


Interpreting the Hannah narrative (1 Sm 1:1–20) in light of the attitude of the church in Nigeria towards childlessness

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The Hannah narrative bears close affinities to the African context with respect to the problem of barrenness. Hence, employing the exegetical approach and contextual analysis, this article examines the narrative in relation to the attitude of the church in Nigeria towards the problem of barrenness among its members. The suffering of Hannah resonates with the travails of childless African women; yet, beyond the weekly or monthly prayer services for them, the church has not exploited these similarities enough to assist its barren members. This article states that the church can organise regular programmes to address issues such as causes of barrenness as well as the role of male and female cells in the conception process. It also needs to teach the right attitude of friends and relatives towards childless couples so as to reduce the psychological effects of childlessness particularly on the women. The church can also identify with childless couples by introducing them to the practices of child adoption and surrogacy when all efforts to have children by the natural process fail. As there will always be childless persons in spite of all efforts to have children, the church has the responsibility to make its members accept the fact that children are a gift from God, and that matrimony must not necessarily end in parenthood. Finally, the church in Nigeria needs to assure childless members that they can live happy and fulfilled lives despite their situation of childlessness.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This research involves the disciplines of the Old Testament and Christian Ethics. It examines 1 Samuel 1:1–20 in relation to the attitude of the church in Nigeria towards its childless members, stressing that the church can do more in identifying with them.

Keywords: Hannah; Barrenness; Childbearing; Church; Nigeria.

Introduction

The Hebrew Bible contains several 'barren-mother stories' (Scott 2011), but the case of Hannah (1 Sm 1) seems to bear the closest affinity to the African context with respect to the problem of barrenness. In the first place, reading the story today undoubtedly arouses in the African reader the stark reality of the prevalence of involuntary female infertility not only in Africa but, in fact, all over the world. Many reports have indicated that barrenness in married women has been on the rise worldwide in recent times (Adeyanju & Ayandiran 2013:48). For instance, '[t]he World Health Organization (WHO) reports that one in five couples in the world have infertility' (Fertility Hub Nigeria 2017), while experts say 'that more than 30% of women (in Africa) are unable to have children' (NBCNEWS 2018). According to Sule, Erigbali and Eruom (2008), in 1991, WHO estimated that between 50 and 80 million couples had infertility problems worldwide, of which 20–35 million couples were Africans. 'This can be extrapolated to 3–4 million Nigerian couples suffering from infertility' (Sule et al. 2008:226). In a study conducted by Adeyanju and Ayandiran (2013) in southwestern Nigeria, it was discovered that the prevalence of female infertility was about 45%.

The Hannah narrative does not only enliven the prevalence of the problem of barrenness in the African reader but, as will be shown in this article, also resonates preponderantly with the ordeal of barren African women. This story has been read and taught in African Christendom over the generations, but what has been the attitude of the church towards the correlation between the experience of Hannah and that of the barren African woman? Apart from the regular prayers, in what other ways should the church identify with the barren member in the dehumanisation she suffers daily on account of her situation? Bearing these questions in mind, this article examines the Hannah narrative with a view to investigate the attitude of the church in Nigeria towards the

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problem of barrenness among its members. Thus, with the church in Nigeria as its target group, the significance of this work lies in the investigation of how the church can employ the affinities between Hannah's experience and the travails of barren African women to assist them in finding a solution to their problem. Bonhoeffer (1971 cited in Mangayi 2014:135) is in agreement with this quest when he says, '[t]he church is the church only when it exists for others [sharing] ... in secular problems of ordinary human life'. In terms of methodology, this article employs the exegetical approach to bring out the meaning of the Hannah narrative. To examine the similarities between Hannah's travails and those of barren African women, the article engages the contextual analysis. The work begins with an explanation on the nature of the material in 1 Samuel 1, from which it moves to the exegesis of the text. From there, it proceeds to a contextual study of Hannah's travails in Africa. The last section examines the attitude of the church in Nigeria towards the problem of childlessness among its members.

Recognising the nature of material in 1 Samuel 1

The books of Samuel belong to the corpus (Joshua-Kings) commonly called the Deuteronomistic History (DH), the final edition of which is the 'work of editors-authors during the period of the exile' (Longman & Dillard 2006:153). The purpose of the Deuteronomistic Historians (Dtr) in 1 Samuel 1-3 is to introduce the figure of Samuel the prophet who is believed to have functioned between the judges and the kings of Israel. Thus, the presupposed historical context is the period immediately after the time of the judges (Payne 1994:298). This suggestion is further supported by the role of Eli and his children at the Shiloh sanctuary (1 Sm 1:3), for the traditions have it that this sanctuary, having been established in the time of Joshua (Jos 18:1), hosted the yearly feast during the period of the judges (Jdg 21:19). While this historical context is not improbable, it is important to note that in the Samuel narratives the historians drew upon popular tradition as against written documents. As it is commonly suggested, for the books of Samuel the Deuteronomists used source collections which include stories from the boyhood of Samuel (1 Sm 1-3), the ark narrative (1 Sm 4:1-7:2) and stories about Samuel and Saul (1 Sm 7:3-12; 9:1-10:16, etc.). A part of 2 Samuel is inclusive of the so-called court history or succession narrative (2 Sm 9-20; 1 Ki 1-2) (Longman & Dillard 2006:153; cf. Boadt 1984:376; Rogerson 2005:39; Römer 2007). 1 Samuel 1-3, therefore, derived from stories about the boyhood of Samuel, that is, its source is the oral tradition. In other words, for this part of the books of Samuel, the sources available to the Dtr 'were not written documents but oral traditions ... folk memories about prominent families in Iron Age Cisjordan' (Noll 2013:218). For Noll, because oral traditions are rarely transmitted in a fixed form, they can be highly unreliable. Many scholars are in agreement on this point, and even that some of the biblical stories might be fictions. However, it must be pointed out that the word 'fiction' is not necessarily synonymous with falsehood. According to Mann (2011:8), 'the word "fiction" derives from the Latin

word meaning "to form"'. Seen from this perspective, every historian engages in fiction in order to give shape to the past. This is what the authors of the DH and other biblical writers did; according to Mann (2011), they were:

[W]riters, editors and redactors giving shape to the past in literary form... [T]hey shape the past in order to speak to the present, and the remarkable dimension of scripture is that the text has continued to speak to people's present down to this day. (p. 8)

Making the text to speak to the present in this way is what is called synchronic interpretation, as against the diachronic that focuses on the processes that produced the text, as in the historical-critical approach. According to Lusk (2004), the synchronic reading 'treats the Bible as a finished product, as a coherent, logical, unified whole'. In view of the fact that countless readers to date have found the 'text meaningful without knowing its historical setting ... there is a growing interest in a synchronic reading' (Mann 2011:9). There is interest in knowing what the text says in the form in which we have it now. As Mann rightly affirms, 'looking at the text synchronically prevents reading it only as editorial opinion speaking to the specific time of the editor' (Mann 2011:9). At the same time, reading the text only synchronically would not adequately acknowledge the processes that produced the final product. Interpreters must, therefore, be careful not to 'lose sight of the conclusions of older literary critics regarding the sources' (Mann 2011:9). In focusing on the final form of the text, the synchronic approach is a corollary of the narrative analysis which studies how the Bible uses the form of story to communicate its message. The 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 so-called "final" form ...' (Oosthuizen 1994:85, 89). Hence, the significance of a narrative and synchronic reading of the text, over against the historical-critical method, resides in the fact that it engages the text in its canonical form. Childs (1979) in his canonical criticism has emphasised the significance of the canonical form of the Old Testament. The thrust of the canonical approach is an attempt to harmonise the findings of historical criticism on the one hand and the needs of believers in the modern world on the other hand (Kruger 1994:183). To this end, in the study of the Hannah narrative, this article employs a synchronic and narrative reading, examining the text in its present form, thereby making it relevant to the modern African reader.

Exegesis of 1 Samuel 1:1-20

In the Hannah narrative, the narrator begins by introducing the father of the anticipated protagonist of the story, Samuel. He is one Elkanah the Ephraimite. He has two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. The latter has children but the former has none. The narrator does not say explicitly if Hannah was Elkanah's first wife but some interpreters conclude that she was in view of the fact that Hannah is listed before Peninnah (v. 2). This conclusion is plausibly buttressed by the use of the terms אֵהָא [one, first] and הַשֵּׁנִית [the second] (Abasili 2015:585). Every year, Elkanah together with his family

would go to the tabernacle at Shiloh for an annual festival.¹ When eating the ceremonial meal with the family, Elkanah would give portions to his wives and children. The English versions are not unanimous on how much he used to give to Hannah (v. 5). The expression in the Masoretic Text (MT) is מנה אהה אפים (one portion [with] additions?). Versions such as the Revised Standard Version (RSV) which translate the phrase as 'only one portion' are clearly incorrect because they lose sight of אפים. The conjunction ו [sing.] means 'also', 'too', often denoting addition (Feyerabend 1959:24), the connotation which may explain the King James Version's (KJV's) 'a worthy portion'. However, the translation of 'a double portion' as in the English Standard Version (ESV) and NIV is more correct. That the expression here is 'most likely a double portion' (Berlin 2004:227; cf. Guzik 2001) is buttressed by the caveat כי את הנה אהה, 'because he loved Hannah'. It makes sense to say Elkanah gave Hannah a double portion because he loved her, which, in fact, is the Syriac rendering of verse 5, 'because he loved Hannah he gave her a double portion' (Brockington 1982:319). In that case, Elkanah here, as in verse 8 (Berlin 2004):

[I]s trying to compensate for Hannah's barrenness ... [because] Elkanah would not have given Hannah a special portion if she had had children, even if she were the favorite wife. (p. 227)

Hannah's special treatment by Elkanah seems to have naturally induced Peninnah's jealousy as is often the case in polygamous² homes. Because of her barrenness Hannah must have been miserable enough already, but Peninnah's taunts made things worse for her (Berlin 2004:228). In verses 6–8, the narrator graphically describes Hannah's maltreatment by her rival. The two main verbs in verse 6 are הרעמה and וכעסתה. The root of the first verb is כעס which in Qal means 'to be angry', 'to be vexed', 'to be disturbed' or 'to be fretful' (Feyerabend 1959:149), but here it is used in Piel, meaning 'to irritate' or 'to provoke'. As the Piel stem is intensive, when used in that conjugation the verb means 'to provoke the heart to a heated condition which in turn leads to specific actions' (Van Groningen 1980:451). In this passage, therefore, the Piel may have been used intentionally to describe the high degree of provocation by Peninnah. Some translations seem to follow this line of thought in using adjectives such as 'sorely' (RSV) and 'grievously' (ESV) to qualify the provocation. הרעמה is from the Qal רעם, literally meaning 'to tremble', 'to rage' or 'to be agitated'. In the Hiphil infinitive construct as used here, it means to provoke to anger, to offend (Feyerabend 1959:323). Many of the English translations render הרעמה as 'to irritate her' but Young's Literal Translation (YLT), 'so as to make her tremble', may describe the intent of the narrator

1.Shiloh, 20 miles north of Jerusalem, was the religious centre of Israel and home of the Ark (1 Sm 4:3) until it was captured by the Philistines (1 Sm 4:11), and the sanctuary ceased to be used. It is possible that the Philistines destroyed Shiloh with the capturing of the Ark, for there is evidence that it was destroyed at some time (Jr 7:12, 14) and its priests settled at Nob (1 Sm 21:1; 22:11) (Brockington 1982:319). 'At the Ark, once a year, the high priest would make atonement for the sins of the nation' (Guzik 2001). The meal in which family members partake in 1 Samuel 1 is reminiscent of the peace offering in Leviticus 3, which suggests that the narrator might have been influenced by the post-exilic source (P), which in turn may support the view that the Hannah narrative is a late composition (Hutzli n.d., 232).

2.Technically the term 'polygamy' means marrying 'many' (wives, husbands or times). In this work, it is used in the popular usage of the state of marriage in which there is one husband and two or more wives, which should strictly be 'polygyny', as against 'polyandry', which refers to a state of one woman marrying two or more husbands (Mbiti 1969:142).

more appropriately. In that case, the narrator might intend to indicate that because of Peninnah's constant provocation of Hannah, the former actually became a source of fear for the latter. Some translations (e.g. the KJV) appear to want to show Peninnah's hardness on Hannah by rendering רעם as 'fret' which, according to White (1980:854), should be taken 'as figurative of Peninnah's loud complaints'. From verse 7 it appears that Peninnah's provocation of Hannah was more pronounced each time they went to the annual festival at Shiloh. Perhaps, that was because Peninnah knew that Hannah's main reason for being at the festival was to seek the face of God for a child; hence, that was the time her taunting would be more effective on her victim. In Hannah's situation, 'not even her husband's love and kind words ... (v. 8) could assuage the depth of Hannah's sorrow caused by her childlessness in a polygamous family' (Abasili 2015:589; cf. Payne 1994:298). For Hannah,

[T]he husband really is not better than ten sons ... for the joy of motherhood is quite distinct from that of conjugal affection, and especially to a Hebrew woman, who had special hopes from which she was cut off by barrenness. (*Pulpit Commentary*, in Bible Hub on 2004–2017a:n.p.)

After the session of eating and drinking in which she did not partake, Hannah rose and went into personal prayer (v. 9). The MT does not state specifically where Hannah did her prayer, but Berlin and Hutzli report that the LXX (1:9,14) says, '[s]he rose and stood before the Lord' (Berlin 2004:229; cf. Hutzli n.d.:231). According to Berlin, this refers to 'inside the temple of the Lord ... the same place where, later, the young Samuel will have his first call from God' (Berlin 2004:229). Hannah's prayer was silent, which in ancient times was unusual, and makes understandable Eli's suspicion of her possible drunkenness (Berlin 2004:230; Hutzli n.d.:232). This suspicion itself suggests that it might not have been unusual for people to be drunk at the sacrificial meals at Shiloh; 'it seems *drunken women* did come to the place' (Guzik 2001:n.p.). But Hannah was not drunk; rather, she was desperately pouring out her heart to God asking for the gift of a son (vv. 11,15). She did not only request for a son but also made a vow: if God gave her a son, he would be consecrated to God as a permanent Nazirite (cf. Nm 6) (Payne 1994:298). Scott (2011:18) observes that the Hannah story is unique in that it is the only instance in all the barren mother stories in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (HB/OT) of a barren woman entering into a promise with God about her child. The vow may therefore be a further indication of Hannah's desperation to become a mother. Moreover, she was not concerned about whether the child would live with her or not; all she wanted was just to have a son as she was willing to give the child back to God for life (Abasili 2015:596). After Hannah convinced the priest about her mission, and Eli prayed that God would grant her petition, Hannah's mood brightened and she ate. The change in her countenance possibly 'shows that she received the [Eli's] promise with faith' (Guzik 2001), and Hannah's faith worked for her because 'in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and called his name Samuel' (v. 20).

Apart from what the text reveals, Hannah's desperation for a child of her own can be understood against her social context

where childlessness had grave negative social implications (Abasili 2015:585). In the ancient Near East, being a mother 'confers a high degree of honor ... and the want of that status is felt as a stigma and deplored as a grievous calamity' (Jamieson, in Bible Hub 2004–2017b:n.p.). The *Ellicott's commentary* also states that 'there is an Oriental proverb that a childless person is as good as dead' (in Bible Hub 2004–2017b:n.p.). It is against this background that Hannah's situation can be properly understood. In her specific Israelite custom, 'the most important duty of a married woman ... is the begetting of offspring for her husband otherwise she will be viewed as a disgrace' (Kösternberger 2004, cited in Abasili 2015:589; cf. Payne 1994:298). This custom is copiously depicted in the narratives of other women whose conditions were similar to that of Hannah. Being hopeless for a child, Sarah surrendered her husband to her maid for a sexual relationship (Gn 16:2). This attitude also echoed from Rachel who preferred death to childlessness when she demanded that Jacob should '[g]ive me children, or else I die' (Gn 30:1). These women's desperation arose from the fact stated in *Benson Commentary* in Bible Hub (2004–2017b):

[T]he Hebrew women considered barrenness as one of the greatest misfortunes that could befall them, not only from a natural desire of children, but from their eager wishes to be the means of fulfilling the promise to Abraham, and bringing forth that seed in which all the families of the earth were to be blessed. (n.p.)

To the African reader, the suffering of Hannah calls attention to the prevalence of female infertility in Africa, and the tragic travails of barren African women. In the following section, with a specific focus on Nigeria, this article examines the various ways in which Hannah's ordeal is reminiscent of the childless African woman's experience.

Understanding Hannah's travails in the African context

As it was among the Hebrews, in Africa there is a strong desire for children so much so that marriage is constituted primarily for the purpose of procreation. Unlike in the western society where marriage is person oriented, 'that is, the concept of marriage as companionship', in the traditional African setting marriage is fertility oriented (Emenusiobi 2013:n.p.; cf. Abasili 2011:567). Mbiti (1969) explains that in Africa:

The supreme purpose of marriage is to bear children to build a family, to; extend life and to hand down the living torch of existence ... [hence] if there is not yet a child in the marriage people do not consider it to be a marriage [and] there is no guarantee that the marriage will endure. (pp. 132–133; cf. Egede 2015:65; Baloyi 2017:3)

As another writer puts it, in Africa 'the sense of children ... as a *value* to be desired – is so strong' that it overrides other purposes of marriage such as compatibility (Marriage & Family 1988:n.p.). In fact, in the traditional African setting, 'the indissolubility of marriage is conditioned to its fruitfulness. Practically speaking, the birth of a child marked the "consummation" of the marriage' (Marriage & Family 1988). Having children is so significant that it is unthinkable for one

to die without having children; it means to 'be completely cut off from the human society, to become an outcast and to lose all links with mankind' (Mbiti 1969:133). For this reason, among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, as stated by Abasili (2011):

For a man ... to die childless or without a male child is a calamity; it is tantamount to a descent into oblivion, to be forgotten by both the living and the dead. He has left no one to pour libation for him. He is not admitted into the status of an Igbo ancestor after his death, which requires one to have children. (p. 567)

To this end, in Africa marriage is not voluntary but mandatory; 'everybody must get married and bear children: that is the greatest hope and expectation of the individual for himself and of the community for the individual' (Mbiti 1969:133). In fact, deliberate refusal to get married is an abomination; in some societies, 'he who does not participate in marriage is a curse to the community' (Emenusiobi 2013:n.p.; cf. Abasili 2011:558). This is why till date every African feels incomplete until he or she gets married and bears children (Emenusiobi 2013).

The above discussion may explain why, as in the case of Hannah, in Africa, as said by Egede (2015):

[C]hildless couples are faced with a cosmological dilemma or tragedy ... This is because they are unable to contribute to that vital link between the living, the unborn and the dead ... [P]rocreation is a group survival issue for ... the primordial public and the involuntary childless in not being able to reproduce may be seen to threaten the existential nature of their primordial public. (p. 51)

It must be pointed out that 'even when there is shrouded male infertility ... the childless woman is still viewed in the African society as the "public face of infertility"' (Egede 2015:65). Therefore, just like Hannah, in Africa it is the barren woman who usually suffers the stigmatisation of childlessness. This is because in traditional African thought a woman is 'needed as a child-bearer and derived her social status and her indispensable value from this position' (Baloyi 2017). Hence, a woman who is unable to have children automatically loses this value, and her condition can be very miserable. In the description of Mbiti (1969), the childless wife is the:

[D]ead end of human life, not only for genealogical level, but also for herself ... [She] bears a scar which nothing can erase. She will suffer for this; her own relations will suffer for it. It is an irreparable humiliation for which there is no source of comfort in traditional life. (cited in Egede 2015:66)

This African perspective of the barrenness may explain the treatment meted out to them, similar to the travails of Hannah. In many societies, a woman is looked upon as a social misfit; 'she is openly ridiculed and told that she is not a woman' (Abasili 2011:562). In some places, 'women often are ostracized as witches or social outcasts if they cannot have children' (NBCNEWS 2018). In the past, it was as if a barren woman deliberately refused to:

[G]ive her husband children, [so] she was considered to have failed him – and society – in the most serious way possible. And if he chose to consider his marriage null and send her back to her family, society – and the woman herself – would agree. (Marriage & Family 1988:n.p.)

Even today, a woman faces the risk of divorce if she does not have children. Where a couple has the challenge of childlessness and it is the husband who is:

[I]mpotent or sterile, his 'brother' [i.e. kinsman] can perform the sexual duties and fertilize the wife for him ... but if the wife has no children, or [bears] only daughters, it follows almost without exception that her husband will add another wife. (Mbiti 1969:143, 145)

The traditional explanation for this attitude is that while the male child is looked upon as the sustainer of the lineage, girls are 'perceived as expendable commodities who will eventually be married out to other families to procreate and ensure the survival of the spouses' lineage by bearing sons' (Igbelina-Igbokwe 2013:n.p.).

As in the case of Hannah and Peninnah, in Africa, polygamy adds to the travails of a barren woman. Apart from the frequent quarrels arising from rivalry, the second wife, especially if she bears children, is a constant reminder of the barren woman's childlessness (Abasili 2015:590). The Hannah narrative indicates that Elkanah was sympathetic towards Hannah's situation, but it does not inform the readers on the attitude of his relatives. In Africa, the role of in-laws, particularly the husband's relatives, contributes tremendously to the suffering of a childless wife. The most conspicuous figure in this scenario is usually the wife's mother-in-law who often supports her:

[D]ehumanization because they believe that the childless woman is aiding the termination of their lineage. As such, in-laws encourage the marriage of a second wife in an attempt to ensure the continuation of their lineages. (Nwosu & Onwe 2015:43; cf. Amole 2011)

This attitude is rampant among the Yoruba in view of the fact that it is a:

[C]ulturally acceptable orientation among the Yoruba to put pressure on a man to take a second or a third wife if the first wife finds it difficult to have a child. (Adeyanju & Ayandiran 2013:52)

And, just as in the case of Hannah, most second or third wives contribute in no small way to the ordeal of their childless rivals. The story of a 57-year-old Grace Kambini illustrates some aspects of the travails of Nigerian barren women (Refugee Documentation Centre 2017):

After nine years of marriage, she realised that she could not give birth. Both her husband and his relatives started attacking her. The abuse and insults extended to her home where she was tortured and frequently denied food for weeks at a time. Her husband did not care about her woes. 'I remember asking my husband, how long I will continue to live in this misery. He replied: You refused to leave my house as if your parents are dead, if they are dead you should ask them to open their grave so you may join them. You are of no use to me. Every time I remember his insult or talk about it, I feel faint and out of breath. Due to the stress I endured, I suffered hypertension and diabetes ...' Grace said crying. Unfortunately, Grace has no living relatives on her mother's side and her in-laws do not seem to care about her suffering. (p. 2)

In the Hannah story, the narrator reports the harassment coming only from Peninnah. In Africa, barren women suffer not only from the mistreatment of in-laws and rivals but may actually become objects of public ridicule. 'In many African languages and dialects [barrenness is] ... generally characterised as [a condition] to be despised, scorned, pitied and shunned' (Egede 2015:56). Several of these languages have derogatory terms designating barren women. Among the Igbo, a childless woman is described as:

Mgbaliga, Nwanyi-iga which literally can be translated as 'the sterile woman', 'the barren woman' or even in a more disparaging way as 'a sterile monster who has maternal organs for mere decoration'. (Egede 2015:56)

The Yoruba have many of such labels which include *aje* [witch], *ako aja* [male dog], *agan* [unproductive woman], *agba ofo* [empty barrel] and *alakhiriboto* [infertile woman] (Adeyanju & Ayandiran 2013:52; cf. Egede 2015:56). It is important to note that these derogatory terms are often used against barren women by other women, especially the so-called 'fruitful' ones, either in direct or 'indirect reference to their plight and sometimes [in] open confrontation' (Adeyanju & Ayandiran 2013:52). Childless women are also often not respected by children because such children know that they do not have peers in a barren woman's house who could defend her. Hence, 'sometimes children do mock childless women, calling them witches and they hardly help or assist them in any chore' (Nwosu & Onwe 2015:43).

The depression suffered by Hannah also resonates in the psychological trauma experienced by barren African women. Grace's case above illustrates that their travails can sometimes lead to distress and certain pathological conditions. In their research, Adeyanju and Ayandiran (2013:53) found that oftentimes childless women weep loudly or silently; they can be lonely, frustrated; often poor, ill and worried because of stigmatisation. As Amole (2011) plausibly suggests, their worry arises partly from the fear of the unknown, 'the fear of what the future holds for them in days when the couple can no longer support themselves, yet without any children to call upon' (n.p.). In her distress, a barren woman may regard herself alienated from her body to the extent that she no longer finds any meaning in her physiology. According to Amole, a barren woman once expressed this type of feeling, saying '... there is no point in having a uterus, there is no point in having periods, there is no point in sex ...' (Amole 2011:n.p.).

Consequently, like Hannah, every barren African woman makes frantic efforts to have children. For instance, among the Yoruba once a woman gets married, the expectation from herself and all her relations is for her to take in after the first few months. When that time elapses with no sign of pregnancy, everyone begins to feel worried, including herself (Refugee Documentation Centre 2017:2). As time passes by, the couple begins to receive pressure from relatives and friends concerning the condition of the new wife. Their 'first point of call is usually the hospital' (Nwosu & Onwe 2015:43), where the couple, particularly the woman, seeks medical attention.

As time goes on, they begin to seek spiritual help for the woman. Seeking spiritual help arises from the African belief that every problem must have a spiritual cause (this is further discussed below). As Abasili (2011:566) notes, if the childless woman is a Christian, 'she may resort to praying for divine intervention'. Usually, a woman in this condition may start the prayer with her pastor and other close Christian friends. If the problem persists, she begins to visit certain 'spiritual'³ churches for help. Some barren women have had to leave their homes to take temporary abode in such churches. A woman who takes this step in her search for the fruit of the womb stays in the church yard with the man of God for intensive prayer and close monitoring. Unfortunately, this practice has led to the abuse of many women by the so-called men of God when they fall into the temptation of sexual immorality in the course of the prayer and monitoring. Moreover, in most cases nothing comes out of such sojourns.

Abasili (2011) is of the view that:

In the past, if the childless woman is a traditionalist, she might visit traditional healers and fulfil all the ritual prescriptions and sacrifices suggested by them. Nowadays, a good number of women in this predicament seek the help of orthodox medical practitioners. (p. 566)

Nonetheless, it is common that even today, in Nigeria, most barren women do not discriminate in the choice of the places they visit for help. Irrespective of religion and denomination, most of them visit traditional healers when orthodox medicine and praying in the Christian way have been employed to no avail. Nwosu and Onwe (2015) present this fact succinctly when they say:

[W]hen the hospital could not provide quick answers, the next treatment point of call is traditional infertility healer. Sometimes, the woman may be visiting the hospital and the traditional infertility healer simultaneously. (p. 43)

Amole (2011) buttresses this fact when he states that as a result of childlessness, Nigerian Christian couples often have recourse to religious syncretism. In their desperation, they carry their search for a solution:

[B]eyond the ambit of their Christian faith ... going from churches to churches seeking signs and wonders, the conjuring of spirit, consulting of the *Babalawo* (*Ifa* priest), *combating* with witches and wizards. (Amole 2011:n.p.)

All these are the aspects of the problem of barrenness that the story of Hannah evokes in the African mind whenever it is read and preached in the church. Usually, when the story is chosen as a text for sermon, the emphasis is on its happy ending, namely, how God answered Hannah's prayer with the birth of Samuel. If the barren has faith in God, she can experience the same. However, there are so many cases known to the congregants that did not end happily like that of Hannah, which means that the church has to go beyond the

³This term is often used for Pentecostal churches well-known for their employment of prayers with accompaniments for solving people's acute problems believed to be beyond the ability of the mainline churches or hospitals. In Yorubaland, the Celestial Church of Christ is one such spiritual church.

happy ending in exploiting the story of Hannah as a response to barrenness. In the following section, this article examines what has been the attitude of the church in Nigeria towards childlessness, and the ways in which it can further assist the childless, based on the study of the Hannah narrative.

Attitude of the church in Nigeria towards childlessness

As already mentioned at the beginning of this work, the church is truly the church only when it identifies with its members in their everyday problems (Mangayi 2014:135). As Baloyi (2017) puts it, 'Theology ... should not turn a blind eye while women ... are subjected to continuous and severe stress because of ... misunderstandings of conception and childbearing'. In Nigeria, many of the denominations have programmes for women seeking the fruit of the womb, which mostly involve weekly or monthly prayer meetings. However, attention to the problem of barrenness is mostly conspicuous in the Pentecostal churches. Their approach to the issue derives from certain underlying factors, principal among which is the belief that all problems have spiritual causes and therefore require spiritual responses. In the understanding of Pentecostal or charismatic churches, all misfortunes such as 'unemployment, securing of visas, general well-being or fruits of the womb ... are supernaturally caused. [For them] human barrenness is synonymous with being in spiritual "bondage"' (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007:439). They teach that barrenness is caused by witches, envious relatives, demons and the mermaid who lives under the sea who is believed to often take human form and have the ability to steal women's wombs (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007:446). All of these must, however, succumb to the will of God for whom nothing is impossible. With this belief, Pastor Enoch Aminu, founder of Pure Fire Miracle Ministries, for example, declares as 'lies' whatever doctors may have diagnosed as the medical causes of barrenness; by which he means 'that faith and miracles work against the flow of what may seem naturally and medically impossible' (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007:447). With faith even a woman who is past the childbearing age can still give birth. The biblical cases of Sarah, Rebecca, Hannah, Elizabeth and others are always cited to prove this point. In the religious economy of these churches 'there is also no critical attention to the possibility that even in God's scheme of things some couples may be destined never to have children of their own' (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007:442). Hence, many Pentecostal or charismatic pastors teach that 'the phenomenon of barrenness [is] a kind of spiritual power that eventually will have to submit to Jesus' (Holter 2014:435). For this reason, Pastor Aminu would pray (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007):

[B]arrenness must die in Jesus' name; unfruitfulness must die in Jesus' name. By the grace of God upon my life I bind every curse upon your life and set in motion the blessing of fruitfulness upon your life; in Jesus' name. (p. 445)

It is important to note here that in identifying 'biological infertility as a religious issue, the theology of African initiated Christianity' draws upon the ideas of African traditional religion' (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007:440). Ray (1993

cited in Asamoah-Gyadu 2007:440) identifies several ways in which this syncretism occurs, particularly in 'the belief in a world in which evil supernatural powers act as the causes of misfortune' (cf. Ademiluka 2012:36). With respect to childlessness, in African traditional religious thought, this condition is often diagnosed by the priests to have been caused by witchcraft. As explained by Field (1960 cited in Asamoah-Gyadu 2007):

The witches have stolen away the supplicant's womb or penis – that is the spiritual counterpart of the organ – and have eaten it (in which case there is no hope) or broken it into pieces, or hidden it in a river. The supplicant is told to lay his need before the deity, make a sacrifice to the river in which the damaged organ is hidden, and the deity will do his best to repair and restore it. (p. 441)

The belief in both traditional religion and the charismatic churches that barrenness has underlying spiritual causes is reflected in Pastor Aminu's prayer quoted above, and similar ones as cited in Holter (2014):

Now lay your hand on your womb and pray like this: O heaven declare the glory of God upon my marriage for the fruit of the womb ... Thou power of the Holy Ghost touch my womb and break any yoke holding me captive ... My navel you are the source of my destiny refuse to co-operate with the works of darkness. I therefore command paralysis, weakness and death upon any contrary power attached to you through my placenta. (p. 435)

Sometimes, combined with these prayers are various forms of ingredients, especially olive oil, which women seeking the fruit of the womb are usually given to drink (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007:447). Also, certain psalms are often read into olive oil or water which they are made to drink (Ademiluka 2012:37).

Nevertheless, deriving from the study of the Hannah story and the experiences of barren African women, there should be other methods which the church can bring to bear upon the problem of barrenness among its members. In both contexts, it is shown that the problem of childlessness is often ignorantly feminised, which is the reason why it is only women who suffer stigmatisation. Unlike Hannah who had a child at last, it is common in Nigeria, as everywhere, that many women have died childless. These facts will form the fulcrum for the discussion on how the church in Nigeria can further assist its childless members, particularly the women who are often made the scapegoats for 'refusing to give birth'.

In collaboration with professionals in the health sector, the church can help to defeminise childlessness by organising regular programmes and workshops, generally tailored towards addressing issues such as causes of barrenness as well as the role of male and female cells in the conception process. In this way, the church will be helping 'to unmask the pathology that sees men as fertile at all times while women are claimed to be infertile' (Baloyi 2017:n.p.). In other words, the church is by this method defeminising the problem of infertility. As Egede (2015) rightly points out,

the feminisation of infertility is practised in many African churches when programmes on infertility are specifically designed for childless women, designating them with terms such as 'waiting mothers' or 'women seeking the fruit of the womb'. These labels can sometimes be disparaging as well as demeaning because 'they do inadvertently help to perpetuate the idea that infertility and involuntary childlessness are female problems' (Egede 2015:62). The church in Nigeria has an active role to play 'in confronting such taboos and in promoting greater openness about male infertility' (Egede 2015:63). One way through which the church can achieve defeminisation is to encourage men to participate in programmes designed to assist childless couples, not leaving them to their wives alone. This advice is necessary in view of the fact that 'it is mostly women and not men that congregate to churches to solicit prayers regarding involuntary childlessness' (Egede 2015:63). Also, oftentimes in most church programmes designed to address the problem of childlessness, 70% of the attendees are women (cf. Asamoah-Gyadu 2007:445).

The church can address the problem of stigmatisation by emphasising the right attitude of friends, relatives and church members towards childless couples, especially the women. Rather than putting pressure on husbands to marry other wives:

[I]t is very important that the family and extended family are supportive of the childless couple. The pastoral responsibility is first to help the family members understand the importance of helping and supporting one another even in difficult situations ... [T]he family must be taught to accept that the extended family should not dictate to the couple ... [B]oth parties – parents and the couple – should know their roles when the marriage begins. The parents must be taught to relinquish some power of decision-making to the couple without influencing them. (Baloyi 2017:n.p.)

The significance of friends and relatives standing by childless couples is that it reduces the chance of barren women suffering the psychological effects such as those discussed in the preceding section. In this way, the church will be helping the barren woman 'regain her self-esteem, dignity and respect of her husband, the family and the community' (Baloyi 2017:n.p.).

Hannah had a child at last, but it is a well-known fact today that many women have died without having their desire for children fulfilled. However, today's childless couples have certain opportunities which were most probably not there in the days of Hannah, particularly the options of child adoption and surrogacy. The church in Nigeria, in collaboration with legal practitioners and other relevant professionals, can also identify with childless couples by introducing them to these practices when all efforts to have children by natural methods fail. In Nigeria, the *Child Rights Act* of 2003 makes it possible for childless people to adopt children (Okolie 2018:n.p.). However, noteworthy are the hurdles involved in the process of child adoption, even when there is availability of adoptive children. The application has to be made to the court through the Ministry of Youth and Social Development, accompanied with relevant documents. The court may turn

down the application if it fails to meet certain requirements such as suitability of character of the applicants, and 'the necessary financial clout and means to take adequate care of the child' (Okolie 2018:n.p.). Applicants must also supply a medical certificate of fitness obtained from a government hospital, which implies that an application may not be approved because of some health condition of the intending adopter. The court also:

[H]as the authority to revoke an adoption order in respect of a child ... where it is proved that the adoptive parent has abandoned or neglected the child or persistently ill-treated or assaulted the child. (Okolie 2018)

Apart from these hurdles, as presented below under the discussion of the option of surrogacy, there are other reasons related to culture why many Africans would not consider child adoption as a viable solution to childlessness (cf. Abasili 2011:568).

Surrogacy has become an option 'in attempting to circumvent the problem of infertility, especially when there is a physiological problem in the reproductive anatomy of the wife' or the husband (Amole 2011:n.p.). According to Umeora et al. (2014), the term 'surrogacy' is derived from the Latin word *subrogare* which means 'to substitute':

... it refers to a situation whereby a third party female elects or is commissioned to carry a pregnancy on behalf of another couple, delivers a baby and hands the child over to the commissioning parents at birth. (Umeora et al. 2014:n.p.)

There are two forms of surrogacy, namely, traditional surrogacy and gestational surrogacy. Traditional surrogacy is the type in which the 'surrogate mother is inseminated with the semen of the commissioning father or donor sperm', in which case she is biologically the mother of the baby (Umeora et al. 2014:n.p.). Gestational surrogacy is the type in which the surrogate mother makes no genetic contribution to the foetus. In this case, pregnancy is the result of in vitro fertilisation (IVF), that is, 'the fertilization of eggs with sperm in glass, which translates to fertilization outside of the body in the laboratory' (Dominion Fertility 2018:n.p.). In other words, in traditional surrogacy, fertilisation occurs inside a woman, whereas in IVF, test-tube babies are developed from an egg that was fertilised outside the body and then implanted in the uterus of the biological or surrogate mother. At present, worldwide 'poor regulatory frameworks are still the norms, with only 71 nations having any surrogacy laws whatsoever' (Glaser 2016:n.p.). In Nigeria, after the birth of the first test-tube baby in 1989, 'there was no follow-up in this field until a few years ago with the establishment of some private IVF clinics' mostly in the southwestern commercial city of Lagos' (Omo 2018:n.p.).⁴

However, even when it is legally regulated, commercial surrogacy will still face many challenges in Africa, particularly Nigeria. Firstly, some people raise the moral question of the appropriateness of the inclusion of a third party in matrimony, and the fact that the inclusion may

4. It is important to mention that there are no regulatory bodies at all that license or monitor the activities of these fertility clinics (Omo 2018).

create serious controversy for the couple either immediately or later. A problem arises if, for example, a child born through surrogacy demands to know his or her biological parents (Amole 2011). From the perspective of African culture, issues arise relating to pregnancy, childbirth and blood relationship. In many parts of Africa, pregnancy and childbirth are highly celebrated. A pregnant woman moves about with joy with her protruded tummy, and the whole community awaits her day of delivery. In commercial surrogacy where a surrogate has to be hired to carry pregnancy, this enthusiasm of openly carrying pregnancy and joyfully awaiting delivery is absent for the intended parents. Moreover, to many around the world, not only in Africa, 'the idea of paying a woman to carry a child seems abhorrent', not only to the intended parents but especially to the surrogate mother (Glaser 2016). The concept of blood relationship is very strong in Africa in which there is:

[A] vertical conception of family that dates back to ancestry and projects into the future ... [comprising] ancestors, the present generation and the unborn, all blood related in an unbroken sequence. (Umeora et al. 2014:n.p)

This conception of lineage does not envisage surrogate or adopted children; hence, a child born via commercial surrogacy or adopted may suffer segregation not only by the other children in the family but, in fact, by the members of the lineage and the community at large (Umeora et al. 2014; cf. Abasili 2011:568). Another problem with commercial surrogacy is the cost that can be very prohibitive, especially for those Africans of low socio-economic status, who of course are in the large majority. Philpott (2013:n.p.) states that 'the costs for surrogacy range from \$40 000.00 to \$140 000.00', while McBrien (2015) puts it at \$100 000.00 – \$150 000.00.

Yet, both child adoption and surrogacy would have much benefits for African couples who cannot have their own children by themselves. The former has its barriers as mentioned earlier, but even then many Nigerian childless couples have used it to erase their tears of childlessness. Others who cannot cross the hurdles may exploit the option of surrogacy. In this regard, Umeora et al. (2014) state:

Surrogacy arrangement is deemed by many as advantageous given the dearth of children available for adoption and complexity of qualifying as adoptive parents. It may represent the only hope for some infertile couple to raise a family. (n.p.)

All the problems relating to culture are real, but they may not debar childless Africans who are desperate to have children. The cost of surrogacy is a major obstacle, but here the church can come to the aid of members who want to exploit that option as a means of having children. The church has the duty to emphasise to childless men the advantage of these options over that of divorcing their barren wives and marrying other women, or engaging in polygamy. Apart from the travails a childless woman suffers, particularly in a polygamous setting, '[t]he fact that the husband divorces his wife or takes a second wife already points to the woman as the root cause of the childlessness' (Baloyi 2017:n.p.).

It is pertinent to note, however, that it is common life experience that there are always persons, Christians and non-Christians alike, who will never have children for reasons beyond anybody's control. For this reason, the church in Nigeria has to make childless couples face the reality that children come from God, and not from man's ability. Therefore, even though childless couples 'need do all they can licitly attempt to circumvent infertility, yet [they] need to understand that ... matrimony aims at parenthood but it need not necessarily end in parenthood' (Amole 2011). The passion of Africans for children, as this article has shown, makes these precepts difficult to accept in the traditional African context. Nonetheless, as Baloyi (2017:n.p.) rightly affirms:

It is the truth that the church must teach through its pastoral services. Whenever there are birthday parties and other child-related events, pastoral caregivers should use these opportunities to make it known to the parents and the family that even though children are born out of the union of the mother and father, the absolute giver of the child is God.

The church has the responsibility not only to make its members accept the fact that children are a gift from God, but also that 'a childless marriage remains a good marriage and retains its core and happiness' (Abasili 2011:572). More importantly, they need to be taught that childless persons can still live happy and fulfilled lives. The latter fact is taught by John Paul II when he says:

[E]ven when procreation is not possible, conjugal life does not for this reason lose its value. Physical sterility in fact can be for spouses the occasion for other important services in the life of the human person, for example adoption, various forms of educational work, and assistance to other families and to poor or handicapped children. (Amole 2011:n.p.)

These words are exemplified by Mercy Oduyoye, the Christian scholar who had no biological children of her own but accepted her condition as an alternative Christian service. She testified:

I had prayed to join in obeying the command to increase and multiply, and God was saying a clear no to my offer. I felt free; I felt open and fertile, a new person for whom God has a purpose ... Rather than being consumed by childlessness, I rose like Hannah, as one who had experienced a secret conversation and a secret pact with God. I was pregnant with expectation of great things to come to me from God. I have not been disappointed. (Oduyoye 1999:60)

Conclusion

The suffering of Hannah as a barren woman is a 'life story' in Africa in the sense that in many respects it resonates with the travails of childless African women. Yet, beyond the weekly or monthly prayer services for women seeking the fruit of the womb, the church in Nigeria still has much to do in exploiting these similarities to assist its barren members. Currently, they receive the most conspicuous attention in the Pentecostal churches. These ones teach that barrenness, like other problems, stems from spiritual causes; hence, apart from vigorous prayers, they also apply methods akin to those of African traditional healers to treat barrenness.

Beyond these, collaborating with professionals in the health sector, the church can organise regular programmes and workshops to address issues such as causes of barrenness as well as the role of male and female cells in the conception process. Through similar programmes, the church also needs to teach the right attitude of friends, relatives and church members towards childless couples, especially the women. The significance of this is that it reduces the chance of barren women suffering the psychological effects of childlessness. The church in Nigeria can also identify with childless couples by introducing them to the practices of child adoption and surrogacy when all efforts to have children by themselves fail. In spite of their shortcomings, these options remain the harmless means by which childless Nigerians can raise their own families. In view of the fact that there will always be childless persons irrespective of all efforts to have children, the church also has the responsibility to make its members realise the fact that children are a gift from God, and that matrimony need not necessarily end in parenthood. More importantly, the church in Nigeria needs to assist childless members to live happy and fulfilled lives.

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Authors' contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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