

Beyond The Privilege Of Maternity: Inputs From The Old Testament On Vocation To Responsible Motherhood In Africa

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Abstract

Even when scholars may not agree on this, experience proves that the mother has a very prominent place in keeping the family together. Today, with the adverse effect of modernity, many have lost consciousness of the fact that beyond 'maternity,' there is the more relevant role of 'motherhood' to play in sustaining the family. Only that divinely-endowed woman can play that role creditably. It is dangerous to allow any thing or situation to continue to play down on the importance of responsible motherhood. This work is a response to the need to project the importance of responsible motherhood beyond the privilege of maternity. Drawing inspiration from the interpretation of isolated Old Testament passages in Genesis and 1 Samuel, the aim is to employ exegetical and analytical methods to examine the relationship between maternity and motherhood and to interpret and apply the findings to benefit the African cultural understanding of Motherhood as a vocation to save the family. The conclusions and recommendations promise an attitudinal and physio-practical re-orientation towards a more meaningful and responsible response to the privilege of maternity and the vocation to responsible motherhood in Africa and beyond. This work promises to be relevant and beneficial to scholarship, gender studies, family, motherhood and pastoral theology in general.

Keywords: *Maternity; Old Testament; Vocation; Motherhood; and Africa*

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I. Introduction

Family is a divine institution and what guarantees family life is not just maternity but motherhood. Beyond maternity, modernity seems to forget a more important role that defines family. Motherhood must be appreciated as a more lasting family role consequent upon maternity. For certain, one state of being that is very noble in almost every culture is 'Motherhood.' However, the perception of motherhood may differ from one culture to another especially when considered from the point of view of the different components of the family setting – the men (fathers), the women (mothers) and the children. The men may have their perception of motherhood; the women may also have their perception of motherhood, and the children, too, may have their separate perception of motherhood. In all these, what stands out about motherhood is the fact that it is a noble vocation that needs to be treasured and lived out as such.

Motherhood as a vocation is a teaching that the Church has emphasized in time and place. The pages of Scripture, especially the Old Testament, are adorned with useful, relevant and meaningful inputs towards maternity as a privilege. But beyond this privilege is a vocation to responsible motherhood. Drawing inspiration from these Biblical mothers as a pre-figuration of the Blessed Virgin Mary - the mother of God, every mother is on a God-given mandate. Whether or not people accept this fact, and, the level to which this is treasured and lived out, maternity is a privileged gift from God and motherhood remains a vocation that should be the concern of everybody if we must sustain the integrity of the family. But the truth of experience is that when this aspect of maternity is seen as the end of the 'journey,' the vocation to motherhood becomes jeopardy. When

motherhood as a vocation is not appreciated, as we see in some cases, the world is the worse for it; the Church is the worse for it. Some people, including some mothers themselves, are yet to fully grasp and live out the very essence of motherhood as a vocation. If this is not checked and addressed, the noble ‘institution’ of motherhood may, sadly, be escorted into disrepute in the near future. This article aims at creating awareness for the right appreciation of motherhood as responsible living after the privilege of maternity. It sees motherhood as a vocation to responsible maternal duty. This call needs to be responded to in the right ways. A meaningful appreciation of the demands of motherhood presupposes an objective understanding of its motivating principle. This orientation needs to be pursued vigorously to save the institution of motherhood from further abuses

Interestingly, just like in the Bible, motherhood is one area in traditional African setting that enjoys a whole lot of appreciation as a God-given privileged status. Africa prizes the institution of motherhood very high and this write up is to examine, identify and project the vocation of motherhood in the Bible and eventually apply its import to serve the growing need for responsible motherhood in Africa. In order to achieve maximum coverage, Africa, here, will be delimited to the Annang Tribe of Akwa Ibom State in Nigeria (a significant ethnic group in West Africa, where the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene resides). This serves as a motivational starting point towards getting everybody, especially the mothers, to appreciate the Biblical position on the vocation of motherhood. The methodology will be a combination of the expository and analytical approaches. After this introduction and the explication of terms, we would look at Maternity as a post motherhood privilege, Motherhood generally as a life-long vocation; isolate and examine key Old Testament passages that touch on these, before we examine their appreciation in the African context. Eventually, maternity in motherhood will be evaluated as a treasured identity. Recommendations will be made for a better appreciation of maternity and motherhood today. It is hoped that this will enhance responsibility, respect and appreciation in family life and in the appreciation of the vocation of motherhood even beyond Africa.

Explication Of Terms

In order to have a better appreciation of our focus, there is need to explain the context of the usage of the terms: Vocation, Motherhood, and African culture.

Maternity

Though maternity may be close to motherhood, it differs from it slightly. It is used here to refer to the entire process of child-birth. It comes before the motherly duties after child birth. While the key word in maternity is child-birth, the key word in motherhood is child-care and upbringing. Maternity has to do with the privilege of qualifying as a mother. It confirms the identity of the mother without necessarily carrying out the duties

Vocation

The word vocation, etymologically comes from the Latin root ‘*vocare*’ meaning ‘to call.’ Vocation is a call and in this context, it is a call from God. To perceive motherhood as a vocation means that motherhood is an invitation by God onto some responsibility. In the course of this paper, a reference to the word, vocation is to highlight the fact and source of the ‘mandate’ surrounding the institution of motherhood. Motherhood is not a choice. It is a divine call to noble service. It is a call and needs a response.

Motherhood

Generally, motherhood is the state of being a mother (PORTIERE-LE COCQ, 2019, p. 11). In this context, the word motherhood is used in a loose sense to include all who are called to nurture and groom the young. Therefore both biological and spiritual female parents are included in this institution. It is associated with the female gender as those called by nature to birth, groom, nurture and oversee the growth of the young. Even Biblically, motherhood is seen as a gift from God (See 1Tim 5: 10). What defines this gift of motherhood is the person’s availability to love, help and support the children in everything as they grow. It is used in this write-up to cover both the role, the action, the institution and the ideology of ‘mothering’ as in nurturing the life and growth of a child. The role of the mother is life-long and continues far beyond the point of maternity.

Old Testament

This first part of the Christian Scripture, is employed in the loose sense, as the research ground for the determination of the right import of maternity in Motherhood. There is no one single passage of the Old Testament here. Instead what is expected is the determination of the Old Testament Biblical Theology of maternity in motherhood.

Africa - Annang Culture

Africa here refers to the black continent in the sub-Sahara region. However, in order to give this topic a meaningful treatment, it has become necessary to delimit Africa to the Annang Tribe in Nigeria. This tribe is not only the home of the researcher but is a community that would very much benefit from the Biblical inputs on maternity in Motherhood. Annang is a significant ethnic group in Akwa Ibom State, in the southern part of Nigeria. Generally, Africa, as one of the continents of our world, is a traditional society that is not only very religious, but is also rich in the cultural heritage of family-love and unity. By Africa, nay - Annang culture, as used here, we mean the values and beliefs that are prevalent in the African continent as closely observed in the Annang context, about the institution of motherhood. In the Annang culture, these values are not only professed but enforced. The Annang, as used here refer not only to the people but also to the way of life of the community that make up Ikot Ekpene diocese in Nigeria. The Annang have a strong sense of family. Their family values give the Annangland a very commendable reputation as 'home.' The African appreciation of motherhood is more or less a way of life that is peculiar to the continent. By Annang culture here, we are referring to the general way of life and traditional convictions of the African people as it relates to motherhood but for indepth appreciation, we delimit Africa to the Annang culture of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria in Africa. (It must be noted that most of Ikot Ekpene Diocese is 99% Annang. The Catholic Women Organisation of Ikot Ekpene would become the primary focus here in as much as it reflects, not only the God –given demands of maternity in motherhood, but also represents the Annang understanding of Motherhood as a vocation).

Maternity As A Privilege

Naturally, only women are associated with child-birth. Nature had created them with all it takes to handle child-birth. No matter how much the man tries, he cannot handle child-birth naturally (NIN, 2011). Yet, experience has also confirmed that not all women are given to child-birth and child bearing. There are women, for several reasons, who are unable to become biological mothers. They have no children. Child bearing – a situation which guarantees maternity – can best be described as a privilege. Every woman must see child-birth as a privilege and attend to it as such. It is not a given but a divine gift. This understanding is necessary to propel the right attitude to it. Beyond maternity, there is something more enduring. Beyond the privilege of maternity, there is the call to motherhood.

Motherhood As A Vocation

Motherhood can be better appreciated as a vocation, a God-mandated duty, that also demands responsibility (CLARKSON, 2024, <https://sallyclarkson.com>). There are two things involved here. The first is the fact of the divine mandate. It can only be commissioned by God. The second is the disposition of the commissioned to receive the responsibility as such. Motherhood seen as a vocation is not a choice. It is a call that demands a response (ROMBS, 2021, pp. 13ff). It is a call to deep personal commitment, nurturing and shaping of the lives of the children, and, much more than the biological dimension, an invitation to a spiritual mentorship of the children. In the context of the focus of this paper, the most significant mother figures will be drawn from the Old Testament pre-figuring our Blessed Virgin Mary, in the New Testament.

The Old Testament On Maternity And Responsible Motherhood

From Genesis to Malachi, the Old Testament has demonstrated that maternity is a privilege but also that beyond privileged maternity there is need to respond to the call to responsible motherhood. Scriptural allusions to these two themes need to be isolated, examined, interpreted and applied to facilitate and enhance objective appreciation of responsible motherhood today

Isolation of Old Testament Texts on Maternity and Responsible Motherhood

A random perusal of the Old Testament exposes many passages that allude to maternity and motherhood. The word 'Mother' appear about 232 times in different forms in the Old Testament (HILTON, 2009). (This research will narrow the scope to some passages in Genesis. An isolation of some prominent passages in the books of Genesis and Samuel does not only show the privilege of maternity but also the call to and importance of responsible motherhood. They include the following:

Looking at maternity as child-birth, the Old Testament records many instances of child birth. Some came with ease. There were others that came as a privileged gift after years of childlessness. More still some came with fatal consequences. All these prove that maternity can only be a privilege. Eve gave birth and became a mother in Genesis 3 (MEYERS, 2000); Sarah, at the age of 90 gave birth to Isaac (cf. Gen. 17: 16); Rebecca conceived her twins after 20 years of marriage (cf. Gen. 25: 21) Leah gave birth (cf. Gen 29: 32- 30: 24); Rachael died at child-birth (cf. 35: 16-18). There is also an instance of Hannah who gave birth to Samuel after years of childlessness (cf. 1Sam 1: 19). Beyond this privilege of maternity, isolated passages of the Old

Testament also show the vocation to responsible motherhood. Eve is called to be 'Mother of all the nations,' and she is seen living it out by accepting the challenges of grooming a prime family. It needed courage and disposition to sacrifice to achieve that even in the face of the disappointment of the fall. Hannah is a lasting example of care and post-maternal accompaniment of the mother to the child. In 1 Sam 1: 1-28, Hannah did not only pray for the privilege of maternity, she understood that beyond maternity lay the vocation to responsible motherhood. She nurtured Samuel and groomed him till it was time to dedicate him at the Temple. She took the initiative of creating a secure path for the young Samuel by introducing and handing him over to a tested and trusted hand to continue the parenting that was already founded on responsible motherhood. All these texts point to some message about maternity and motherhood.

Exegesis of Old Testament Texts on Maternity and Responsible Motherhood

From the afore-mentioned, it is clear from the old Testament that maternity is a privilege and that beyond it, there is a more important duty that women have: It is the divine mandate for responsible parenthood. The Biblical theology of the passages mentioned above confirms that there is much to desire beyond maternity. Women should prepare for motherhood and not just for child-birth. It also shows the responsible mother as the pathfinder for the child (NIN, 2011). Women are co-creators and must be seen as such. The example of Hannah in 1 Sam 1:1ff confirms this divine call to responsibility.

Inputs from the Old Testament on Maternity and Responsible Motherhood

Some salient inputs from the Old Testament are evident as far as maternity and motherhood are concerned. Two of the most significant are: Maternity is a divine mission for women; and, Motherhood is a noble duty in co-creation

Maternity as a Divine Mission

When God told the woman in Genesis: Go and multiply, it signaled the fact that maternity was not just the woman's chosen career path but it was a call to embark on a divine mission. Maternity as a divine mission meant that God's design would still continue beyond maternity. The experience of Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Hannah show that maternity is a gift from God and it is not earned by might. Maternity is a privilege and the response needs to be that of gratitude shown in eternal disposition to responsible motherhood.

Motherhood as a Noble Duty in Co-creation

As long as people understand the example of Hannah in motherhood, it is meaningful to see that motherhood is a duty, and a sacred one at that. Motherhood is a noble duty and needs to be appreciated as such (FELDSTEIN, 2018, p. 18). It is considered a deeply important and spiritually significant mandate to shape young lives and guide them towards positive development (CLARKSON, 2024, p. 23).

Motherhood is a sacred calling. Just like God picked mothers in the Scriptures, He has picked today's mothers for a specific purpose - to nurture the life of that specific child and, that of the attendant spiritual children. This is why, in procreation, beginning from maternity to motherhood, the capabilities are only given uniquely to the mother and not even to the father. She keeps the biological child in her womb for nine months. Motherhood is a noble duty in co-creation.

The fact that motherhood is a noble duty also has its implications. Motherhood must be lived in faith and with dignity, and it must be celebrated and appreciated. In the Old Testament, Hannah attested to this. Even outside the Old Testament, the Virgin Mary rightly echoed this point when she said "by this, all generations will call me blessed" (see Lk 1: 48f). Motherhood as a post maternity responsibility is a noble duty. The responsibility is both for the mother called, and for others experiencing the beneficial effects of motherhood. In some cases, this is not the case and this article is a wake up call to the renewed appreciation of the vocation of motherhood. Though there is so much universal agreement in the understanding of motherhood as a vocation, but Africa, nay the Annang tribe stands out prominently in the profession and enforcement of the values which highlight Motherhood as a vocation.

The Cultural Appreciation Of Motherhood In Annang, In Africa

Motherhood is a central part of African culture and tradition. This is seen and expressed in many aspects of the African life - folklore, religious and cultural myths, and values. Even more predominantly, motherhood is very significantly appreciated in Annang. This shows the importance of motherhood in Africa, and because motherhood is important in Africa, there are cultural expectations by everybody and for everybody as far as motherhood is concerned. In Annang culture, motherhood is both an institution and an ideology. All through the ages, it has shaped, social, economic and religious organizations and is recognized as a major part of the people's life-setting. Both as an institution and as an ideology, the Annangs see motherhood as a vocation to love, care, provide, direct, and groom the child as a family pillar.

The Importance of Motherhood in Annang

The importance of motherhood in Annang stems from the important place the Annang culture gives to Religion and Family. Given that motherhood is the birthplace of family, Annang does not joke with motherhood. The mother is revered and respected (AKUJOBI, 2011, 13. 1. 9). Annang sees motherhood as a God-given role. In the family structure, mothers are the ones to keep the family together (TANNER, 2005). As the first caretakers of the children, they are the custodians of African language and culture. The cultural provisions of Annangland recognize and treasure the mothers. Motherhood is an essential aspect of women's lives in Annang. (In Annang, there are many phases of celebration for the mother after childbirth. The Father is virtually forgotten. All these speak to the appreciation of motherhood in the culture of the people). Motherhood, as much as it is associated with childbirth, is considered a mystery. Motherhood has a sacred dimension in as much as it links us to the source of life. This is the reason why, in Annang, the woman is celebrated in different stages after child-birth. She is celebrated by her family, her husband's family, and her religious family (HEALY-CLANCY, 2017, 42. 4. 843). The mother is the 'queen' of every family. The different traditional birth practices confirm this. There are birth attendants and fattening institutions in Annang which prepare the young woman for motherhood. At every point, the woman is appreciated for ensuring the continuity of the family through child-birth and rearing.

The Expectations of Motherhood in Annang

Even with all the positive aspects of Motherhood in Africa, there is still room for improvement. A lot more is still expected of the Mothers in Africa and the input from the Old Testament as seen above can be of great advantage to the renewed appreciation of motherhood as a responsible vocation in Annangland. The best way to appreciate the expectation of motherhood in Annangland of Africa is to invoke the import of this vocation. Motherhood is a vocation to love, care and nurture to all-round maturity. The expectation is double edged. The Mother's love has to be given and received. There are expectations on the side of the mother and there are expectations also on the side of the beneficiaries of motherhood. For the Mother, in answer to the call to love, the mother is to radiate this love unconditionally. She is to nurture and groom the child in love. This is why the popular adage in the Efik indigenous language says "*idiok eyen, inua abanga eka*" This means that it is the mother that is blamed when the child is not doing well. In Annang family context, whether as a spouse or parent, the woman is basically seen as a mother. She is a mother not only to the children, she is a mother also to the husband (TOBY, 2024, 3.3). She is expected to suspend everything and every judgment and bear the burden of child bearing and child rearing in love and patience. It is that same understanding that advises the mother (wife) not to quit marriage. The marriage home (for mothers) is not a bed of roses, yet the mother has to adapt to it (*Ufok ndo isifonofon owo, ase memehé*). The mother is expected to be tolerant of any situation she finds in the home in order to show love primarily to her biological children.

But the beneficiaries of a mother's love go beyond just the biological children. A mother in Africa, is a mother for all (THURER, 1995, p. 59). All children are children of all mothers. That is why the mother's love is expected to be 'universal' and without discrimination. This is how demanding the vocation of motherhood is even in the cultural setting in Africa. This leaves the beneficiaries of this love with serious expectation. If nothing else, gratitude is expected of all beneficiaries of mother's love and this can be shown in reciprocal love and respect. Africans generally see it as a taboo for a child to disrespect his or her mother. The Annang culture strongly upholds this too. Such a dignifying ideology and such a demanding institution is expected to elicit reciprocal love and respect.

II. Evaluation: A Call To Motherhood As A Treasured Identity

Though it may be demanding, the institution or the ideology of motherhood comes with an inexplicable sense of pride (GRIFFIN, 2020, pp. 167-185). The Annang mother should be a very 'proud' mother. A mother is God's co-creator. It is such a noble vocation that it can only be described as a treasured identity (CLARKSON, 2024, p. 23). From the religious or even from the cultural standpoints, Motherhood retains an identity that is treasurable and must be treasured (ATKINSON, 2019, pp. 13ff). But an evaluation of this proposition, unfortunately, falls short of the desired 100% acceptability. Today, we see Mothers who are not proud of their identity. Today we see mothers who claim they have reasons to commit the abortion of their children. Today we see mothers who abandon their children (CLARKSON, 2024, p. 25). However, a quick and informal sampling still shows that over 90% of the mothers treasure their identity. This write-up addresses the less than 10% that does not treasure their identity and calls on them to appreciate motherhood for what it truly is – a God-given vocation to 'partner' with God in creation and sustenance of the God-given life. This is why a good mother must first of all be a good and faithful believer (WHITMORE, 2024, p.56). A mother cannot but be a woman of faith. It is also good to call everybody, especially the direct beneficiaries of motherhood to the consciousness that motherhood, as a treasured identity must be appreciated (NELSON, 1999).

Motherhood: From Vocation to Devotion

While Maternity must give way to motherhood, responsible motherhood must graduate from vocation to devotion. What this means is that the understanding of the fact that motherhood is a God-given privileged position, should motivate all those concerned to great devotion and faith. When God calls, the next thing is for the individual called to answer and show commitment. Devotion to motherhood is the response that our Church and society needs today. Our world needs this devotion too. This devotion needs to come as commitment, resignation, availability, sacrifice, love, tolerance, consideration, etc. It is not enough to be a mother. As a good mother, especially as a Catholic mother, it is important to be a devoted mother (HARRIS, 2024, p. 32). Devotion gives meaning to motherhood as vocation.

III. Recommendations

After a thorough evaluation of what is and what should be in motherhood, the following recommendations are proffered to ensure a better appreciation of the vocation of motherhood in Africa and beyond.

1. Mothers must be encouraged to look beyond maternity to motherhood, using the examples of the Biblical mothers of the Old Testament.
2. Families, schools and Churches must initiate some periodical orientation on embracing the responsibilities of motherhood as a vocation and such should be open to all – men, women and children
3. The Church should embrace and inculcate some traditional practices that promote the dignity of motherhood. The traditional 3 to 6 months ‘incubation’ of the lady before marriage could be refined to replace the cultural practice of ‘fattening’ (*mbokpo*)
4. The husbands should be encouraged to be more appreciative of their wives before their children as such example would promote maternal appreciation by the children
5. Prolife campaigns should be enforced to conscientize the would-be mothers of the adverse implications of abortion and other acts against natural procreation
6. There should be grants and aids to indigent mothers to assist them carry out their God-given task where their abilities cannot carry.
7. Women organizations must be allowed to play significant roles in the society. Mothers should be encouraged to proudly live out their faith. They should be counseled and commissioned to assist the Church in the duty of spiritual formation of the faithful as children under the maternal car of our Blessed Mother, Mary

The Virgin Mary as a Prototype of Vocation in Motherhood

Though this is in the New Testament, it is safe to look up to the Virgin Mary as a model in motherhood. The Blessed Virgin Mary is the most meaningful example of motherhood as a vocation. From the Scriptures, we know that she was called to this role and we also know that she willingly took up this responsibility in the best of ways (cf. Luke 1: 1ff). In many ways, Mary depicts not only a good model for motherhood but more so for seeing motherhood as a vocation. Her vocation to motherhood is contained in the message of the Angel Gabriel announcing to her that God wanted her to be the mother of His Son. It was a call from God and it was an invitation by Him. To demonstrate that Mary saw it as a vocation, not her choice, she exclaimed: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord.” (Lk 1: 38-55). It is in her committed response to the call that Mary becomes a model or prototype for Motherhood. Her love for Jesus was enduring. She sacrificed much of her comfort in answering this call. She was compassionate and loving. She was faithful and charitable. Today, she is spiritually seen as the mother of humanity. Her faith, commitment, responsibility and availability to her God-given/freely-accepted role projects her as a prototype of motherhood as a vocation. These virtues and values must be learnt and lived by today’s mothers.

IV. Conclusion

Beyond maternity, there is motherhood. Motherhood is a vocation. It is God given and the Scriptures attest to this in the example of the holy women like Eve, Sarah, Rebecca, and especially Hannah in the Old Testament and the Blessed Virgin Mary in the New Testament. It is interesting too to note that culturally, especially in the Annang context, Motherhood is also seen as a sacred institution that must not only be appreciated and sustained, but must also be respected and treasured. The Annang woman has reasons to proudly showcase her identity of honour. If our world must enjoy the dividends of parenthood, motherhood must be refined to the standard God designed it to be. In the Church, as in Ikot Ekpene diocese, the role of the mothers is not only commendable, but its continued workability is desired. The way out is to continue to see Motherhood as a vocation to African women (Annang women), in this context, to join in building the kingdom of God here on earth. The inputs from the Old Testament as highlighted in this work promise a renewed appreciation of Motherhood. Mothers must look up to Biblical examples, especially Hannah in the Old Testament and Our Lady, the Mother of God, and our mother, in the New Testament, and live out their vocation responsibly. This is

a vocation and as long as our mothers are disposed to respond to it as such, given the cooperation of every body, it is very safe to conclude with sure hope that our mothers will, proudly, and through their maternal and motherly roles, ‘heal’ the world in love.

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