

Exodus 2:1–10 and Dialectics on Maternal Virtues in Contemporary Igboland, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the disposition of mothers in contemporary Igboland towards displaying traditional maternal virtues in the upbringing of their children. The inquiry is underpinned by a popular Old Testament narrative, Exodus 2:1-10. The pericope reports the story of the birth of Moses, who was born at the climax of a chaotic situation in Egypt. To control the numerical growth of the Israelites, the king of Egypt instructed that all Hebrew male babies be thrown into the Nile. When Moses was born, his mother, sister and Pharaoh's daughter displayed age-long maternal qualities such as love, sacrifice, courage, wisdom and patience, to save him from Pharaoh's plot. The study observes that in contemporary times, women have more opportunities for self-development and employment; they venture into diverse careers that could restrain them from exhibiting some longstanding motherly virtues in child upbringing. Feminist criticism, descriptive analysis and comparative analysis are employed in studying the text, the social phenomenon and the interaction between the text and the social context, respectively.

KEYWORDS: Exodus 2:1–10, Mother, Maternal virtues, Infanthood, Igboland, Traditional mothering system

A INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, a mother is a female parent; a woman who has a child/children. Brooks asserts that "A mother is a female parent who gives birth to and

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nurtures a child. Aspects of motherhood are conception, pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing.”¹ Besides the exclusive role of bringing forth young ones, mothers play other significant roles in child upbringing. Martin observes that “Although her primary duty is to bear children, a mother also possesses considerable influence over her family and gains respect and honour from her husband and children.”²

Nurturing children implies carrying out motherly responsibilities towards them. It is associated with the various things mothers do to look after their children. Certain traditional motherly virtues are fundamental in the effective upbringing of young ones. Hence, mothers are valuable to the proper growth and development of young ones. Both parents are important, but because of the special needs of children, mothers play significant roles in the raising of children. The work of raising children is multifaceted and effort-intensive.³ Hence, it is needful for mothers in contemporary society to show unwavering commitment to their primary responsibility of child upbringing.

This study is underpinned by an Old Testament narrative, Exod 2: 1-10. The text reports the birth of Moses and its associated circumstances. Moses’ life began under the Pharaoh’s judgment of death. Steinberg notes that “The text recounts the actions of three women to defy Pharaoh’s orders; in contrast to the midwives (Shiprah and Puah) in Exod 1, the women are unnamed in the story.”⁴ The women flouted the king’s order and utilised various measures to protect Moses. Thus, Moses experienced motherly affection and care from three committed and undaunted women, who were instrumental to averting the danger that the king of Egypt spelt for all Hebrew male babies. Exodus 2:1-10 portrays self-effacing kindness and God’s presence lurking behind providential coincidences.⁵ Moses’ mother, Moses’ sister and Pharaoh’s daughter displayed age-long motherly virtues such as love, compassion, wisdom, braveness, patience and sacrifice towards Moses. Besides, the text showcases the Old Testament theology of remnant; the survival of God’s people in Egypt.

In contemporary times, women venture into various careers and businesses which come with a myriad of unique challenges that could deter

¹ J.A. Brooks, “Mother,” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (ed. C. Brand, C. Draper and A. England; Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1154.

² W.C. Martin, “Moses,” in *The Layman’s Bible Encyclopedia* (Nashville: The Southwestern Company, 2017), 541.

³ B. Stallman, “The Work of Midwifery and Mothering,” n.p. [cited 31 April 2024]. Online: <https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/exodus-and-work/israel-in-egypt-exodus-111316/the-work-of-midwifery-and-mothering-exodus-115-210>.

⁴ N. Steinberg, “Feminist Criticism,” in *Methods for Exodus* (ed. T. B. Dozeman; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 179.

⁵ C. Meyers, “Exodus,” in *The New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 39.

them from effectively exhibiting these traditional motherly virtues in the upbringing of their children. Moreover, personal challenges which are inevitable in human existence and socio-economic complexities also compete for the attention of mothers. The timeless virtues demonstrated by the women in Moses' story form the foundation for this study's examination of motherhood in Igboland. The study also identifies the factors that militate against the effective portrayal of motherly virtues in contemporary Igboland.

In order to achieve novelty, in-depth interviews were carried out among 37 mothers (young, middle-aged and elderly) who were randomly selected from various communities in Igboland. These categories of mothers were chosen in order to obtain information on the various mothering patterns in traditional and contemporary societies. The interview was guided by structured questions that centred on discovering the dispositions of mothers towards child upbringing, ascertaining the gap between traditional and contemporary styles of mothering and investigating the challenges that mothers face in carrying out their responsibilities towards their children. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms⁶ are used for the interviewees in this study.

B CONTEXT OF EXODUS 2:1-10

The story of Moses' birth in Exod 2:1-10 is set against the backdrop of the Israelites' increasing oppression in Egypt, following Joseph's death and the rise of a new Pharaoh who did not know Joseph. These significant events became a turning point in the lives of the Israelites, who at that point had multiplied greatly and grown exceedingly strong. The growth of the people of Israel worried the new king, resulting in forced and hard labour for the Israelites. The king also issued orders that were aimed at reducing their numerical growth in the closing part of Exod 1; whereas, the beginning part of Exod 2 tells of the birth of Moses. The account of Moses' birth and childhood includes his deliverance from the infanticide planned by Pharaoh as reported in Exod 1:22. It is a continuation of the Joseph narrative; an aspect of remnant theology. Therefore, Exod 1–2 is often considered an indissoluble narrative complex.⁷ Moses is a central figure in the account of the exodus⁸ and the religion and history of Israel.⁹ He led the people of Israel out of slavery from the land of Egypt, received the Ten Commandments from God and led the Israelites towards the Promised Land.

⁶ Pseudonyms are used because the interviewees did not consent to their real names being presented in the study.

⁷ K. Schmid, *Genesis and the Moses Story, Israel's Dual Origins in the Hebrew Bible* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 140.

⁸ Meyers, "Exodus," 39.

⁹ R. Davidson, "Moses," in *A Basic Introduction to the Old Testament* (ed. R. C. Walton; London: SCM Press, 1980), 76.

1 Structural analysis and insights into Exodus 2:1–10

Exodus 2:1-10 has a simple, coherent and bipartite structure, with each part containing a unique message. The two parts of the text are titled based on the core message of the verses that they are made up of.

1a Exodus 2:1–4 (The birth of Moses)

The manner in which the narrative was reported creates a wrong belief that the baby is the first child of the couple based on the obvious absence of an account of the birth of the baby boy's sister, later identified as Miriam in Exod 15:20. Emphasis on the birth of the son signifies the importance of male children in ancient Israel for the continuation of the patrilineage, the line of inheritance, from fathers to sons. It also emphasises the context of the narrative; the son's life and not the daughter's was in danger and had to be saved. Hence, the detail of the birth of the baby's sister was not significant in understanding the narrative and the book of Exodus.¹⁰

Moses' parents are from the tribe of Levi. At this point, information on their names was lacking; they were identified later as Amram and Jochebed in Exod 6:20. Even before his birth, Moses' life was threatened by two orders of the king as reported in Exod 1: 16, 22. Moses' mother flouted the king's instruction by keeping her son away from the eyes of the Egyptians. Exodus 2:2 notes that when she saw that he was a טוֹב (good/beautiful) baby, she hid him for three months. Holladay writes that a common translation for the adjective טוֹב is 'good,' 'pleasant' and 'desirable.'¹¹ According to Schmid, "The baby's mother had decided to put him aside, but because of his 'beauty', she kept him with her at first."¹² The narrative is silent on how and where Moses was hidden. Moses' mother exercised her faith by entrusting her baby to God's protection. A thought that readily comes to mind is whether his mother would have discarded him if he was not טוֹב. Probably not, but in a period of high infant mortality occasioned by the king's evil order, abandoning a hale and hearty child would have been more bitter.¹³

Exodus 2:3 describes what Moses' mother did when she could no longer hide him. The negative particle לֹא (no, not) is used to state the reality of Moses' mother's inability to keep hiding her baby and to introduce the actions she took to protect him from Pharaoh's death decree. Moses' mother took more practical steps to actualise her dream. She got a papyrus basket, plastered it with bitumen and pitch, put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the

¹⁰ Steinberg, "Feminist Criticism," 179.

¹¹ W. L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 184.

¹² Schmid, *Genesis and the Moses Story*, 142.

¹³ W. H. C. Propp, "Exodus 1-18," in *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 149.

bank of the river. The noun *אֲרָז* (papyrus) refers to a tall aquatic plant with strong stalks that grow as high as 15 feet, which grew in abundance in Egypt and served many purposes.¹⁴ Its fibres were used for making ropes, sandals, baskets and mats.¹⁵ In Exod 2:3, the noun *תִּבְיָה* (basket) is the same word used for the ark built by Noah (Gen 6:14); the word appears only twice in the Old Testament. Moses' mother used *חֵמָר* (bitumen) and *זָפֶת* (pitch) to make the papyrus basket watertight to save Moses from the cold attacks from the overwhelming water and to keep him from drowning. Obiorah and Okafor observe that the mother prepared a good water-resistant basket that could not sink; she placed Moses among the reeds on the bank of the river. Moses, sister stood at a distance to keep watch over him.¹⁶ Utzschneider and Oswald opine that the actions Moses' mother took characterise her—she makes no mistakes; she chooses the right time, the appropriately fitted little box and the appropriate place in which to expose her child. We are told nothing about her fears, not even an act of protest.¹⁷ According to Propp, "Moses' mother obeys Pharaoh's decree in her way. She 'puts' rather than 'throws' the child and not into the middle of the Nile but among the rushes near the shore."¹⁸

Through faith, Moses was entrusted to God's protection when he was left in a cradle in the Nile.¹⁹ According to Childs, "Moses' sister's role was one of the most exciting highlights in the narrative."²⁰ There is no indication that her mother or father sent her to watch over the baby. Thus, this scene highlights Miriam's audacity and ingenuity.²¹ Branch opines that "she displayed great courage, empathy, and persuasion in her attempt to save her brother, thereby impressing Pharaoh's daughter. Through her, Moses' mother was involved in her son's infancy."²² Ironically, the Nile which is meant to be the king's

¹⁴ R. Reeves, "Papyrus," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (ed. C. Brand, C. Draper and A. England; Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1243.

¹⁵ J. Orr, "Papyrus," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1915), 1083.

¹⁶ M. J. Obiorah and N.C. Okafor, "Moses' Mother in Exodus 2:1-10 and Mothers in Personal Names among the Igbo People, South-East Nigeria," *Acta Theologica* 40/1 (2020): 87.

¹⁷ H. Utzschneider and W. Oswald, "Exodus 1-15," in *International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer GmbH, 2012), 45.

¹⁸ Propp, "Exodus 1-18," 149.

¹⁹ A. Ndjerareou, "Exodus," in *Africa Bible Commentary* (ed. T. Adeyemo; Nairobi: Word Alive, 2006), 88.

²⁰ B. S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical Theological Commentary* (Louisville: The Westminster Press, 1976), 18.

²¹ A. Berlin, "Moses' Birth, Upbringing, and Marriage," in *The Torah – A Women's Commentary* (ed. T.C. Eskenazi and A. L. Weiss; New York: URJ Press, 2008), 311.

²² R. G. Branch, "Understudy to Star: The Courageous Audacity of an Israelite Slave," in *Stimulation from Leiden: Collected Communications to the XVIIIth Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament 2004* (ed. H. M. Niemann and A. Matthias; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2006), 257.

instrument for killing male children became the vehicle for saving Moses.²³ The story about Moses is coloured with elements of folklore. It is reminiscent of a similar account from Sargon of Akkad. In an inscription, Sargon says that his mother gave birth to him in secret, placed him in a basket of rushes sealed with bitumen and cast the basket adrift on the river. Akki, the drawer of water, lifted him out of the water and reared him as his son. Thus, from humble beginnings, Sargon rose to be the mighty king of the city of Agade, from which the Akkadians took their name. Sargon II also made use of this legend to boost his image in the Neo-Assyrian period.²⁴

1b Exodus 2:5–10 (Pharaoh’s daughter intervenes)

Miriam did not wait long before Pharaoh’s daughter came to bathe at the river. When Pharaoh’s daughter saw the basket, she opened it and discovered the child. In v. 6, נֶעַר which usually denotes an older boy but sometimes an infant is used perhaps to limit the quasi-synonymous יֶלֶד (child) to seven occurrences; נֶעַר is more gender-specific than יֶלֶד though both are grammatically masculine. Thus, the princess first perceives there is a ‘child’ and then discovers it to be a boy.²⁵ The princess’ reaction is not foreseeable and it is not certain that she will disregard her father’s murderous command.²⁶ Pharaoh’s daughter knew that the baby was born to Hebrew parents. Ordinarily, as a king’s daughter, she would have kept to the king’s order by throwing the baby into the river, but she defied the edict. Coats and Clendenen restate that “Rather than killing the child as her father had ordered, she showed compassion on the child, and with the help of the child’s sister, established a procedure for adopting the baby as her child.”²⁷

The princess would have had to arrange for a wet nurse to care for the child and Miriam, knowing this, takes the initiative and offers to get one of the Hebrew women.²⁸ A wet nurse is usually sought for if a mother dies or if she is unable or chooses not to nurse her child by herself. The use of wet nurses was far less common because most women suckled their children. Only some royal families seem to have resorted to such services, perhaps as a means of showcasing their wealth.²⁹ Miriam succeeds in arranging for the child’s mother to nurse the baby for Pharaoh’s daughter. Thus, Moses’ mother is to be paid for

²³ J. I. Durham, *Exodus* (Word Biblical Commentary 3 Waco: Word Books Publisher, 1987), 16.

²⁴ B. W. Anderson, *The Living World of the Old Testament* (London: Longman House, 1982), 36.

²⁵ Propp, “Exodus 1-18,” 151.

²⁶ Utzschneider and Oswald, “Exodus 1-15,” 45.

²⁷ G. W. Coats and E. R. Clendenen, “Moses,” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (ed. C. Brand, C. Draper and A. England; Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1243.

²⁸ A. Ndjerareou, “Exodus,” 87.

²⁹ Meyers, “Exodus,” 41.

nursing her baby. Utzschneider and Oswald observe that "The miracle of the delivery is even further intensified by the fact that the child is to be raised by its Hebrew mother as its wet nurse."³⁰

In Exod 2:9, the verb נָנֵה (nurse) is used in the imperative sense; Pharaoh's daughter orders Moses' mother to take the baby and nurse for her. The closing part of the story records that when the child grew up (the expression 'grew up' suggests 'weaned'), she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter and named him מֹשֶׁה (Moses) because she drew him out of the water. The word מֹשֶׁה is derived from Egyptian Moše '(is) born'; the root is familiar from such names as Thutmosis, Ramesses, etc.³¹ In the narrative, the name of the child is lacking until this scene (v.10). Exodus 2:6–10 does not indicate that Pharaoh's daughter hid Moses. Hence, Moses became part of her household and entered the royal family. Hale and Thorson state that "Moses came under the protection of the very one - Pharaoh - who had originally wanted him dead."³²

Conclusively, through divine providence, Moses' life was saved by three persons, all of whom were women. Obiorah and Okafor note that the story of women in the life of Moses began with his mother who was highly solicitous about her son.³³ The women did not let the tyrant's command limit their choices or hope.³⁴ God used Moses' mother, who had hidden the child. He used Moses' sister, who watched from a distance to see what would become of her brother. Finally, God used Pharaoh's daughter, who was moved with compassion for the apparently abandoned child. She played a providential role not only in saving the child but also in protecting and educating him.³⁵ In the narrative, these women are unnamed. Being the only character with a name, Moses assumes the central focus in the birth account.

C MOTHERHOOD IN TRADITIONAL IGBOLAND

Motherhood is an age-long aspect of human existence and traditionally depicts a nurturing and self-sacrificing role. In many traditional societies, motherhood is primarily associated with domestic duties, child nurturing and maintaining family harmony. Many women prioritise the needs of their families over their

³⁰ Utzschneider and Oswald, "Exodus 1-15," 45.

³¹ Propp, "Exodus 1-18," 152.

³² T. Hale and S. Thorson, *The Applied Old Testament commentary* (Ontario: Morris and Winrow, 2007), 208.

³³ Obiorah and Okafor, "Moses' Mother in Exodus 2:1-10," 86.

³⁴ R. J. Clifford, "Exodus," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (ed. R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer and R. E. Murphy; Trenton: Burns and Oates, 2003), 23.

³⁵ A. Ndjerareou, "Exodus," 87.

personal ambitions.³⁶ In traditional Igboland, mothers played invaluable roles in their children's growth and thus become their initial contact with the culture and traditions of the society.³⁷ Mothers were committed to nurturing and training their children. Apart from ensuring that their basic needs such as food, shelter and clothing are met, they loved, protected and inculcated values in their children. Many sacrifice their careers to effectively discharge their motherly responsibilities. Thus, motherhood is a call to sacrifice, patience and diligence.

1 Nurturing

From the birth of their offspring, many mothers conscientiously play inestimable roles. Udeagha and Nwamah opine that mothers are greatly valued for their commitment to nurturing their babies. Women do all within their ability to protect their children.³⁸ Nursing is the first role mothers usually play in the lives of their children. Nursing a baby is demanding and as a result, some mothers resigned from their workplace to devote sufficient time to it.³⁹ Ucheoma (interviewee), a retired teacher, says that during her reproductive years, she resigned from her work because she was granted four weeks maternity leave and the school did not allow staff to come to work with their babies. When she was through with child-bearing, she resumed her teaching career and later rose to the position of assistant headmistress before retiring.⁴⁰ Likewise, mothers who engaged in farmwork and other activities usually took a long break after childbirth. Many stayed at home till their babies were weaned. During such a period, they depended on their husbands and relatives for sustenance.⁴¹

2 Training

Mothers are the first instructors of children. This usually starts during the period of breastfeeding. For instance, a suckling child who bites the nipple of his/her mother is usually scolded.⁴² As children grow older, the mothers instil certain values such as honesty, hard work, respect, courage and gratitude in

³⁶ Support Team, "Motherhood Redefined: Balancing Tradition and Modernity," n.p. [cited 23 May 2024]. Online: <https://byshree.com/blogs/news/motherhood-redefined-balancing-tradition-and-modernity#>.

³⁷ O. Omuholo, "Mothers as Custodians of African Languages and Cultures," n.p. [cited 23 May 2024]. Online: <https://localizationafrica.com/mothers-as-custodians-of-african-languages/#>.

³⁸ N. I. Udeagha and G.O. Nwamah, "Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart and the Role of Women in Igbo Traditional Religious Culture," *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 7 (2019): 278.

³⁹ Nkiruka and Obiageli et al., Interview, 2 February 2024.

⁴⁰ Ucheoma, Interview, 5 December 2023.

⁴¹ Nne and Urenwa et al., Interview, 5 December 2023.

⁴² Orie et al., Interview, 2 February 2024.

their children. Okafor opines that, "Extended family members were also involved in parenting; children were taught values such as obedience, respect, and hard work."⁴³ They also taught cultural values, moral values and the need to refrain from wrongdoing and evil association. Children were conscientiously trained on how to do house chores such as washing dishes and clothes, sweeping and mopping the floor, splitting firewood, pounding yam, taking care of their younger ones, etc. Mothers assigned age-appropriate chores to their children.⁴⁴ Many mothers also ensured that their children received rudimentary education.⁴⁵ Many overlooked their personal needs such as clothes, footwear and jewellery to sponsor their children's basic education. In difficult financial situations, they sold their wrappers and other valuables to see that their children completed their education.⁴⁶ When food is not in much supply, many mothers cheerfully stayed without food to ensure their children ate.⁴⁷

3 Discipline

Most mothers also did not spare the rod of discipline when their children erred. Misconducts such as stealing, fighting, telling lies, disobedience and disrespecting elders were condemned.⁴⁸ Various punishments were meted out according to one's age and misdeeds such as closing one's eyes and facing the wall while standing up, flogging, staying without food for some time and doing extra house chores.⁴⁹ Moreover, in the traditional Igboland, a mother saw every child as her own child. They were not responsible for their biological children only; they also took care of other children around them, especially those kept within their care.⁵⁰ Mothers usually kept their younger children with other women before going to the farm.⁵¹ In the same vein, Nwaneki and Uzowulu aver that a child belongs to the community. The responsibility of training a child is a collective affair that includes the community.⁵²

D TEXT AND CONTEXT: AN INTERPLAY

The story recorded in Exod 2:1–10 explicitly identifies age-long maternal virtues such as love, compassion, wisdom, courage, patience and sacrifice.

⁴³ C. B. Okafor, "Child Rearing Practices in Eastern Nigeria: Implications for Social Work in the United States," *International Journal of Global Health* 2/2 (2003): 4.

⁴⁴ Ngozi et al., Interview, 4 February 2024.

⁴⁵ Amaka et al., Interview, 6 December 2023

⁴⁶ Nkiruka et al., Interview, 3 February 2024.

⁴⁷ Adaobi et al., Interview, 5 December 2023.

⁴⁸ Ndidi et al., Interview, 4 February 2024.

⁴⁹ Amara et al., Interview, 6 December 2023.

⁵⁰ Udeagha and Nwamah, "Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart," 278.

⁵¹ Chinyere et al., Interview, 6 December 2023.

⁵² M. E. Nwaneki and O. E. Uzowulu et al., "A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary and Traditional Systems of Igbo Child Upbringing," *Trinitarian International Journal of Arts and Humanities* 1/2 (2021): 75-89 (76).

These longstanding virtues are natural traits associated with women, but in contemporary times, some are declining as a result of modernism and the quest for personal development. As societies evolve and embrace modernity, motherhood practices have undergone a profound transformation. Today, mothers are redefining their roles, striving to balance tradition and embracing the opportunities of a rapidly changing world.⁵³ Modernity and socio-economic complexities strongly contend with some of these long-standing motherly virtues. The specific factors associated with the decline in demonstrating some maternal virtues among mothers in contemporary Igboland are identified in the discussion. This section studies the disposition of mothers in contemporary Igboland to exhibit their natural traits in the light of the motherly virtues observed in Exod 2:1-10. In the narrative, Moses' mother was the only mother mentioned, but two other women equally displayed maternal virtues in the life of Moses. While some of the maternal traits identified in the text are waning, some are still inherent among many mothers in contemporary Igboland. Both perspectives are laid bare in the discussion.

The increased economic upheaval in Nigeria restrains many mothers from displaying some maternal traits towards their children. As a result of difficult financial times, more women have realised that working full-time is ideal for them. According to Omuholo, motherhood continues to undergo different external pressures due to the strive for self-improvement and empowerment,⁵⁴ while some mothers are engaged in various careers and businesses to make ends meet. Many women whose husbands are wealthy also have jobs and businesses to have a personal source of income because no one knows what could happen in the future; loss of employment, retirement, death, etc.⁵⁵ Many engage in various income-yielding ventures concurrently. For instance, many civil servants are actively involved in other businesses such as tailoring, interior decoration, catering, event management, farming, hairdressing, etc. Some are schooling and employed at the same time.

In a bid to improve the living standard of one's family, some mothers relocate to other countries for further studies or better jobs and businesses. In a family where a woman is the breadwinner, the situation is usually sympathetic, as the entire family, including the husband and sometimes relatives, depends on the woman's income. Undoubtedly, the many demands on her time influence her disposition towards the upbringing of her children, affect the bonding between them and make her less responsive to their emotional needs. Some mothers rarely interact with their children because they leave the house very early in the morning when the children are still asleep and return late at night

⁵³ Support Team, "Motherhood Redefined: Balancing Tradition and Modernity," <https://byshree.com/blogs/news/motherhood-redefined-balancing-tradition-and-modernity#>.

⁵⁴ Omuholo, "Mothers as Custodians."

⁵⁵ Nnenna et al., Interview, 2 February 2024.

when they have already gone to bed. Unfortunately, during weekends and off-duty days, some mothers are still unable to spend time with their children because of social media addiction. If their children approach them for a discussion, they refer them to housekeepers or nannies.⁵⁶ Sadly, many mothers are unaware of the distinctive character and unique needs of each of their children because they are overwhelmed with busy schedules. They place premium on getting high-paying jobs to cater for their physical needs. At various daycare centres, one sees very tender babies who should still be in their mothers' arms. Those who cannot afford to enrol their babies at daycare centres take them along, exposing them to unfavourable environments. Others are left at the mercy of house-helpers, nannies and neighbours.⁵⁷

In traditional Igboland, separation was very rare, let alone divorce. Wives were more subservient and husbands were more committed to the marriage relationship. Maternal and paternal relatives ensured that marital disputes were settled amicably.⁵⁸ However, in contemporary times, separation and divorce are on the increase. Husbands and wives are ready to end their marriage at the slightest provocation and marital dissatisfaction.⁵⁹ Some manage to live under the same roof to avoid being stigmatised. In extreme cases, some mothers leave their homes to escape being harmed by their husbands. Some men also force their wives out of their homes and make it difficult for them to access their children. Mothers who are allowed to move out with their children could face financial challenges and other difficulties linked to single parenthood. These situations hamper a mother's love, sacrifice and commitment to her children. Mothers who are in unstable marriages experience anxiety, trauma and depression, which influence how they demonstrate unconditional maternal love for their children.⁶⁰ Most times, they unintentionally vent their anger on innocent children as a result of incessant conflict and hostility between them and their husbands.

Nwaneki and Uzowulu aver that "In traditional Igboland, child upbringing was regarded as a collective responsibility. Mothers usually correct other women's children when they act improperly."⁶¹ They could rebuke other children if they do not greet them; if they dress indecently, if they always move around with the opposite sex, if they are seen in the company of evil people, etc. Some do not confront the child directly but report to the child's mother.⁶² On the other hand, some mothers also applaud children who behave

⁵⁶ Nkechi et al., Interview, 5 December 2023.

⁵⁷ Njideka et al., Interview, 6 December 2023.

⁵⁸ A.U. Agha, *Religious Ethics in a Permissive Society* (Enugu: SAPS, 2003), 109.

⁵⁹ A. Agbo, *Christian Teachings about Marriage* (Enugu: Christian Books Press, 2004), 38.

⁶⁰ Ngozi et al., Interview, 4 February 2024.

⁶¹ Nwaneki and Uzowulu, "A Philosophical Analysis," 76.

⁶² Nneoma et al., Interview, 6 December 2024.

well and do well in their studies by praising them and giving them money and other gifts. Sadly, this parenting style is largely missing in contemporary Igboland. Many mothers only pay attention to their children and refrain from correcting another woman's child to avoid conflict. Even extended family members rarely discipline each other's children because they do not want to disrupt family relationships.

A cursory reading of Exod 2:2 therefore raises a question: if Moses was not a fine baby, would his mother have protected him? From the text, one could infer that Moses' mother was more enthusiastic about saving her baby because of his healthy looks. Schmid suggests that "If Exodus 2:2–3 is understood only from the standpoint of the infanticide of Exodus 1, then the puzzling idea must be accepted that the mother only hid her beautiful children, not her ugly children from Pharaoh and his people."⁶³ According to Onwuka, "Having children is delightful; in Igboland, births are hugely celebrated. Babies (whether healthy or feeble) are cherished and protected from danger. No baby is less human; they believe that all are gifts from God."⁶⁴ Similarly, Ekpe writes that "In all parts of Africa, children are considered very important. They are a sign of blessing in the marriage and are a factor of social status."⁶⁵ To this end, even mothers who have sick babies continually and conscientiously show affection and care to them. In fact, mothers instinctively show more care and love to sick babies than they do to healthy ones.⁶⁶

Moses' mother was passionate about saving her child. Stallman avers that Moses' mother faced a difficult situation, but she thought of a solution through her ingenuity.⁶⁷ Just as Moses' mother exhibited amazing braveness by hiding her baby for three months, many mothers in contemporary Igboland display courage when their babies' lives are in danger. They brace up and do everything within their ability to save them. Ngozi narrates that after she delivered her baby, nurses discovered that he had jaundice and difficulty in breathing. He was referred to a teaching hospital which was in another town. While her mother asked whether there was a nearby hospital that could intervene in the baby's health, she immediately went home to prepare and with the assistance of her mother who carried the baby, she drove to the teaching

⁶³ Schmid, *Genesis and the Moses Story, Israel's Dual Origins in the Hebrew Bible*, 142.

⁶⁴ A. E. Onwuka, "Cultural Parenting: Igbo Mothers Raising Their Children in the United States," *Africana Studies Theses*, Thesis, Georgia State University, 8.

⁶⁵ C. P. Ekpe, "Social Welfare and Family Support: The Nigerian Experience," *The Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 10/3 (1983): 490.

⁶⁶ Chinonso et al., Interview, 1 December 2023.

⁶⁷ B. Stallman, "The Work of Midwifery and Mothering," Online: <https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/exodus-and-work/israel-in-egypt-exodus-111316/the-work-of-midwifery-and-mothering-exodus-115-210>.

hospital. They spent eight days in the hospital; her baby's health was restored.⁶⁸ Nnedinso related a similar narrative; her three-month-old baby started breathing very fast and produced abnormal sounds while breathing. She informed her husband (he travelled the previous day) and then proceeded to a private hospital. After some medical examinations, the doctor told her that there was no problem with her baby and that the abnormality in breathing would correct after some time. She proceeded to another private hospital because she was not satisfied with the diagnosis. There, she received a similar report. Over time, her baby's breathing improved and later became normal.⁶⁹

Exodus 2:6-10 reports that the king's daughter showed compassion when she saw the child. She did not see that as an avenue to carry out the dictates of her father to earn his approval. Similarly, in contemporary Igboland, mothers are very compassionate about the plights of other women's children. This is expressed in a common Igbo adage: *Naani otu nne anaghi azu nwa* (One mother alone does not raise a child). When a baby is born, mothers usually visit the mother with money or gifts for the baby. If a child starts crying uncontrollably, mothers who are nearby usually express concern. Some give biscuits, groundnuts or sweets to calm the child. In addition, some mothers show compassion to other children by intervening when their mothers want to flog them (that is, by putting away the cane or begging their mothers to not flog them). A child whose mother wants to flog is usually spared if he/she runs into another mother.⁷⁰

There are stories about babies who were thrown inside waste bins or gutters and were rescued by compassionate mothers. Ubani reports that a newborn baby who was thrown into a dustbin was rescued by two women.⁷¹ A similar incident occurred at Sacred Heart Street, Uwani Enugu; a newborn baby was dumped at the ESWAMA (Enugu State Waste Management) refuse dump and was rescued alive by a compassionate mother.⁷² In such scenarios, many mothers show compassion by picking up the baby and doing the necessary things to ensure that he/she becomes stable. Some take the baby into their homes, whereas many take them to motherless babies' homes.⁷³

⁶⁸ Ngozi, Interview, 1 December 2023.

⁶⁹ Nnedinso, Interview, 3 December 2023.

⁷⁰ Amaka et al., Interview, 2 March 2024.

⁷¹ T. Ubani, "Newborn Baby Rescued after Being Dumped Inside Dustbin to Die," n.p. [cited 17 April 2024]. Online: <https://www.tori.ng/news/97251/tears-see-newborn-baby-abandoned-and-dumped-inside.html>.

⁷² B. Bosah, "Newborn Baby Dumped in a Dustbin in Enugu State," n.p. [cited 17 April 2024]. Online: <https://www.nairaland.com/4931273/new-born-baby-boy-dumped>.

⁷³ Ngozi et al., Interview, 6 December 2023.

E CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Exodus 2:1–10 is a narrative that celebrates the strength and ingenuity of women. The preceding verses (Exod 1:15–22) also applaud two Egyptian midwives, *Šiprāh* (Shiphrah) and *Pû‘āh* (Puah), who thwarted the evil plans of the king of Egypt. The pericope tells of the exploits of three strong-willed women—Moses’ mother, sister and the king’s daughter. Maternal virtues such as love, compassion, bravery, inventiveness, sacrifice and patience are evident in the conduct of the three women. Similarly, in traditional Igboland, many mothers demonstrated great virtue in the upbringing of their children. They were committed to making significant and lasting impact in the lives of their children. They also looked out for other people’s children. Many willingly sacrificed their aspirations and dreams and prioritised the needs of their children.

The pursuit of personal development and career achievements among women has led to a decline in the exhibition of some motherly traits among mothers in contemporary Igboland. Many mothers are actively engaged in various careers and businesses to ensure better living conditions for their children. Pressure from the workplace and family hinders them from consistently displaying maternal traits such as love, sacrifice and patience towards their children. Additionally, technology has contributed to the declining roles of mothers in recent times. While this study celebrates the worth of women in the development of various important establishments all over the globe, it recommends that they fully embrace the image of motherhood which depicts unconditional love and self-sacrifice for their children. As they aspire to develop their careers, they should not neglect their responsibilities towards their children.

Priests in various Christian denominations also have a role to play during church programs such as Mothering Sunday, Women’s Day, Ezinne Title Day, etc. Therefore, they should give homilies which emphasise the importance of expressing maternal virtues towards one’s children. In the same way, during the annual August meeting in various Igbo communities, women leaders and traditional rulers should encourage mothers to be conscientious about their motherly responsibilities. Although this study focuses on the role of mothers, it is important to state that support from fathers will go a long way in relieving the challenges that mothers face in creating a balance between career and motherhood. Therefore, alongside the various programs of religious and non-governmental organisations that call the attention of mothers to their primary responsibilities, academic contributions aimed at challenging them to return to the traditional patterns of motherhood are apt.

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