

PARENTAL NEGLIGENCE AS A CATALYST FOR MORAL DECADENCE IN MINISTERS' HOME. AN APPRAISAL OF ELI'S HOME

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Introduction

The phenomenon of moral decadence among the 21st century youths has reached an unbearable level. Today's youths are rated higher than their counterparts in past years in the aspect of moral decadence. Recent research studies have shown that higher percentage of youths are engaging in various immoral activities, ranging from examination malpractices, cultism, violence, hostage taking, cyber crime, sexual immoralities etc.¹

Moral decadence is rife and on the increase in our society today. There is a sharp decline of morality among the youths of this generation so much that any pretence or attempt on our part to feigning ignorance will be playing the ostrich. If all the stakeholders fail to curb this menace, it may spell doom for the future of this country and the continent of Africa as a whole.

The situation becomes very disturbing and alarming when occupants of our vicarages and mission houses are not exempted from this scourge. There have been cases of pastors' children impregnating one another in the mission house and the parents assisting them by aborting the pregnancy. Many of the pastors' children have been accused and found guilty of stealing church's offering. When these happen the questions that always come to one's mind are "where were the parents," "what could be

responsible for this?" or were they not properly brought up?" Etc.

So, to combat this monster has always been the constant source of anxiety for all youth stakeholders including the government, non-governmental organizations, religious bodies etc. Thus, this work examines the life of a biblical character in person of Eli and his home and submits that parental negligence is one of the main causes of moral decadence among the youths.

Eli's Background and Ministry

The man Eli, the priest and predecessor of Samuel, has little record in the Bible. Outside the first book of Samuel, there is a dearth of information about his background. However, the first book of Samuel made us to understand that he was the priest at Shiloh and a judge in Israel before and during the days of Samuel's youth. More precisely Eli's office was probably that of high priest although he was not specifically given this title in the Old Testament text.² He ministered in Shiloh at a time when the days of judges became numbered due to the imminent collapse of the Israelite tribal confederacy.³

The priesthood was established by God and assigned to Aaron and his descendants with the intention that the priesthood shall be kept in that lineage forever. The establishment of the Levitical priesthood was done as a sovereign act of God and the choice of Aaron's lineage to occupy the office forever was in like manner. It was this priestly office that Eli occupied at Shiloh.

Thus, Eli ministered before the LORD of hosts at the central tabernacle located at Shiloh together with his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, as priests. Eli was the first person to combine the

offices of a judge and that of the high priest in Israel⁴ and this he did for the forty years his ministry lasted in Israel. His ministry covered the period before and during Samuel's infancy and youth.

Eli's priestly duties at Shiloh included the maintenance and operation of the tabernacle as well as that of the altar. Priests had the duty of removing the ashes from the altar and keeping the fire burning at all times. Apart from these priestly duties, Eli judged Israel which was an administrative function in Israel. As a priest and judge in Israel, he had a right standing with God and impacted the lives of his followers positively. He had a faultless ministry but for his home. He showed great concern for the things of the LORD and presented the people and their sacrifices to the LORD of hosts. The Lord in turn blessed his people. He kept this successful run until his two sons; Hophni and Phinehas, took charge of this tabernacle as Eli was ageing.

Eli's Home and the Sins of his Sons

Eli appears to belong to the house of Ithamar, the fourth son of Aaron. This position is based on the possibility of the fact that Ahimelech, Eli's grandson and successor in I Samuel 22:9 is the same as the Ahimelech referred to in I Chronicles 24:3. This therefore suggests that Eli was a descendant of Ithamar and by extension Aaron.⁵

His immediate family who were mentioned in the Bible include Hophni, Phinehas, Phinehas's wife and Eli, the high priest himself. Virtually, nothing was mentioned of his family life nor his wife. His two sons were priests like their father and ministered at the Tabernacle in Shiloh. However, the life and ministry of the two sons of Eli sharply contrasted that of their father.

Hophni and Phinehas were first mentioned as priests and as two sons of Eli. Their introduction by the author of I Samuel was set within the context of the story of the early years of Samuel. As the story continued, it became so obvious that the author was using Eli's sons as foils in contrast to Samuel. Samuel emerged as the true priest of Israel and Eli's sons became examples of evil, greedy priests who had rejected the Lordship of Yahweh.⁶ Both of them were indicted for the following offences.

The first indictment for both priests appeared in I Samuel 2:2-17. The two of them were described as sons of Belial. This phrase suggests the degree of condemnation of Hophni and Phinehas by the writer. Although scholars debate the etymology of the term, used for the two priests, its usage in the Old Testament is clear. It serves as a reference to a person who has become so corrupt and wicked that he is a detriment to the society.⁷ Again, this person can be said to be characterized by rebellion against authority and social order. This phrase was used by the writer to describe the sons of Eli. This shows that they were detriments to the society in which they lived. This same phrase was used by Eli to depict Hannah. He suspected Hannah to be a daughter of Belial. It is ironic that the father of genuinely sons of Belial about which he did nothing reproached an innocent woman as someone corrupt. This is to show that the conduct of a Belial's son strikes at the moral fabric of any society. Yet, this phrase was used to describe the two sons of Eli, the high priest of Israel.

Besides, it has been said that the phrase literally means "not of use" or "worthlessness" but in this case, it implied the worship of gods other than Yahweh.⁸ With regard to the sons of Eli here, not only did they become problem to the people, but they "had no

regard for Yahweh" (I Sam 2:12). Worthless men sometimes attempt to undermine sacred things. They can plot evil and have destructive speech, seeking to convince people to worship false gods instead of the only true God. They can violate basic social order, mock moral standards and care nothing about genuine worship of Yahweh. So, the evil of Eli's sons was implicit in the statement that they did not know Yahweh or "had no regard for Yahweh" as the Revised Standard Version (RSV) puts it. The clear implication of this is that their activities were evil and that they had turned away from Yahweh.

This perspective is reinforced in I Samuel 2:13-17 where the greed of Hophni and Phinehas and in their demands for an excessive portion of the offering and in their threatening violence (v. 16) if the extra portion was not surrendered. Normally, Israelite priests were allotted portions of the sacrificial animal, in particular, the breast and the right leg (Lev. 7:27-36). But Eli's sons demanded their share before the ritual burning of the fat had taken place and even before the meat had been cooked. This is hardly the dignified control one would expect of priests.⁹ Unfortunately, both priests who should be the successors of Eli their father, were involved in all these and brought reproach to the institution of priest.

Above all, they were indicted for "lying" with the women who guarded the door of the tent of the meeting. The word that was used mean to have sexual intercourse with a woman unlawfully or sexual perversion in general.¹⁰ Hophni and Phinehas' corruptible nature extended to sexual perversion. They forced themselves on the ladies that were guarding the tent of meeting and probably raped them. They brought in sacred prostitution

which was one of the religious practices of the Canaanites. This was purely against the will of God and the LORD had warned the Israelites never to follow their footsteps, yet, both Hophni and Phinehas pursued the practice without looking back. So, even though Eli was serving as the high priest of Israel at the time of Samuel's birth, Eli's sons were known as those who had no regard for the covenant LORD of Israel.

The above shows the difference between the approved service of Samuel even from childhood and the moral decadence of Eli's sons. Both sons were characterized as worthless fellows. The summary indictment against Hophni and Phinehas was that they did not know Yahweh, a knowledge which meant experience of and obedience to God. They were totally dishonest in the LORD's work. In fact, they were running one of the first religious rackets.¹¹

Eli's Negligence of his Duty at Home and its Consequences

The moral depravity of both Hophni and Phinehas was no secret at Shiloh and Eli, the high priest was duly informed about same. However, Eli refused to apply adequate sanction and also failed to punish them effectively. The actions of both Hophni and Phinehas were an open scandal in Israel and all Eli did was to give his boys a gentle slap on the wrist. This is absolute weakness of his fatherhood. The people were doing what the priests were doing; turning away from the worship of the LORD and it was Eli's sons that were leading the folk. Instead of taking positive steps to correct the situation, Eli gently rebuked them. No wonder Vernon remarked that he was indeed an indulgent father.¹²

The personality of Eli has been described as that of a humble

minded, good man but of a weak character.¹³ His lack of influence over his two sons serves to emphasize this estimate. Eli was of sincere and devout character but he lacked firmness. He was not a strong personality. According to Grant, Eli was of a truth a man full of humility and gentleness but his greatest flaw was being weak and indulgent.¹⁴ He allowed his children to have their ways.

In I Samuel 2:23, he said to his sons "... for I hear of your evil dealings from all the people" This feeble rebuke was about all he could muster enough courage and strength to do. He expressed disapproval of their sexual immorality but was silent about their liturgical or priestly immorality. Eli would have done well if he had sanctioned his sons perhaps with at least suspension if not outright dismissal from priestly functions.¹⁵ Such a measure of discipline would have gone a long way in assuaging the situation. But Eli failed to do this. In the military, probably Eli would have been charged with dereliction of duty thereby jeopardizing the safety and well-being of the whole nation.¹⁶ Eli did not act appropriately in cautioning his children neither did he do so even after God had warned him.

The consequences were very grave for all concerned parties, Eli's household and the nation of Israel. Firstly, the attitude of both Hophni and Phinehas must have hindered the worship of God at Shiloh rather than to facilitate it. This is because instead of being devout priests, they were devouring priests. One can therefore imagine what godly Israelites would have gone through in their reaction to the conduct of Eli's sons. Their operation of the priestly ministry was a complete departure from the norm of priesthood and an outright disregard for the sacred office of Old Testament priest in Israel. Thus, the people lost respect for priestly authority

which led to loss of true spiritual worship and religion.

The next immediate consequence of Eli's negligence of his home responsibility was the fact that it marked the end of Eli's priestly line. Their lives were cut short. One can imagine the kind of tragedy and sorrow that would be in Eli's household, the day Hophni, Phinehas, Eli and Phinehas' wife all died. This is a tragic end of a man who happened to be the spiritual leader of Israel.

The special relationship of Eli to Yahweh was rehearsed on the occasion of the appearance of "a man of God," that is a prophet. Eli's house was chosen in Egypt to be priests but since Eli's sons became so greedy and worthless, Yahweh decided to destroy Eli and his house. Most importantly, Eli's sons would no longer serve as priests in Israel. In place of Eli, Yahweh raised a faithful priest in the person of Samuel who would forever stand before Yahweh's anointed.

Solomon's expulsion of Abiathar from the priesthood in Jerusalem fulfilled the prophecy concerning Eli as Abiathar was supposedly the great great grandson of Eli.¹⁷ The last appearance of Hophni and Phinehas was connected with the battle of the Israelites against the Philistines at Ebenezer and Aphek which the later led to their death and that of Eli, their father. This was also when the ark of covenant was captured and taken to the land of the Philistines.

Implication of Eli's Negligence for the 21st Century Spiritual Leaders

There is no doubt that the manifestations of behavioural decadence in the lives of members of ministers' households

impact negatively on their lives and ministries. There is hardly anything more embarrassing to a pastor than a crisis precipitated by his wayward children's actions of inactions.¹⁸ In the case under examination, the dishonesty of both sons of Eli cause many people to turn from God. The Israelites saw what Eli's sons were doing at the Tabernacle and instead of being drawn closer to the LORD, they were driven away. Leaders should be careful today about the way they live their lives and how they run the church of God. This idea of shutting one's eyes to sin in one's family or the church and trying to cover it up drives people away from God. Hypocrisy should stop among the spiritual leaders because it brings doom and eternal damnation just as it was in the tabernacle in Eli's day.

Besides, Eli was an indulgent father, who shut his eyes to the sins of his sons. He noticed their awful gross immorality and how they lay with the women that assembled at the door of the Tabernacle of the congregation. There is a great deal of talk today about what is called the "new morality." But Eli's sons beat the crowd today in the new morality. Actually, it was not even new in their day, it goes back to the time of the flood.¹⁹ So, spiritual leaders today should learn to act and take appropriate steps at the right time.

The slowness of Eli in responding with any corrective measure seems to have contributed to the moral decadence of his sons. Leaders are to be caring and humble but that does not mean they should not be firm or disciplined. Appropriate measures should be taken at anytime to forestall ungodliness and disorderliness.

Recommendation and Conclusion

From the above, it has been noted that parents play significant roles in the upbringing and development of a child. Thus, parents are to make their family a topmost priority because they have a lot of influence on their children. Gbile warned in one of his works on the family that parents should not pursue money at the expense of their children.²⁹ Parents should learn to settle down with their children and bring them up in a godly manner.

The continent as a whole is being threatened by decay and the family is a component of the society. So, whatever happens in the family is reflected in the society. Today, parents have abandoned their duty of providing guidance to their children in pursuit of wealth which cannot be a substitute for moral teaching. For us to experience a new Africa that is regenerated and ruled by adults carefully brought up, nurtured and admonished in the LORD, parents should rise to take up their responsibilities.

Governor Chibuike Amaechi of Rivers State recently advised women to use their positions as mothers to curb the growing rate of moral decadence among youths. According to him, parents especially women owned the state a duty to instill discipline and good moral upbringing in the younger generation.²¹ Parents should therefore rise to save our society being the custodians of the home.

Christian leader should know that it is his responsibility to lead the entire family in the way of righteousness. To accomplish God's purpose for the family, there is need to worship together, study together and pray together. The father, as the spiritual head of the home, should learn to be firm and take the lead. All these

will help the spiritual growth of the young family members and their understanding of spiritual truths.

Finally, the joy of this writer is to see African children and youths grow up in wholesome family settings for them to grow into responsible and God-fearing adults who will produce after their kind.

End Notes

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