to revise the pastoral response to childlessness in Nigeria.

## Updating the pastoral attitude towards childlessness in Nigeria

To start with, the church in Nigeria should have a change of attitude towards childlessness. As plausibly noted by Ademiluka (2020:7), given their traditional passion for children, it will be a difficult task 'to make Africans accept any proposition of a child-free life'. Yet, the church has to accept and teach its members the truth that motherhood is not necessarily meant for every woman. So far, generally, the church and many preachers seem to have endorsed the belief that everyone must have children, seeing in motherhood the greatest 'place of ministry' (George 1997:97) and 'the mother's womb the workplace of the Holy Spirit' (Murray 1975:180). This teaching relies apparently on Bible passages like Proverbs 31 and Titus 2 where the highest qualities of a woman are seen in being an obedient wife, a good mother and a homekeeper. In this way, 'the woman's identity becomes wrapped up' absolutely in marriage and motherhood (Baldwin 2013:119). Nonetheless, perhaps there

is no biblical text that appears to make motherhood mandatory more than Genesis 1:28. As earlier corrected, this text dwells on children as a blessing from God to humankind in general and not a divine command for every individual to bear children. This position finds absolute support in Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7, where the apostle expressly states that 'not everyone must get married which implies not everyone must have children' (Ademiluka 2020:7; cf. Baldwin 2013:120; Moss & Baden 2015:191). The message that the church in Nigeria has to accept and inculcate in its members, then, is aptly captured by Ryan (2005) that:

[*The church has to develop*] a theological reconstruction of the place of procreation in a theology of marriage [*that*] will mitigate the undue emphasis on procreation ... [*which*] tends to render the childless marriage [*deficient*]. (p. 72)

After developing a theology that accepts being child-free as a way of life equal to motherhood, the church should come up with methods of support for childless women. In the first place, as these individuals will 'experience continuous invalidation' from other people (Zapanta et al. 2023:670), they need to be assisted to develop resilience against 'experiences of feeling stigmatized for their childfree status' (Stahnke et al. 2023:62). To achieve this, childless women should be encouraged 'to imbibe the attitude of self-acceptance' by which they can find satisfaction with themselves (Ademiluka 2020:7). One major area of challenge with childlessness has to do with a lack of support, especially to stay healthy. To tackle this challenge, the church can encourage and make provisions for childless old people to engage in 'health-related behaviours' like physical exercises such as long walks, gymnastics, swimming, yoga, among others. They can also be encouraged to engage in other activities where 'there are ... couples without children' (Pelton & Hertlein 2011:49). The church can also assist them to have regular check-ups and a healthy diet (Abramowska-Kmon, Mynarska & Timoszuk 2023:12). As they have no children, for companionship and support, childless women will have to 'expand their social networks' by sustaining close contacts with family members, other relatives and friends. It will also help to engage in various activities that will allow them 'to widen their circle of friends and to build new, meaningful relationships' (Abramowska-Kmon et al. 2023:12). Such activities include being members of various groups and clubs relating to the church and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Pelton and Hertlein (2011) aptly state that:

Maintaining ties in the community ensures that [*childless women*] will stay connected to the world outside of the marital relationship, helping to prevent those feelings of depression and anxiety that comes along with loneliness and isolation. (p. 49)

Nonetheless, for the building of a social network to be effective, other church members should be made to realise that childless women need acceptance from their social environment 'in order to gradually reduce the invalidation' of the choice of being child-free (Zapanta et al. 2023:673). More importantly, unlike Hannah, childless women of the



21st century will give less room for stigmatisation if they are empowered to actively engage in activities that will enable them eventually to leave a mark on their communities, 'as they navigate through their own life cycle' (Pelton & Hertlein 2011:49).

## Conclusion

The stigmatisation of Hannah on account of her childlessness resonates with similar experiences of childless Nigerian women. The factors underlying the stigmatising attitude towards childless women in Africa reside in the passion for children, such that barrenness is thought to be the worst misfortune that can befall a woman. However, there is the reality now that a significant number of women in other pronatalist societies like Nigeria are choosing to remain childless. The reasons for this choice include ill-health, inability to get marriage partners, financial instability and the desire not to add to the already overpopulated world. Because the reasons for the choice to live a child-free life are apparent in Nigeria, instead of submitting to stigmatisation, childless Nigerian women should accept their condition and live happily. For this proposition to work, the church in Nigeria should have a change of attitude towards childlessness. It has to accept and teach its members the biblical truth that every woman need not bear children. Thereafter, the church should come up with methods of support for childless women, such as helping them to develop resilience against stigmatisation. The church in Nigeria will also have to encourage and make provisions for childless old women to engage in health-related behaviours. For companionship and support, women who have to be child-free will need to be assisted to expand their social networks in terms of sustaining close contact with family members, other relatives and friends. For this network to be effective, other church members, particularly women, should be made to realise that childless women need acceptance from their social environment. More importantly, childless women of the 21st century will be relieved of stigmatisation if they are encouraged to engage in activities that will enable them to leave a mark on their communities for which they will be remembered when they are no more.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Author's contributions

S.O.A. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

### Ethical considerations

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

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

## References

- Abasili, A.I., 2015, 'Hannah's ordeal of childlessness: Interpreting 1 Samuel 1 through the prism of a childless African woman in a polygynous family', *Old Testament Essays* 28(3), 581–605. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2015/v28n3a3>
- Abramowska-Kmon, A., Mynarska, M. & Timoszuk, S., 2023, 'Coping strategies for happy childless ageing: An explorative study in Poland', *Genus: Journal of Population Sciences* 79(2), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41118-022-00180-8>
- Adebayo, O.O., 2012, 'Effects of family size on household food security in Osun State, Nigeria', *Asian Journal of Agriculture and Rural Development* 2(2), 136–141.
- Ademiluka, S.O., 2019, 'Interpreting the Hannah narrative (1 Sm 1:1–20) in light of the attitude of the church in Nigeria towards childlessness', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40(1), a2004. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v40i1.2004>
- Ademiluka, S.O., 2020, 'Be fruitful and multiply': Examining Genesis 1:28 as a basis for the adoption of polygamy as a solution to childlessness amongst Nigerian Christians', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 41(1), a2116. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v41i1.2116>
- Ademiluka, S.O., 2021a, 'Hannah's prayer for a male child: Interpreting 1 Samuel 1:11 in the Nigerian context', *In die Skriflig* 55(1), a2719. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v55i1.2719>
- Ademiluka, S.O., 2021b, 'Marriage as a choice or duty: Considering Nigerian Christians' attitude to singlehood from the biblical perspective', *In die Skriflig* 55(1), a2674. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v55i1.2674>
- Adeyanju, A.B. & Ayandiran, E.O., 2013, 'Health status and experiences of barren elderly women in Ondo State, Nigeria', *Journal of Research in Nursing and Midwifery* 2(3), 47–54.
- Agbor, I.M., 2016, 'Culture, child preference and fertility behaviour: Implications for population growth in Cross River State, Nigeria', *British Journal of Education, Society & Behavioural Science* 17(3), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.9734/BJESBS/2016/27289>
- Amole, V.A., 2011, *Of Christianity, infertility and ethics in Nigeria*, Academia, viewed 15 April 2019, from [https://www.academia.edu/1438243/Of\\_Christianity\\_Infertility\\_and\\_Ethics\\_in\\_Nigeria](https://www.academia.edu/1438243/Of_Christianity_Infertility_and_Ethics_in_Nigeria).
- Anderson, G., 2001, *The book and its narratives: A critical examination of some synchronic studies of the Book of Judges*, Örebro University, Örebro.
- Araoye, M.O., 2003, 'Epidemiology of infertility: Social problems of the infertile couples', *WAJM* 22(2), 190–196. <https://doi.org/10.4314/wajm.v22i2.27946>
- Baldwin, K., 2023, 'The gift of infertility', in *Scientia Moralitas conference proceedings*, viewed 27 December 2023, from <https://scientiamoralitas.education/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/01270.pdf>.
- Baloyi, M.E., 2017, 'Gendered character of barrenness in an African context: An African pastoral study', *In Die Skriflig* 51(1), a2172. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v51i1.2172>
- Baloyi, M.E. & Manala, M.J., 2019, 'Reflections on challenges of preferring the male child in an African marriage – A practical theological observation', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40(1), a1852. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v40i1.1852>
- Berlin, A., 2004, 'Hannah and her prayers', *Scriptura* 87, 227–232. <https://doi.org/10.7833/87-0-959>
- Cranford, L.L., 2002, 'Modern New Testament interpretation', in B. Corley, S.W. Lemke & G.I. Lovejoy (eds.), *Biblical hermeneutics: A comprehensive introduction to interpreting scripture*, 2nd edn., pp. 147–162, Broadman Press, Nashville, TN.
- Egede, H., 2015, 'The social stigmatisation of involuntary childless women in sub-Saharan Africa: The gender empowerment and justice case for cheaper access to assisted reproductive technologies?' PhD thesis, Cardiff University.
- Esan, D.T., Nnamani, K.Q., Ogunkorode, A., Muhammad, F., Oluwagbemi, O.O. & Ramos, C.G., 2022, 'Infertility affects the quality of life of Southwestern Nigerian women and their partners', *International Journal of Africa Nursing Sciences* 17, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijans.2022.100506>

- Familusi, O.O., 2012, 'African culture and the status of women: The Yoruba example', *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 5(1), 299–313.
- Feyerabend, K., 1959, *Langenscheidt's Hebrew-English dictionary*, Methuen & Co., London.
- George, E., 1997, *A woman after God's own heart*, Harvest House Publishers, Eugene, OR.
- Guzik, D., 2001, 'Study guide for 1 Samuel 1', *Blue Letter Bible*, viewed 20 June 2019, from [https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/archives/guzik\\_david/StudyGuide\\_1Sa/1Sa\\_1.cfm](https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/archives/guzik_david/StudyGuide_1Sa/1Sa_1.cfm).
- Inhorn, M.C. & Patrizio, P., 2015, 'Infertility around the globe: New thinking on gender, reproductive technologies and global movements in the 21st century', *Human Reproduction Update* 21(4), 411–426. <https://doi.org/10.1093/humupd/dmv016>
- Iwelumor, O.S., Jamaludin, S.S., George, T.O., Babatunde, S.K. & Olonade, O.Y., 2020, 'A child is as important as Life': Reflections on the value of children from infertile couples', *Macedonian Journal of Medical Sciences* 8(E), 302–307. <https://doi.org/10.3889/oamjms.2020.3752>
- Kim, Y.S., 2008, 'The story of Hannah (1 Sam 1:1–2:11) from a perspective of *han*', *The Bible and Critical Theory* 4(2), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.2104/bc080026>
- Kösternberger, A.J., 2004, *God, marriage, and family: Rebuilding the biblical foundation*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL.
- Koster-Oyekan, W., 1999, 'Infertility among Yoruba women: Perceptions on causes, treatment and consequences', *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 3(1), 13–26. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3583225>
- Kruger, H.A.J., 1994, 'The canon critical approach as a means of understanding the Old Testament', *Old Testament Essays* 7(4), 181–197.
- Longman, T. & Dillard, R.B., 2006, *An introduction to the Old Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Magnuson, K.T., 2000, 'Marriage, procreation and infertility: Reflections on Genesis', *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4(1), 26–43.
- Makinde, T., 2004, 'Motherhood as a source of empowerment of women in Yoruba culture', *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 13(2), 164–174.
- Mann, T.W., 2011, *The book of the former prophets*, James Clarke & Co., Cambridge.
- Mbiti, J.S., 1969, *African religions and philosophy*, Heineman, London.
- Moss, C.R. & Baden, J.S., 2015, *Reconceiving infertility: Biblical perspectives on procreation and childlessness*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Mulzac, K., 2009, 'Hannah: The receiver and giver of a great gift', *Seminary Studies* 40, 207–217.
- Murray, A., 1975, *How to raise your children for Christ*, Bethany Fellowship, Minneapolis, MN.
- Mynarska, M. & Rytel, J., 2020, 'Fertility desires of childless Poles: Which childbearing motives matter for men and women?', *Journal of Family Issues* 41(1), 7–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X19868257>
- Noll, K.L., 2013, *Canaan and Israel in antiquity: A textbook on history and religion*, T&T Clark, New York, NY.
- Ntoimo, F.C., 2012, 'Prevalence, determinants and consequences of spinsterhood in Lagos, Nigeria', PhD thesis, University of Ibadan.
- Oderinde, O.A., 2013, 'A socio-religious perspective of late marriage and stigmatization of single adults and its impact on the Church in Nigeria', *Review of European Studies* 5(4), 165–171. <https://doi.org/10.5539/res.v5n4p165>
- Odukogbe, I., 2020, 'Re-evaluating 1 Samuel 1:1–17 and the plight of the barren woman in ancient Israel and Yoruba culture', *International Journal of Science and Research* 9(1), 1431–1437.
- Oforchukwu, J.I., 2010, 'A biblical and theological study (analysis) of marriage and divorce among *igbo* Catholic Christians (Nigeria)', MA thesis, South African Theological Seminary.
- Ogoma, D.E., 2014, 'Reflection on an African traditional marriage system', *Journal of Social Sciences and Public Affairs* 4(1), 94–104.
- Okogu, J., 2011, 'Family size and its socio-economic implications on the inhabitants of Delta State, Nigeria', *International Journal of Economic Development Research and Investment* 2(3), 128–133.
- Okonofua, F.E., Harris, D., Odebiyi, A., Kane, T. & Snow, R.C., 1997, 'The social meaning of infertility in Southwest Nigeria', *Health Transition Review* 7(1), 205–220. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3583272>
- Oosthuizen, M.J., 1994, 'The narratological approach as a means of understanding the Old Testament', *Old Testament Essays* 7(4), 84–91.
- Payne, D.F., 1994, '1 and 2 Samuel', in D.A. Carson, G.J. Wenham, J.A. Motyer & R.T. France (eds.), *New bible commentary*, pp. 296–333, Inter Varsity Press, Nottingham.
- Pelton, S.L. & Hertlein, K.M., 2011, 'A proposed life cycle for voluntary childfree couples', *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 23(1), 39–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08952833.2011.548703>
- Ryan, M.A., 2005, 'Faith and infertility', in *Christian reflection*, pp. 65–74, The Centre for Christian Ethics, viewed 22 March 2020, from <https://www.baylor.edu/ifl/christianreflection/CloningarticleRya.pdf>.
- Settle, B., 2014, 'It's the choices you make that get you there: Decision-making pathways of childfree women', *Michigan Family Review* 18(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mfr.4919087.0018.102>
- Spendlove, L., 2022, 'Hannah's adversity and Peninnah's redemption', *INTERPRETER: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 53, 37–70.
- Stahnke, B., Cooley, M.E. & Blackstone, A., 2023, 'A systematic review of life satisfaction experiences among childfree adults', *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families* 31(1), 60–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10664807221104795>
- Stein, G., 2010, 'Hannah: A case of infertility and depression', *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 197(6), 492. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.197.6.492>
- Sule, J.O., Erigbali, P. & Eruom, L., 2008, 'Prevalence of infertility in women in a southwestern Nigerian community', *African Journal of Biomedical Research* 11(2), 225–227. <https://doi.org/10.4314/ajbr.v11i2.50716>
- Utamidewi, W., Widjanarko, W., Abidin, Z. & Nayiroh, L., 2022, 'When spouse decide to be childfree: Are they happy without child?', *Proceedings of International Conference on Communication Science* 2(1), 915–924. <https://doi.org/10.29303/iccspceeding.v2i1.118>
- Van Groningen, G., 1980, 'כַּנַּס', in R.L. Harris, L.A. Gleason & B.K. Waltke (eds.), *Theological wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., pp. 451, Moody Publisher, Chicago, IL.
- Zapanta, E.D., Apo, A.S., Medalla, A.M.E., Antonio, A.A.G., Deguzman, C.G.D. & Sengco, B.T.S., 2023, 'Life without a CHILD: A phenomenological study of adult couples in Quezon City', *Psychology and Education: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 7, 666–674.
- Zwang, J., 2004, 'Perceptions and attitudes towards late marriage and premarital fertility in rural South Africa: A study on social changes and health risks among young adults', *IFAS Working Paper Series/Les Cahiers de l'IFAS* 4, 61p.