




Genesis 15:1–6 and child adoption in Awkunanaw, Enugu state, Nigeria



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Adoption is a global phenomenon, and many childless couples choose adoption because they cannot have children biologically. Over the years, legally approved orphanages have been a beacon of hope for prospective adoptive parents. However, in contemporary times, many childless couples have employed both legal and illegal means to have children. As a result, baby-making industries have become a lucrative business because it is a fast means for childless couples to have children. In the contemporary Awkunanaw, this practice has devalued socio-cultural practices and made the Awkunanaw society and her dwellers vulnerable to social vices. This study investigates the importance of adopting a child from a known background other than a strange one. Genesis 15: 1–6 tells of God's covenant with Abram in which God promised him a great reward. Amid the divine promises of greatness and protection, Abram was worried about his state of childlessness. The part of the pericope which relates to this study is that Abram adopted an heir from a known background. The exegetical research methods employed in studying Genesis 15:1–6 include a narrative method and sociological approach to the study of the Old Testament. The data obtained through interviews and secondary sources were analysed using the phenomenological method. The study aims to advocate that Awkunanaw parents who patronise baby-making industries should desist from such practice as it contributes to the prevalence of social vices in the community.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article studies adoption in Awkunanaw, Enugu state, Nigeria, in the light of Abraham's narrative in Genesis 15:1–6. In Awkunanaw culture, adoption from an unknown background is abhorred. The article submits that adopting children from unknown backgrounds is precarious for the social development and peace of the Awkunanaw community. Hence, the study is a contribution to Old Testament discourses on religion and society. Its related disciplines are sociology, biblical interpretation and practical theology.

Keywords: Genesis 15:1–6; childlessness; adoption; baby-making industries; Awkunanaw.

Introduction

Adoption is an age-long and socio-cultural phenomenon. It refers to the act of taking the child of another parent to be one's child. Norman (2003:29) notes that 'It is a process whereby a person receives another into his family and confers upon that person familial privileges and advantages'. The practices associated with adoption vary among cultures across the globe. In the Jewish culture, there is usually a well-known and strong relationship between the adoptee and the adopter. A trace of the lineage of the adoptee by the adopter is observed in Old Testament narratives. Most times, there has been a common social heritage concerning adoption.

Genesis 15:1–6 is a narrative about Abram's *tete-a-tete* with God regarding his state of childlessness. Abram stressed that despite God's promise of an heir from his blood, it has been another person, though well known to him, that has remained his heir. The text reveals that Abram did not adopt an heir from a strange background. Eliezer was born in the house of Abram. Abram was conversant with the events surrounding his birth. The Old Testament patriarchs who were childless, were not so desperate over the adoption of an heir. They were careful to trace the origin of anyone being adopted into their family circle before the adoptee was granted the right of inheritance.

The practices associated with adoption in contemporary times is an indication of a shift from the Old Testament pattern of adoption. The references to adoption in the Old Testament indicate that there is usually a relationship between the adopter and the adoptee. According to

Note: Special Collection: African Hermeneutics.

Norman (2003), although adoption is not explicitly mentioned in the Old Testament, references to the phenomenon exist. For instance, Abram adopted Eliezer, Pharaoh's daughter adopted Moses, and so forth. These adoptions were socially and culturally accepted in the then society.

It is disheartening that in contemporary times, some people advocate and sponsor illegal adoption. The emergence and prevalence of baby-making industries in Southeastern Nigeria is a worrisome development (Omeire et al. 2015). In recent times, an awful development has surfaced in Nigeria; unmarried pregnant teenagers are kept in an undisclosed location until they give birth. After delivery, the teenage mothers are given token amounts and discharged while their babies are taken from them and sold at outrageous prices by the proprietor(s) who engaged them. According to Mba (2013), the phenomenon is referred to as 'baby factory business'. The baby factory business has become a social menace in Nigeria, particularly in Igboland, and it is proliferating at an alarming rate. Uzor (2014) indicates that about 2500 pregnant teenagers were rescued by the police from various baby factories within 1 year in the Southeastern states of Nigeria (Omeire et al. 2015). The emergence of buying babies from baby-making industries is no longer incongruous in the land of Awkunanaw. This strong patronage has exposed the Awkunanaw community to many social vices such as violence and killing within the family, prostitution, stealing, robbery and other vices (Ene, Ewah, Nwachukwu, Nwigwe, Ogbodoachime, Okoli, and Ugwuonyia: interview). Some of these vices have been in existence but they seem to have heightened. This illegal way of making strangers members of various families in Awkunanaw is very precarious.

The research methods employed in studying Genesis 15:1–6 include a narrative method and sociological approach to the study of the Old Testament. The narrative method is the approach used to take a discourse of a biblical text which is a story. This method, according to Obiorah (2015), investigates how the narrator engages and draws the readers into his narrative world. Alter (1981) opines that using the narrative method, biblical narratives are not merely history or religious doctrine, but rather exquisite works of literature deserving of careful analysis and appreciation. It revolutionises the way readers engage with and understand the timeless tales found within the Bible, opening a door to a world of literary richness to be explored. The sociological approach, on the other hand, is a method used to study the life situation that gave rise to a biblical text. Obiorah (2015) asserts that 'situation in life', technically called *Sitz-im-Leben*, is the study of the sociological milieu that generated a particular text. The narrative method is suitable for this study because the pericope is a story; the sociological method is equally appropriate because certain social situations brought about the event(s) in the story.

The researchers obtained informed consent to analyse the data elicited from the interviews carried out among 33 middle-aged and elderly members of the Awkunanaw

community. The interviewees were recruited using random sampling selection method. The semi-structured interviews centred on the practices of adoption in the Awkunanaw community (ancient and contemporary). During the interviews, the languages of communication were English and Awkunanaw local dialect. The primary and secondary data were analysed using the descriptive analytical method, also known as the phenomenological method. This method gives room for detailed discussions on a specified phenomenon. For confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to present the views of the interviewees in the text.

Insights into Genesis 15:1–6

Genesis 15:1–6 contains a single literary unit which focusses on God's covenant with Abram. In a prolonged interview with Yahweh, Abram's misgivings regarding the fulfilment of the divine promises are removed by solemn and explicit assurances, and by a symbolic act in which the Almighty binds himself by the inviolable ceremonial of the covenant (Skinner 1976:276). The discussion is initiated by God who promised Abram a great reward. Abram was not comfortable because someone other than his biological son was to be his heir.

Genesis 15:1 presupposes a situation of anxiety on the part of Abram, following some meritorious action performed by him. This regards Abram's defenceless position among the Canaanites immediately after his heroic obedience to the divine call (Skinner 1976:278). Cook (2010) notes that:

A call consists of a theophany or appearance of God, a commission from God to perform a particular task, a question or objection on the part of the one receiving the call, and a reiteration of the call followed by a sign of confirmation. (p. 45)

The phrase אַתְּרוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה [after these things] was used to introduce a new revelation of God to Abram, which differs from the previous ones in form and meaning, and constitutes a significant turning point in his life. Barnes (1870) posits that the formula, 'after these things' implies the victory, the blessing and the self-denial recorded in the previous chapter. Benson (2004) avers that as a result of that act of generosity which Abram had done, in rescuing his neighbours, God paid him the gracious visit. Barnes further avers that it was not out of place for Abram to entertain some fears. The intimidating allies had been defeated, but they might return with an overpowering force. God had stood by him and given him victory, and now speaks to him in the language of encouragement.

In verse 1, the phrase דְּבַר־יְהוָה [the word of the Lord] denotes a divine and solemn communication. Exell and Leale (1974:306) state that 'This is the first instance in which the phrase "word of the Lord" is applied to a Divine communication'. God's words to Abram: 'Do not be afraid, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great' was necessary because Abram was afraid that God's promises would not be fulfilled. God promised to give him land, but Abram has not yet possessed it. God promised to make his

offspring like the dust of the earth, but Abram had no son. Again, as a result of the impending danger in the land where Abram lived, God reassured him that he was his shield. Calvin (2015) asserts that Chedorlaomer and his associates had been overcome in battle, yet Abram provoked them excessively so that they might, with fresh troops and with renewed strength, attack the land of Canaan again.

Abram's response to the divine promise depicts a state of anxiety and perplexity. He questions the promise because he is childless. The interrogative statement מַה־תִּתֶּן־לִּי [what will you give me?] is not rhetorical; rather, it is a question that requires a response. Speiser (1990:111) notes that 'The question can be put in another way: "To what purpose are you gift?" This question refers to the promise of rewards in the preceding verse'. Exell (1978) writes that:

God had given Abram everything but a child, and therefore it seemed to him that all this flow of God's love was running into a pool where it could only stand still. (p. 604)

Exell adds that Abram had no child; all his goods were in the hands of a steward, a true servant, but still not a son; what was to become of all these tokens of God's love? Ellicott (2018) avers that there is a slight tone of complaint in the statement: 'What will you give me, for I continue childless'. God repeats the promise, expanding on it and adding the sign of the heavens: Abram's descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Likewise, Barnes (1870) reports that notwithstanding the priceless nature of the promise, Abram is still childless and landless; and God has made no sign of action concerning these esteemed promises. Hence, of what use will land or wealth be to Abram, the immediate reward specified by the promise?

In the second part of Genesis 15:2, the statement אֲנִי הֹלֵךְ צָרִירִי [I go childless] is used metaphorically and means 'I am going out of this world in this condition' (Calvin 2015). Seeing that he was advanced in age, Abram was worried about his childlessness because of the need to have an heir after his death, going by the prevailing cultural practice of his time. Following the fundamental statement of promise, Abram protests, doubting that such a promise can be accomplished in the circumstances. The Lord responds to the doubt with a double statement of assurance (Brueggemann 1982:140). According to Skinner (1976:279), 'To die childless and leave no name on earth is a fate that even the assurance of present fellowship with God brings no hope or joy'. Richard and Roland (2003) assert that Abram complains, like Kirta and Danil in the Ugaritic texts, that he is still denied the one thing that he wants – his son to carry on his name. Abram knew that it was a misfortune among his people for a man to die without a child, especially a male child. An advanced man in socio-cultural Israelite society who had no son was tantamount to a deceased man. Likewise, Assohotto and Ngewa (2006) affirm that:

Like a true African, Abram's greatest need was a child. If he remained childless, his only option was to adopt an heir, and the one he was considering to adopt was Eliezer of Damascus. (p. 33)

Genesis 15 describes Eliezer as Abraham's heir even though he was not a blood relative of the family. It is believed that Abraham had earlier adopted Eliezer as son and heir (Selman 1974). Hoezee (2022) posits that Abram made legal arrangements about giving the right of inheritance to his heir as it was prevalent at that time to make sure the whole thing would not end up in probate court after he had died.

Genesis 15:3 states that the major reason for Abram's adoption of an heir was for the succession of his household. The use of the particle הִנֵּה [behold] before לֹא־נָתַתָּה־לִּי [you have given me no offspring] is for emphasis. Benson (2004) comments that Abram was not worried because he had no son, but because he had no child (neither male nor female) with whom the promise of the covenant would be fulfilled. This could imply that if Abram had a female child, she might be married subsequently and continue the generation of Abram probably in another clan other than Abram's clan, but there would be a mention of Abram's name as the father of the mother of a certain existing nation. But unfortunately, he did not have even such alternative hope.

Since Abraham has no descendants, his estate will pass to a member of his household. Abram has a detailed background of the heir even though the heir is not his biological offspring. Bock (2015) notes that the childless master (Abram) of the house is here represented as likely to be succeeded by a member of his household (Eliezer of Damascus). According to Skinner (1976:279), 'The expression "Eliezer of Damascus" refers to Abram's heir. In the absence of children or near relatives, the slave, as a member of the family, might inherit'. Though Eliezer of Damascus is said to have been in Abram's house, his parentage was of Gentile city; and Abram refers to it as conveying a reflection on his desolate case (Exell & Leale 1974:306). The Hebrew text does not make use of 'slave' as observed in some English versions such as the *New Revised Standard Version*. The use of 'a slave born in my house' and 'one born in my house' are latter additions to the original manuscript. Supporting this observation is Ellicott (2018) who argues that the use of 'one born in my house' is a mistake in the translation. The original text reads בְּנֵי־בֵיתִי '(the son of my house)' and implies that the son of Abram's house was born by Abram's relative, a person well-known to him. Abram's heir was not a stranger to his house and kindred. Hamilton (2011) and Wenham (2017) aver that there may not be assurance about the custom that would result in Eliezer being Abram's heir. However, the extra-biblical sources from the Nuzi document in Mesopotamia indicate that a childless couple is allowed to adopt a slave who would then become responsible for assuming the responsibilities of a son – caring for the couple in their old age, seeing to their proper burial and mourning them following their death. The adopted slave would assume the right of inheritance. Abram's choice of Eliezer as his adopted heir could be a result of such practice at that time. Selman (1974:115) observes that 'A number of the Old Testament patriarchal narratives have parallels at Nuzi text. One of the examples is the inheritance narrative between Abram and Eliezer'. In verse 3, the verb נָשָׂא means

'to seize', 'dispossess', 'take possession of', and 'inherit'. This implies that the son of Abram's house would possess Abram's possessions after his death. Hence, Abram was worried about transferring the right of inheritance to a relative other than his biological son. An adopted child is a source of great joy and blessing. But what Abram wanted was a child from his own body, and this is what God will give him (Assohotto & Ngewa 2006:33).

Genesis 15:6 reports that Abram renewed his confidence in God by immediately accepting God's promise. By this, Abram received an immediate applause from God; a divine sentence of approval. This is the famous statement about Abram's faith and is quoted in some New Testament texts such as Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6 and James 2:23. This is one of the single most important Scriptures in the entirety of the word of God. In this, one finds the meaning of justification by faith. Abram was saved by grace through faith, not by his good works. Similarly, Clarke (1996) asserts that this is one of the most important passages in the Old Testament. It accurately contains and emphatically states the doctrine of justification by faith which occupies a considerable part of the epistles of Paul. Hale and Thorson (2007:153) aver that 'in this statement, we see the center of God's acceptance of man. Trust and humility are what God looks for in a man. In God's eyes, this counts as righteousness'.

Alternatives to child adoption in ancient Awkunanaw

In ancient Awkunanaw, the adoption of a child from an unknown background was seen as an abomination; there was rarely an adoption of children outside one's relative (Ewah, Echi, Ekwomchi, Onyeabor, and Ngene: interview). Members of the Awkunanaw community avoided adopting children from unknown backgrounds to maintain society and family cohesion (Atu, Ani, Ngwu, Nsude, and Aninwene: interview). Similarly, the Old Testament patriarch in Genesis 15 did not adopt an heir from an unknown background. Awkunanaw community devised other acceptable means of preserving the family name. There were alternatives for childless couples and families with no male child because members of the Awkunanaw community believe that adopting a child from elsewhere is a contamination of family lineage (Aninwene, Odoh Ngwu, Ugwu, Nwigwe, Ogbodo, and Ani: interview).

In ancient Awkunanaw, families without children or male children usually resorted to marrying a second wife. If, as a result of age or other factors, the husband were unable to perform his sexual obligation to the second wife, she is permitted by the husband to have sexual affairs with a younger man of their kindred who would perform the sexual duty on behalf of her husband (Atu, Ani, Ngwu, Nsude, and Aninwene: interview). However, the consent of the first wife was usually sought before such arrangements were made. Sometimes, it was the first wife who sought a girl from a good reputable family. Hence, it is culturally acceptable for a married man (whose first wife is barren or could not

give the husband a male child) to take a second wife at the permission of the first wife. In most instances, the first wife would be happy that she has gotten a younger person who would help her with domestic chores and farm work (Ogbodo, Aninwangwu, and Ogbodoachime: interview).

Another alternative was adopting one's relative. However, it was done out of love and consent between both families. Such a system of adoption is common in some Awkunanaw villages such as Amechi, Ugwuaji, Amodu, Obuoffia, Akegbe, Akwuke, among others. Moreover, such relationships existed among relatives who maintained mutual interpersonal relationships (Echi, Nsude, and Ani: interview). In families where their daughter got pregnant out of wedlock and gave birth to a male child, the child may be adopted by his grandfather and thus, accorded the right of a son while the grandfather is alive. However, if the grandfather were dead, he may not be adopted by his uncles, especially if there is not much property left by the deceased grandfather (Aninwene and Ngwu: interview). Nevertheless, in ancient Awkunanaw, it was forbidden for someone to get pregnant out of wedlock. Such a person is considered to be a nuisance in her father's house (Atu, Odoh, Ngwu, Aninwene, Ewah, Ugwuonyia, and Ani: interview).

In ancient Awkunanaw, a man who had no male child saw himself as a man who had no child at all, even if he had numerous female children. Culturally, female children are not permitted to own their father's property (Ani and Ugwuonyia: interview). However, in rare cases, a man, by the permission of his kindred, may request that one of his daughters should forfeit marriage. She is encouraged to get pregnant and if she gives birth to a male child, her father gets reassured. However, such was not an acceptable cultural practice (Ani, Ogbodoachime, Odoh, Aninwangwu, and Echi: interview).

Studying Genesis 15:1–6 in relation to child adoption in Awkunanaw

The study of Genesis 15:1–6 reveals that Abram's adoption of Eliezer as an heir was a result of Abram's loss of hope of getting a biological son. This is also the major reason for adoption in the contemporary Awkunanaw. Whereas Abram was careful to adopt from a known background, parents in contemporary Awkunanaw adopt from any available source, including from an unknown background. Moreover, adopting a child from an unknown background was not original in Awkunanaw in particular, but in Igboland in general. The text also indicates that Abram adopted an heir from a background well known to him. However, in the contemporary Awkunanaw, many childless couples go to any extent to get a child, even though the background of the child is unknown. Amato (2000) avers that infertility in marriage could cause marital conflict and lead to separation or divorce. Child adoption appears to be a viable solution to the problem of infertility in Igbo society. Likewise, Nwaoga (2013) observes that it is common knowledge that most

women in Nigeria and Igboland can do anything to get a child because having a child gives them 90% right to stay in their husband's house. However, some studies report that in Igboland, some infertile women are not willing to adopt children as a result of the socio-cultural effects which might follow afterwards (Ezugwu et al., 2002; Omosun & Kofoworola 2011). The implication of adopting a child from an unknown background may bring about some negative consequences subsequently (Nwachukwu, Nweze, Ngene, Ngwu, and Nwagu: interview).

Abram was worried that one who was not his biological son might be his successor, even though according to the text, the heir was a member of his household. He thought of the implication of what he was about to do. Abram's name and fame may be forgotten if his successor was not his seed. Moreover, the text did not indicate that Abram's adoption of an heir, Eliezer was through any illicit arrangement or plan; adoption of Eliezer never upheld any immoral practice. However, the reverse is now the case in the contemporary Awkunanaw community where couples patronise various baby-making industries. There was no deceit in Abram's adoption of an heir. In the contemporary Awkunanaw, many women fake pregnancy when planning to adopt a child from a baby factory. Omeire et al. (2015) assert that women who fake pregnancies prefer to purchase babies from baby factories and claim such as their biological babies rather than formally adopting children from orphanages. They do this to create the impression that the woman is capable of becoming pregnant and that she is not unproductive after all. The second reason is to secure the new child's socio-cultural acceptability and remove from the child the stigma associated with adopted children (Omeire et al. 2015). This, however, creates more problems than solutions in subsequent times. The adopted child may be the biological child of an armed robber or prostitute (Ene, Edeh, Egbo, Ugwunta, and Odoh: interview).

Abram's acceptance of God's words paved the way for his emancipation from the dangers of adopting a child from an unknown background. In the contemporary Awkunanaw, there are very few couples who still maintain the traditional practices of Awkunanaw by keeping away from adopting a child from an unknown background. More so, some couples decide to remain childless until God gives them children either through natural means or medical intervention (Aninwene, Ewah, Nwachukwu, Odoh, Onyeabor, Ugwu, and Ugwunta: interview). The aftermath of illegal adoption as well as adopting children of unknown backgrounds is sometimes unfavourable.

Husbands and wives who intend to adopt a child should be aware of the dangers associated with adopting from an unknown background. The lineage of the adopted child might be known for a particular social vice such as stealing, fierce anger, prostitution among others. The child, while growing, may in one way or the other bring problems in the family and also influence people around him or her.

It can also breed sexual misconduct, particularly in a family where a male child is adopted among female children since he is not biologically related to the female children (Ugwuonah, Ejim, Okoli, and Uzo: interview). Awkunanaw community forbids an adopted individual to be a community leader. Moreover, in the Awkunanaw traditional fellowship meal, an adopted child is not permitted to participate. It is the leftover meal that adopted children may be allowed to partake in (Aniagu, Aniebe, Aninwangwu, Odoh, Ogbodoachime, and Ugwuonyia: interview). The trauma of social marginalisation faced by an adopted child may be unbearable. It is the joy of parenthood and transfer of inheritance that usually propel childless couples and couples without male children into adoption.

Recommendations

- Members of the Awkunanaw community should refrain from patronising baby-making factories because it encourages immorality among the youths.
- They should maintain the cultural practice of adopting children from known backgrounds.
- They should refrain from fake pregnancy; faking pregnancy while adopting a child implies that such means of adoption are socially unacceptable.
- Law enforcement agents should fish out baby-making factories in all Local Government Areas in Awkunanaw and take necessary disciplinary actions against them.
- Couples who remain childless till old age can bequeath their inheritance to a relative.

Conclusion

The study of Genesis 15:1–6 reveals that Abram adopted a son whom he already had a close relationship with – a son born in his house. He adopted an heir from among his relatives. Hence, Abram adopted a son whose identity he knew. Unfortunately, the dominance of baby-making industries is a challenge to embracing this Old Testament practice of adoption among members of Awkunanaw. Be that as it may, members of the Awkunanaw community should endeavour to borrow a leaf from the patriarch (Abram) to spare themselves from the problems associated with adopting children from unknown backgrounds. Couples who need children should be conscientious when considering getting a child into their family to maintain a socially healthy family tier. Adoption of a child from a strange source and unidentified background should be frowned upon by members of the Awkunanaw community. This will enable Awkunanaw people to preserve and easily transmit their cultural and social values to subsequent generations and, to a great extent, minimise the infiltration of social vices and other menace which can be bred by illicit adoption. Among many works which focus on adoption, this research is distinct because the exegetical study of Genesis 15:1–6 aims at having a feasible solution to the problems of adoption of children from untraced backgrounds in the Awkunanaw community.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

C.S.U. wrote the sections of the study and article which border on 'Alternatives to child adoption in ancient Awkunanaw', and identified the appropriate methodology for the study. M.J.O. supervised the study and edited the original draft of the manuscript. O.G.C. wrote the section on the exegesis of Genesis 15:1–6, and did the final editing of the manuscript.

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Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka and ethics consent was received on 09 May 2023.

Data availability

A greater percentage of the data used for this work was novel and was gathered from field work (personal communication). Data generated are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author, O.G.C.

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