

## PERMISSIVE PARENTING STYLES IN THE LIGHT OF 1 SAMUEL 2: 22- 26

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### **Abstract**

*The aim of this study is to exegetically examine permissive parenting styles in the light of 1 Samuel 2: 22- 26. The text gives account of Eli and his sons. It portrayed how Eli was weak in handling of his sons' ill- behavior in Shiloh before God and the people. The study employed primary and secondary sources methods of qualitative approach of data collection. Data collected were analyzed using the exegetical method of biblical studies. The exegetical study of the text showed that Eli has displayed permissive parenting style. It is therefore suggested that parents should not embrace such parenting style.*

### **Introduction**

According to Yusuf and Abdulkareem (2009), parenting is a “complex activity that includes many specific behaviour that work individually and together to influence the child” (p.36). Adegbola (2019) adds to this definition given by Yusuf and Yusuf by saying that parenting is one of the skills every parent intends to possess. Adegbola further says that in this century it is quite complex to exercise the roles of parents. It is the duty of every parent to provide good parenting and this is upheld in the Bible (Proverb 6: 23 -24) (Akwagi &Egwu, 2014). Parenting is one of the duties clearly emphasized by God to the people of Israel that they should strive to maintain discipline and adherence to his commandment. When it was time for God to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, God was able to say of Abraham that Abraham would provide good parenting to his children (Genesis 18: 16- 32).

Recent happenings in Nigeria have shown that parental responsibilities in Nigeria have not lived up to expectations in term of moral upbringing up children. Many of the reported crimes are perpetrated by the younger generations, which are expected to be the future leaders of the country. Rape, stealing, kleptomania, burglary, homicide and prostitutions are some of the crimes that have been associated with youth in the contemporary times (David, 2022). These youth- aided crime have led to the rising of questions such as “Should we blame the parents and guardians for failing their responsibilities to bring up their children and wards?” This question and others have been raised by David (2022).

Biblical account showed that Eli, one of the priests in Israel was not justified by the evil conduct of his children. The Bible provided the consequences of the failure of Eli on himself and the children. This showed that God wants the parents to be responsible for the moral

upbringing of their children. Onuoha (2021) buttresses that both the Old and New Testament direct the parents to teach their children how to grow up and become socially and morally responsible. Hinckley (1995) adds that “parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs, to teach them to love and serve one another, to observe the commandments of God and to be law-abiding citizens wherever they live” (para. 6).

From biblical perspective, God wants every parent to be accountable to Him in respect of their children. As such, God is unhappy when parents failed in their responsibilities towards their children. God makes parents to have influence on their children; and such influences incorporating molding and shaping the behavior of their children. Sarwar (2016), on this, says that this role belong to the parents because they are the first set of people children have contact it when they are born. This means parents determine the later behavior of their children by the way they have parenting them in the earlier lives. It is on this basis that this study intends to examine the parenting style in the contemporary Nigeria in the light of Eli’s parenting style.

The aim of this research work is to examine the extent to which the parenting styles of Eli and Hannah have provided a paradigm for contemporary parenting in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to: (i) exegetically analyse 1 Samuel 2: 22- 26 with the aim of discovering the original meaning of the text and for a clear understanding; (ii) re- interpret 1 Samuel 2: 22 - 26 in the context of parenting style in the contemporary Nigeria; and (iii) ascertain the implications of parenting style of Eli on the contemporary Nigerian parenting.

### **Exegetical Analysis of 1 Samuel 2: 22 - 26**

The Hebrew word זָקֵן *zaqen* can be transliterated to mean was *very old*. This verb describes the physical state of Eli and it pointed to the fact that Eli was quite old at the time he was confronting his children about their evil lives. To show that Eli was very old, an intensifier was used to emphasize the degree of Eli’s old age. This intensifier is Hebrew word מְאֹד *me’od*. There is possibility that Eli at some point in time could not involve actively in the activities in the tent of meeting because of his age and not be able to see very well. This is likely may be reason for the use of the Hebrew verb שָׁמַע *sha-ma*. Since Eli could not see very well, he only depended on what he heard from the people. One fact to draw from here is that Eli had failed to rebuke his children when they were young and rebuking them at the later years becomes useless.

The Hebrew phrase כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂים בְּנָיו לֵכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל *kāl’ā-sher ‘ō-sīm-bā-nāvlθ-kālyiś-rā-ēl* showed that evil deeds of the sons of Eli affected all the children of Israel. It should be noted that בְּנֵי־עֹשִׂים *osimbanav* describes an ongoing actions of the sons of Eli.

עוֹשִׂים *osim* is the participle of ‘to do’ meaning ‘doing’. This implies that the misconduct of the children of Eli was a continuous and widespread practice, and significantly affecting not only individuals but also the broader community of Israel. Because their actions affected all Israel, it is on this note that the narrator used the Hebrew phrase לְכֹל־יִשְׂרָאֵל *lechol Yisrael*, which specifies the scope of the actions of the sons of Eli.

In addition, it should be noted that the Hebrew phrase וְהַנָּשִׁים *vehannashim* introduces another aspect of the Eli’s sons’ wrongdoings. This was the climax of their wrongdoings. The Hebrew clause וַאֲיָרָא יִשְׁכְּבוּ אֶת־הַנָּשִׁים הַמְשִׁרְתוֹת אֶת־פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד *ve’eichyishkevu et-hanashim hamesharetot et-petach ohel moed* showed that they were engaging in sexual immorality with the women who served at the entrance to the tabernacle, violating their positions of trust and dishonoring the sacred space of the tent of meeting. This behavior not only defiled the sanctity of the tabernacle but also exploited vulnerable individuals who were serving in a religious capacity. It could be seen that the sons of Eli followed the example of the Canaanite worshippers in their act towards the women who served in the temple. Ritual prostitution was a common practice among the Canaanites (Constable, 2012).

Evidences showed that these women were not temple prostitutes but women who were serving in the temple. The Hebrew verb used, which is אָצְבָּ *tsaba*, means assembled but according to Coffman (1999), same word can mean ‘served’. This means these women were, according to Jamieson, Fausset and Brown (1871), belong to the institution of holy women of a strict ascetic order, who had relinquished worldly cares and devoted themselves to the Lord. In the commentary by Precept Austin, this verb pronounced as *tsaba* can mean the religious service in the Tabernacle. These women can be seen to serve in the temple as volunteer helpers but not as priests. In describing the word *tsaba* in terms of being translated as ‘assembled’, Exell and Spence- Jones say that the word means ‘arrange in bands’. Exell and Spence- Jones explain it the word in this way: “shows not merely that they were numerous, but that they had regular duties assigned them and each one her proper place and office. The frequent sacrifices, with the feasts which followed, must have provided occupation for a large number of hands in the cleaning of the utensils and the cooking of the food”.

The serious of the actions of the sons of Eli can be seen in the use of the Hebrew phrase לְכֹל־יִשְׂרָאֵל *le’kol Yisra’el*. This showed that their misconduct has become a matter of public concern or scandal. According to Keil and Delitzsch (n.d), the narrator inserted the phrase רְעִים אֶת־דְּבָרֵיכֶם is inserted to make the meaning clearer, and כָּל־הַמָּאֵת is dependent upon שָׁמָּה. "This whole people" signifies all the people that came to Shiloh, and heard and saw the wicked doings there. It is clearly seen that the sons of Eli made people to abhor

appearing in the temple. Deffinbaugh (2017) says that Eli was not innocent of his sons' crimes. Eli knew everything they were doing and the extent of their wicked act to all Israel. In the words of Deffinbaugh, their deeds were not in the forms of momentary lapses in character or conduct. These were habitual patterns of conduct that have become their lifestyles.

In verse 23, the Hebrew phrase **וַיֹּאמֶר, לָהֶם מַדּוּעַ תַּעֲשׂוּן כְּדָבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה:** *vayyo'emar, lahem madduata'asunkad'varimha'elleh* identifies the nature of question asked by Eli from his sons. According to Precept Austin, this is not the right question that was expected of Eli concerning his sons' misbehavior. The right question should be "why don't you repent of the evil?" At this point, the sons of Eli needed strong rebuke. This makes Schultz to say that "Eli did not endorse his sons' behavior, but his lack of parental and priestly authority in removing them from their position made him an accomplice. His rebuke was feeble and his age had probably sapped his energy to the point where he felt himself unable to do what he ought to have done". Eli has the tendency to sack his sons from their posts as priests and save them from destruction. Guzik (2018) adds to this by saying that "Eli did about the worst thing a parent can do in trying to correct their children: just talk. All he did was whine about what they did wrong, but he never took the necessary actions to correct the problem." Jamieson, Fausset and Brown (1871) also assert that:

Eli was, on the whole, a good man, but lacking in the moral and religious training of his family. He erred on the side of parental indulgence; and though he reprimanded them (Duet 21: 18), yet, from fear or indolence, he shrank from laying on them the restraints, or subjecting them to the discipline, their gross delinquencies called for. In his judicial capacity, he winked at their flagrant acts of maladministration and suffered them to make reckless encroachments on the constitution, by which the most serious injuries were inflicted both on the rights of the people and the laws of God (para. 22).

In Matthew Henry's commentary, Henry claims that Eli was a man who wanted to avoid open confrontation with his children because he desire to shun trouble and exertion. These weak attributes of Eli led into what Henry paints as follows:

This led him to indulge his children, without using parental authority to restrain and correct them when young. He winked at the abuses in the service of the sanctuary till they became customs, and led to abominations; and his sons, who should have taught those that engaged in the service of the sanctuary what was good, solicited them to wickedness. Their offence was committed even in offering the sacrifices for sins, which typified the atonement of the Savior! Sins against the remedy, the atonement itself, are most dangerous; they tread underfoot the blood of the covenant. Eli's reproof was far too mild and gentle. In general, none are more abandoned than the degenerate children of godly persons, when they break through restraints (Henry, n.d, para. 11).

In Clarke (1832)'s comment on this phrase "why do ye such things!" Clarke notes like Schultz that Eli had power to remove his children from office. Clarke says that "as judge, he had power to cast them immediately out of the vineyard, as wicked and unprofitable servants; this he did not, and his and their ruin was the consequence". According to Clarke, "Eli appears to have been a fondly affectionate, easy father, who wished his sons to do well, but did not bring them under proper discipline."

Another fact brought out by Gill (1999) is that Eli had previously heard lots of complain about his sons from the inhabitants of Shiloh, or those who came to worship but he was laxity in rebuking them. Gill asserts that the previous complains was the cause of the using this statement "*for I hear of your evil doings by this entire people*". The persistent complaints of the Israelites about Eli's sons triggered the challenge of his sons' behavior.

In verse 24, Eli continued to challenge his sons about their wrong doings. The Hebrew phrase **אֶל-בְּנָי** *al benai* showed that Eli was disappointed and sad with the conduct of his sons. **אֶל-בְּנָי** *al benaim* may seem as if it connotes endearment but it conveys disapproval from Eli. Gill (1999) also supports the fact that the phrase **אֶל-בְּנָי** *al benai* seemed to be too soft and smooth and appellation, too kind and endearing. In the words of Gill, it was at this point that Eli should have referred to them as sons of Belial, the children of the devil, brutes and shameless wretches based on the gravity of their offences.

Further, in verse 24, the Hebrew phrase **לֹא-טוֹבָה הַשְׁמָעָה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי שֹׁמֵעַ** *kilo'tovah hash-shemu'ahasheranochishomer* revealed that Eli has understood how severe the sins of his sons and the deeds of his sons were widespread. Keil and Delitzsch (n.d) put this Hebrew phrase in this way: 'The report which, as I hear, the people of God are spreading'. This showed that Eli was not fabricating report evil reports about his sons. It was what they were actually doing that came to his hearing. Gill (1999) adds that Eli was telling his sons that they had made people to speak evil of them everywhere in the camp of Israel, throughout the whole nation.

The final part of verse 24 contains a Hebrew clause **מַעֲבִירֵם יְהוָה** *ma'avirîm am-YHWH*, which can be perceived as the crux of the verse itself. This Hebrew clause has a Hebrew verb **מַעֲבִירֵם** *ma'avirîm*, which is participle form (plural masculine) of the verb "to cause to pass over" or "to cause to transgress". It can be said to have the connotation of leading someone astray or into sin. It can be seen that the use of this verb **מַעֲבִירֵם** *ma'avirîm* by Eli for his sons means that he was accusing them of not just sinning themselves but also leading God's people astray through their actions. On this Hebrew clause, Ellicott (n.d) asserts that the sons of Eli did not only involve in unblushing immorality but also corrupted the inner religious life of the whole people.

In verse 25, Eli attempted to appease his sons in order for them to see the reasons to turn from their evil ways. Eli uttered this statement **כִּי לֹאֵלֶּקִים אֶחָיִיחַטָּאִישׁ לְאִישׁ וּפ** *Ki bichtaishl'ishv'pnl'u Elohim* to show them that there is human intermediary to mediate between two humans. The second utterance of Eli in the same verse is **וְיִמְבַּחַתְּשִׁיחַוְהַמִּיפְגַּעֲלוֹ** *V'imbichtaishlyhvh mi yipga lo*, which he employed to show them that when sinning against God, there is no human judge or mediator. On these utterances of Eli, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (n.d) explains that these were likely to be ancient proverbs and Eli has applied them to impress his sons with a sense of the enormity of their sins, which were committed against Jehovah. Benson Commentary (n.d), on the other, asserts that these utterances of Eli, though came out of the good reasoning, but they were not sufficient in this regard. According to the commentary, it requires a more serious interference; and Eli should have referred the punishment of his sons to God.

The Hebrew phrase in 26 **וְהַנֶּעֶר** *ve-hanna'ar* can be transliterated as '*And the boy*' - This phrase begins with the conjunction "and" (וְ, ve) followed by the noun "boy" or 'youth' **נֶעֶר** *na'ar*, referring to Samuel, who was still a young child at this point in the narrative. Another Hebrew phrase of interest in this verse is **הֹלֵךְ** *holekh*, which means 'continued'. This is the participle form of the verb 'to go' or 'to walk' **הָלַךְ** *halakh*, indicating ongoing action. This Hebrew phrase is used by the narrator to convey the idea of continuous growth and development in various aspects of Samuel's life. Adding **גָּדַל** *gadal* to the **הֹלֵךְ** *holekh*, the phrase indicates ongoing or repeated action; which emphasizes Samuel's physical, intellectual, and spiritual growth over time (Precept Austin, n.d, Guzik, 2022).

Also, in verse 26 is the Hebrew phrase **וְגָדַל חֹכְמָה** *ve-gadelchokhmah*. This part of the verse highlights Samuel's intellectual and spiritual growth. **חֹכְמָה** refers to wisdom, insight, or discernment, indicating that Samuel's understanding and knowledge expanded over time. The Hebrew phrase **וּגְוִיל** *u-goyel* refers to Samuel's physical growth or development. **Goyel** typically refers to one's stature, height, or physical size, suggesting that Samuel not only grew in wisdom but also in physical maturity. In the verse 26 also is the Hebrew phrase **גַּם בְּעֵינֵי ה' טוֹב** *ve-tov gam be-einei Adonai*), which signifies Samuel's spiritual favor or approval in the eyes of God. **Tov** means good or favorable, indicating that Samuel found favor in God's sight due to his righteous character and devotion. Lastly is the Hebrew phrase **וְגַם בְּעֵינֵי הָאָדָם** *ve-gam be-einei ha-adam*, which denotes Samuel's favorable reputation or standing among people. It suggests that Samuel was not only esteemed by God but also respected and admired by those around him for his integrity, wisdom, and character (Guzik, 2022).

### **Eli's Parenting Style and Implications**

Based on the above exegesis, scholars such as Cook (2014), Buettel (2016), Kuiper (2006), Taylor (2019) have described the parenting style displayed by Eli as permissive/indulgent/passive. In the words of Ellicott, Eli was a parent, who exhibited the attribute of weak indulgence, couple with own lack of energy and foresight. All these led his family into destruction. Spence- Jones, in his commentary, on Eli says Eli was indifferent to the report he had about his sons. Spence – Jones further sheds light on Eli's response to the accusation laid on his sons. Spence- Jones asserts that Eli handled it lightly and faintly rebuked his own sons. The worst picture about the faint rebuke is that Eli might have not done it. Eli was forced to do it because the misdeeds of Eli's son were in everybody's mouth. Since it has become national issue in the land of Israel, Eli was prompted to act in the matter pertaining to his sons.

Zadow (2018) critically examines the life of Eli and discovers that Eli was a hypocrite who never restrained, intervened or acted in any capacity to dissuade in the matter pertaining to his sons. Zadow takes the action Eli employed as weakly protest against their wickedness. Zadow further describes Eli has father who had no power to change events. At Eli's old age, he has become a man who has lost his place before the people of Israel because no one listened or valued his word. Eli was a priest used his place as a leader in the Tabernacle to silence Hannah but could not similar thing with his own son. Zadow concludes on Eli by saying that Eli had years to parent for God and should have sorted out his own house. Eli allowed the season of parenting for God to be over and too late because his sons had become sons of Belial rather than sons of God.

In Matthew Henry's commentary, Eli was described as a father who shunned trouble and exertion. At that particular point in time, when Eli supposed to have trained his sons to be good and law abiding; Eli embraced the path of indulgence. Eli restrained from using parental authority and correction. As time went on, Eli began to take lightly some of the abuses committed by his sons in the Tabernacle. Eli's sons became accustomed to evil doings in the Tabernacle. At the end, Eli allowed his sparing the rod principles to make his sons abominable unto the people and God. Eli's sons went to the extent of sleeping with the women that carry out some specific duties in the Tabernacle and trampled on sacrifices made unto God. When Eli was confronted, Eli applied mild and gentle rebuke, which had no impact on his sons.

From Keil and Delitzsch (2020)'s account, Eli did nothing to prevent the abominable actions of his sons. When the account of his sons' misbehavior came to him, Eli could only utter the statement "Why do ye according to the sayings which I hear, sayings about you which are evil, of this whole people". Keil and Delitzsch point out that this utterance of Eli was far below what was expected of him in relations to evil deeds of his sons; and the

utterance could not prevent his sons from committing more abominations. Eli's sons never listened to the warnings of their father.

Jamieson, Fauset and Brown identified Eli as a good man, which lacked moral and religious training of his family. In their examination of Eli, Jamieson, Fauset and Brown, Eli could be called an indulgent parent. Eli exhibited the characters of fear and indolence, which made him to be weak in restraining his sons or subjecting them to any form of discipline. Eli's sons were left alone in the world of no rebuke until the people began to groan under the burden of their evil deeds. In the judicial capacity of Eli, Jamieson, Fauset and Brown assert that "Eli winked at their flagrant acts of maladministration and suffered them to make reckless encroachments on the constitution, by which the most serious injuries were inflicted both on the rights of the people and the laws of God".

Buettell (2016) believes that Eli adopted a passive approach to parenting. A passive parenting is one in which the parents provide high support, responsiveness, and nurturing with nominal structure or control. Parents make few demands of their children and enforce little punishment (Guarnotta, 2023). In the words of Buettell, Eli could not be seen as reprobate and he was such a person that had good desires for the people of Israel, reverence for God, and a hatred for evil. A fact to be noted was that his hatred for evil did not produce any active response in his sons. Eli's passive approach to parenting caused disastrous results for his family and the nation of Israel. Buettell further asserts that Eli displayed three severe attributes that ruin his place as a father. The first was the failure to discern. The second one was the failure to discipline. And the third was the failure to divide; that is, Eli failed to make distinction between priesthood and his family. Eli continued to allow his sons to minister as priests in the Lord's house when he supposed to dismiss them. The series of warnings that came in did not deter Eli from allowing his son to continue to minister. Eli's passivity made him accomplish in doing of his sons.

Another scholar that has examined the parenting style of Eli is Taylor (2019). Taylor used the term 'ineffective parenting' to describe Eli. Like Buettell, Eli was a devoted priest, with the tendency to according to God's command. Taylor reveals that Eli had knowledge of the sins of his sons but he failed to rebuke or discipline them in order to stop that type of behavior. Taylor continues by saying that Eli put his ministry before his family, and rationalizes the sin of his sons. Eli was trying to justify the behavior of his sons even they were not appropriate in the sight of God and man. It can be seen that Eli was indifference to the judgment God wanted to bring upon his family. At old age, Eli has become blind, overweight and a lazy man; feeding on the earnings from his sons' wicked act in the Tabernacle.

Following the line of Taylor in regards to parenting style of Eli is Cook (2023) in his work on "Parenting is not for chicken". Cook (2023) sees Eli as a compromised father, who

destroyed his family after years of ignored compromise. In line with Cook, when a father compromises on the clear instructions of the Bible, such man's household suffers terrible damage. As earlier authors such as Buetell (2016), Zadow (2018) and Taylor (2019) have observed, Eli was fully aware of his sons' evil acts, which means he was not ignorant of their sins. This made Cook to say that Eli's obesity in his late years could be trace to fat derived on ill- gotten gains from his sons. It could be said that Eli's poor parenting resulted in national disaster in the land of Israel and 30,000 men lost their lives. Cook sees Eli as a parent who led his own children into self – destruction and condemned by God. Cook notes that compromise is the enemy of godly parenting because Eli allowed it. Eli began to play along with his sons even when he knew that they were doing what contradicted God's commandment.

Another author who describes Eli as an indulgent father is Kuiper (2006). In his article title "Eli's failure as a father", he asserts that Eli failed in the following ways as a father: "But the problem was that that is all that he did. He did not stop them. He did not bring them to the elders in the gate. He did not depose them from their priestly office. He did not remove their priestly garments. He did not bar them from performing sacrifices. He did not call the people to stone them for their fornication". In the words of Kuiper, all these were expected in the Bible of a father with children who are disobedient. Eli over- protected his own children and failed to show good example to the children of Israel a father who kept God's commandment. Kuiper buttresses that Eli showed his fatherliness to his children by speaking and yelling, which were not backed up by actions. Looking at this, Kuiper opines the following: "He had a hard time saying "No." It hurt him when he had to say "No." He did not displease his sons. He did not spank. He did not want to cause his children pain. He did not want to run the risk of, perhaps, upsetting them and making them angry". All these attributes qualified Eli as an indulgent parent.

In the description of Johnson (2013), Eli was seen as a parent with indifferent personality. Indifferent person is defined by Meriam- Webber (n.d) as someone who lacks concern or interest. It is used to describe a person that is nonchalant. Johnson critically looks at the spiritual state of the Tabernacle in the time of Eli and says that activities in the Temple have sunk to unprecedented depths. The people of Israel had already despised the Tabernacle. Johnson goes further to describe the children of Eli in these ways: "They were a couple of unbelievably wicked thugs. They acted like they were Mafia dons whose territory was the Tabernacle". Their Eli who supposed to take action "had been sinfully tolerant of his sons' misbehavior for many years. He had permitted them to indulge in all kinds of flagrant mischief without fear of rebuke. He had tolerated their diabolical behavior for so long that now they brazenly bullied and intimidated worshipers, openly indulged in all kinds of fleshly sins, and blasphemously took for themselves offerings that were meant for God—

apparently without fear that anyone would seriously challenge them”. According to Johnson, Eli was too much tolerant as a father, which suggested that it was partly his fault that Hophni and Phinehas had grown to be so wicked in the first place.

From the exegetical study of 1 Samuel 2: 22 – 26, two parental styles were identified as pertaining to the story of the following characters: Eli, and Elkanah and Hannah. Findings from the commentaries, sermons, and others have upheld that the story in 1 Samuel 2: 22 – 26 reflected permissive/indulgent/passive parent from the side of Eli.

## **Conclusion**

The exegetical analysis of the text, which consist of the orientation of the text, delimitation of the text and so on shows that Eli’s parenting style is sharpened by the following features - weak indulgence, indifferent, a hypocrite, indiscipline, indulgent parent, a passive parent, ineffective parenting, a compromised father, and over- protected parent. All these attributes made the great Eli, who has contributed immensely to the growth of Israel a poor father; and his sons rendered serving God in the land of Israel abominable to the people. This show that the contemporary Christian parents should be careful not to tow in the path of Eli’s parenting style.

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