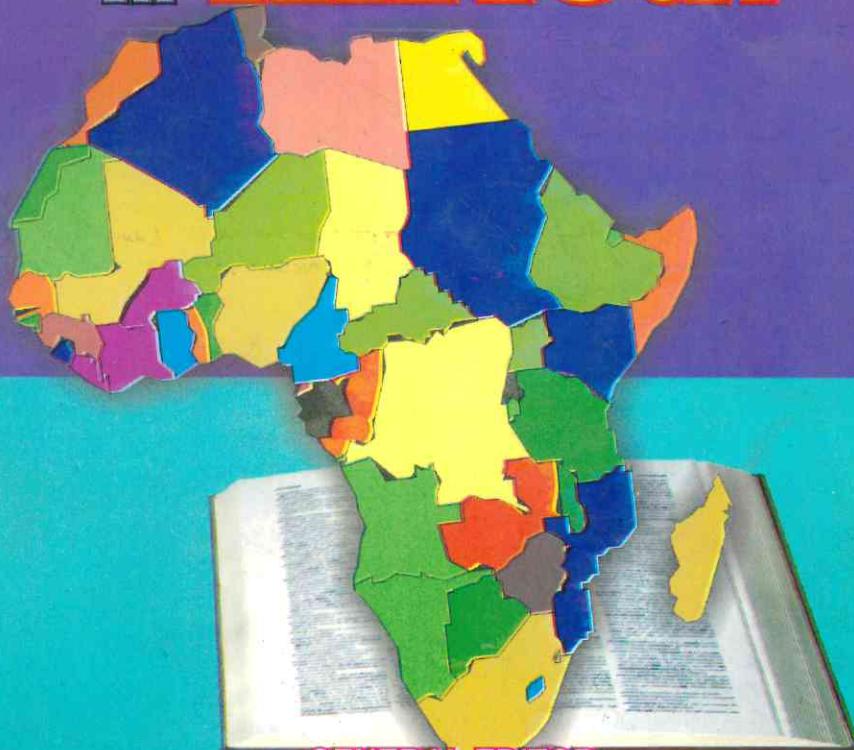


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BIBLICAL STUDIES and
YOUTH DEVELOPMENT
In **Africa.**



GENERAL EDITOR

S.O. ABOGUNRIN FNAL

Biblical Studies Series Number 8

A PUBLICATION OF THE NIGERIAN ASSOCIATION OF BIBLICAL STUDIES (NABIS)

C. O. Ogunkunle

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BIBLICAL STUDIES AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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Number 6

**A Publication of The Nigerian Association
for Biblical studies (NABIS)**

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CHAPTER 5

SPIRITUAL LEADERS AND THE NEGLECT OF THE HOME FRONT: ELI'S HOME IN THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

C.O. OGUNKUNLE

INTRODUCTION

Tunde Jaiyebo looks at leadership from the perspective of influencing other people. He describes a leader as: "Somebody who influences a certain group of people to achieve a set of objectives, goals or aims. He affects their thought beliefs and actions in a way that are able to achieve a desired purpose."¹ However, this must not be done at the expense of the family. A popular adage says "Charity begins at home" which means that the family unit is of great importance to the existence of any church organisation or nation. Therefore, parents need to give special attention to the training of their children, as failure to do so early in life may bring disaster and shame to the family in future. Obviously, children as from the teenage years are a set of active individuals. They are very conscious of themselves; they have new ideas, and want to venture into new things. Also, children and young people are confronted by several challenges that have influence and control over them. These challenges include those from friends, educational institutions, society, and even the government.²

Obviously spiritual leaders are so much involved in helping their followers. But how much time do they have for the spiritual growth and nurturing of their own homes? How much time do they have for the training of their children as commanded in Proverbs 22:6 which says:

"Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it"? Are they aware that the untrained children of today will ruin their reputation and the so-called 'successful ministry' tomorrow?

This article is premised on the fact that a spiritual leader whose home is in shamble as in the case of Eli, is not fit to lead any congregation or denomination. Apostle Paul, while admonishing Timothy on the qualification of an overseer or a deacon says: "He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (1 Timothy 3:4-5). The historical method is adapted whereby relevant books and articles on the subject are examined. This is corroborated with exegetical study of relevant biblical texts.

ELI AND HIS SONS

The events in the first three chapters of 1 Samuel can be associated with the period of Judges whose summary is given in Judges 21:25. "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit". The stories contain a lot of contrasts, especially between the families of Elkanah and Eli. Writing on the contrasts, Marjorie Menaull says:

Eli, whose status as priest should make him a respected and positive figure will show himself instead to be an inept and ineffective. In contrast, Hannah, a woman with an insecure future, will prove herself to be a person of integrity and strength.⁶

Also, the birth, growth and devotion of Samuel contrast with the wickedness of Hophni and Phinehas in the Sanctuary. And no wonder, God Himself raised up Samuel

as His prophet, priest and judge, while He punished the sons of Eli for their evil practices.

Eli, whose account is recorded in 1 Samuel 1-4 was the second to the last judge of Israel; the last being Samuel. He is described as a priest in the house of the Lord at Shiloh (1 Samuel 1:3, 7, 9). In other words, Eli was a spiritual leader whom God had given the highest place in the nation of Israel at that time but unfortunately his sons down-graded it as he was unable to control their wickedness. Eli's ancestry is not given at least in the Old Testament. However, one tradition assigns him to the Aaronic home of Ithamar (1 Samuel 1:9; 1 Kings 2:27; 1 Chronicles 24:3) and another tradition attaches him to the house of Eleazer (Exodus 6:23, 25).⁸ Eli was the instructor and mentor of Samuel, but unfortunately his own sons, Hophni and Phinehas, dishonoured God as a result of his weakness. Eli is described as a man who was "strong in one thing only and that was weakness".⁹ Eli was an indulgent father who did not exercise his authority to correct the evil habits and passions of his children. Rather than contend with his sons, he would submit to their will and let them have their own way. Instead of regarding the education of his children as a serious matter and as one of the most important responsibilities, he treated the matter as of little consequence. Perhaps, the political situation at the time of Judges made it difficult for Eli as he probably had to struggle to keep the people together. This might be the main reason why he neglected his primary responsibilities of training his children in the way of the Lord. In other words, Eli was spending his energy in keeping the people together rather than training his children.

The weaknesses of Eli are reflected in the lives and activities of his sons, Hophni and Phinehas. 1 Samuel 2:12

says "they had no regard for the LORD". The Hebrew verb used has a number of meanings which include: to know and to learn good and evil (Genesis 3:22); to know a person, be acquainted with (Genesis 29:5; Exodus 1:8) to know a person cordially, of sexual intercourse (Genesis 4:1, 17, 25, 38, 26 etc); to know how to do a thing and be able to do it (Jeremiah 1:6, 6:15 etc) to have the knowledge of God (Isaiah 1:3; Proverbs 17:27, 30:3 etc).¹¹ Obviously, the sons of Eli had a general knowledge of God but their knowledge was not accompanied by faith and the fear of God. Therefore, they became worthless, good for nothing, base fellows (1 Samuel 2:12).¹² As the sons of Eli served in the Tabernacle, they demanded from the worshippers their unlawful portion of the offerings, before the LORD received what was rightly His. The sons of Eli had no regard for the LORD and they had no respect for their father or his office as the High Priest of God. They were idle, loose and indolent. Their father probably did not correct them early in life. And since they were not restrained and punished for their offence of defiling the offerings and sacrifices, they became hardened and lost respect for God, their father and the people of God.

CHILD TRAINING AS A COMMAND

The Bible is very clear on the need for parents to train their children early in life and for them to be firm while instructing them. The Bible says "Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6). The passage is perhaps the best known verse in Proverbs on child training. Here it means the setting apart of a child and "narrowing a child's conduct away from evil and towards godliness and starting him off in the right direction".¹³

Earlier in the Pentateuch, God says of Abraham, "for I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what He has promised him" (Genesis 18:19). In other words, this verse again established the importance of child training. Indeed, it is by the training of children in righteousness and justice that God's blessings will flow in the family. Also, God warns the Israelites through Moses against worshipping other gods when they get to the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 11:13-16). The only solution against the enticement into pagan worship is fixing the words of God in their hearts, minds, hands and foreheads; and they are to diligently teach them to their children.

THE WEAKNESSES OF ELI

It was required in the law that all adult Hebrew males should appear at the tabernacle for three major religious festivals each year (Exodus 23:14-17). On this particular occasion, Elkanah was at Shiloh with his family and Hannah was pouring out her heart to God in prayer for a son. Unfortunately, Eli, the High Priest was not spiritually sensitive enough to understand Hannah's intensive silent prayer. He accused the woman of being drunk. Obviously, Eli's assumption suggests the religious decadence of his days when it was a common thing for drunken individuals to enter the sanctuary (Judges 17:21).

Eli had very good understanding of the evil practices of his sons as reports came from several people. However, he had lost the control of the family as he was very old and it was too late for him to act. One major offence of the sons of Eli was sexual promiscuity as they had affairs with women who served in the tabernacle (Exodus 38:8; Genesis 26:10,

34:2, 7, 35:22; 1 Samuel 2:22 etc).¹⁴ This kind of ritual prostitution was specifically forbidden by God (Numbers 25:1-5; Deuteronomy 23:17; Amos 2:7-8) especially as it had connection with the Canaanite cultic practices.

While Eli was fast enough to rebuke the innocent Hannah who was sincerely pouring out her heart to God in prayer, he did not rebuke his own wicked sons. And looking at the form of his rebuke one will see a kind of misplacement of priority. He did not rebuke them for the way they fed themselves from the sacrifices and he did not rebuke them for the way they threatened worshippers. He simply rebuked them for their sexual promiscuity.

The man of God raised the following questions with Eli in 1 Samuel 2:29:

Why do you scorn my sacrifice and offering that I prescribed for my dwelling? Why do you honour your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel?

The major weakness of Eli as contained in the above verse was that, Eli honoured his sons more than God.¹⁵ This possibly explains why he was not firm in correcting or rebuking their evil practices.

Perhaps the greatest problem that contributed to the moral and spiritual deterioration in the family of Eli is the conspicuous absence of the motherly role in the story. Unlike Hannah who made a significant contribution to the birth and growth of Samuel; the Bible is silent as to the role played by the wife of Eli. In other words while Hannah contributed immensely to the physical, material and spiritual life of Samuel; the same thing cannot be said of the mother of the sons of Eli. There is no information as to

her attitude towards the children, whether she was tolerant towards their misbehaviour or not. Writing on the significant roles of mother in the home, Kenneth Chaffin notes that "mothers are specialists at meeting the needs of children".¹⁶ Mothers are sensitive to the various needs of their children. They spend time with each of their children. Spiritually, they have more to contribute to the growth and development of the children. Kenneth Chaffin notes:

Mothers play a special role in the religious development of their children. All the foundations for adult faith are laid in the simple experiences of childhood, most of which take place in the home. As the child becomes aware of himself he can be told of God's love for him which does not change. As the child becomes aware of the world with all its beauty and mystery he can learn that it is good because God made it. All the relationships which involve trust, love and even forgiveness can give meaning to ideas which will someday equip the child for a vital faith. The words which he hears in the church about God's love will only have meaning if he has had experiences which actualize it in the home.¹⁷

Obviously all these attributes of motherhood are probably lacking in the family of Eli.

THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

A critical examination of the contemporary Nigerian society shows a kind of similarities between what happened at the time of Eli and in the homes of some of our contemporary Nigerian spiritual leaders. In fact, our contemporary spiritual leaders are confronted with several challenges that give them additional responsibilities which tend to keep

them very busy. Nigeria is blessed with millions of active children and young people. Unfortunately, some of the children, while in school, have already been exposed to guns, drugs, violence, gangs and much more.¹⁸ Several of them graduate from tertiary institutions and become restless in the community. Describing the various evils and atrocities being perpetuated by the Nigerian youths, Festus Adebayo notes:

When robbers gain entrance into our homes brandishing pistols and AK47, they are these young boys, barely off their diapers, requesting for our all in amazing Queen's English. Those who visit red light districts regale us with the high level of literacy on the streets among sellers of the flesh. Even in our neighbourhoods, those who terrorize us are those kid spill-over whom society has failed to create a space for in the midst of the unemployed. Visit the nearest police station and you would be alarmed at the rate at which cases of larceny, robbery, theft and other societal crimes are being taken over by knowledgeable Nigerian youths who are nevertheless jobless. The one that assails me week in week out is the colonization of cyber-cafes by youths who try to circumvent the blocked roads to eking out honest living by successive Nigerian governments. Good-looking and precocious, they storm the cafes in twins and pound out dross on the computer to unsuspecting victims in God-knows-where. As you wait to take your turn, these youths make phone calls to these victims in improvised voices, asking that the money be remitted as soon as possible. When you image how such wizardry and intelligence

would have rescued our archaic industries, you will weep for this country.¹⁹

Writing in the same vein, the sole administrator of the Lagos State Command of National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW), notes the "high rate of unemployment among the youths as the main cause of violent crimes in Lagos".²⁰

Another dimension to the problems confronting our contemporary spiritual leaders in Nigeria is the rate of multiplication and proliferation of individual Christian ministries, prayer homes, churches and denominations. Every available space and shop has been turned into a place of worship. It has been noted that several of the nation's warehouses and factories are giving way for Churches.²¹ It is a fact that the pastoral work has become both financially lucrative and competitive. Therefore, many of the pastors and founders are forced to struggle hard to keep their members and to make sure that they are well rooted and grounded in their so-called teachings and doctrines. Thus, in an attempt to make spiritual impact upon their members, many of the pastors have neglected the ministry of the family. In other words, many of the pastors and ministers of the gospel are working very hard for the growth of 'their ministry' at the expense of the home front. There are several cases of children of renowned men of God misbehaving in the society as a result of neglect in the home.²²

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The above study shows that the neglect of the home front by spiritual leaders is dangerous as seen in the family of Eli and in some parts of our own contemporary Nigerian

society. Obviously, Eli did not perform his fatherly responsibility early enough. His preoccupation had negative effect on his family, especially upon the children. So also many of the contemporary spiritual leaders get carried away with the ministerial work. Some have the assumption that all is well with the children, when indeed it is not so.

In the light of the above, it is recommended that parents should create quality time for the training of their children. Parents, especially mothers have a very big responsibility in the training of their children. Stressing the importance of spending quality time with the children, Aunty Ronke advised the parents that:

Family is a very important part of a child's life; the first 5 years are the most important, so as parents, do the best you can in the world around you. Remember also that a child hears everything you do. All of these can affect the way he or she lives in the future. The most important thing to remember is letting your children know that you are always there for them. Most times, parents get too involved with their careers, businesses or other things and do not realise what they are doing to their children.²³

In other words, parents should note that the future of their children is influenced by them. Incidentally, several parents are making positive impact upon their children.²⁴ One of such women is Mrs. Idiat Adegoke Aderinto, the Commissioner for Information and Youth Development, Osun State. She is interested in her family and particularly in the training of her children. While answering the question on how she has been combining her office with the home front, she says:

If this appointment had been given to me about two, three years ago, I think I would have rejected it because my family matters so much to me.²⁵

Finally, parents should take the issue of discipline seriously. Parents should not spare the rod in disciplining and correcting their children (Proverbs 3:11-12, 13:24, 23:14).²⁶ The greatest mistake of Eli was failure to discipline his sons. Unfortunately, some parents are doing a similar thing today by permitting their children to have their own way and do whatever they please. And if either the father or mother should say any word of opposition there would be the expression of serious anger.²⁷ Jennifer Ahidiamen rightly notes:

Parents who failed to live up to their responsibility to train their children well and maintain a good parent-child relationship risk being abused in future. Therefore, it is crucial that the 21st century parents rise above the norms put their feet down and not spare the rod.²⁸

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