

Leviticus 19:32 in Times of Elder Care Crisis in Nigeria: A Hermeneutical Analysis

Favour Chukwuemeka Uroko^{1*}

¹ Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

* favour.uroko@unn.edu.ng

Abstract

This study establishes a theological foundation for elder care in Nigeria by integrating biblical principles and traditional values to address increasing marginalization and neglect. Through a multidisciplinary approach and hermeneutical exegetical analysis of Leviticus 19:32, the study finds that respect for the elderly is a theological imperative that links human dignity directly to reverence for God. While biblical principles and Nigerian culture align in upholding the elderly, both are now challenged by modern socio-economic realities. The study confirms that this divine mandate demands practical support that recognizes the dignity of the elderly, going beyond mere oral tradition. Therefore, religious institutions have a crucial role to play in reactivating dignified care practices through their moral influence and extensive community networks.

Penelitian ini membangun landasan teologis perawatan lansia di Nigeria dengan mengintegrasikan prinsip biblis dan nilai tradisional guna merespons meningkatnya marginalisasi serta penelantaran. Melalui pendekatan multidisipliner dan analisis eksegetis hermeneutis Imamat 19:32, studi ini menemukan bahwa penghormatan kepada lansia adalah imperatif teologis yang menghubungkan martabat manusia langsung dengan rasa hormat kepada Tuhan. Meskipun prinsip biblis dan budaya Nigeria memiliki keselarasan dalam menjunjung tinggi orang tua, keduanya kini menghadapi tantangan akibat realitas sosial-ekonomi modern. Hasil penelitian menegaskan bahwa mandat ilahi ini menuntut dukungan praktis yang mengakui martabat lansia, melampaui sekadar tradisi lisan. Oleh karena itu, lembaga keagamaan memiliki peran krusial untuk mengaktifkan kembali praktik perawatan yang bermartabat melalui pengaruh moral dan jaringan komunitas mereka yang luas.

Keywords

Biblical hermeneutics; elder care; gerontology; Leviticus 19:32; Nigeria.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The biblical injunction to "rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God" (Leviticus 19:32, NIV) presents a profound ethical mandate that resonates across cultural and temporal boundaries. This ancient text emerges from the holiness code of Leviticus, where reverence for the elderly is inextricably linked to reverence for God (Gerstenberger, 2018). However, with the growing number of allegations of elder abuse, neglect, and marginalisation, this hallowed concept meets hitherto unheard-of difficulties in modern Nigerian culture. Critical hermeneutical investigation is encouraged by this contradiction between social reality and scriptural ideals.

Nigeria has seen tremendous sociocultural changes in recent decades, despite its rich cultural legacy that has historically honoured elders as keepers of tradition and sources of wisdom. Intergenerational relationships have undergone a complicated reconfiguration as a result of urbanisation, modernisation, economic pressures, and changing family patterns. The National Population Commission (2022) estimates that approximately 6.3% of Nigeria's population—over 13 million individuals—are aged 60 and above, with this demographic expected to double by 2050. Yet, this growing elderly population faces increasing vulnerability to various forms of abuse, from physical and psychological maltreatment to financial exploitation and systemic neglect. Nigeria's expanding elderly population experiences heightened susceptibility to multiple abuse forms including physical violence, emotional mistreatment, financial exploitation, and systemic neglect. These vulnerable seniors face inadequate social protections, limited healthcare access, and weakened traditional family support systems, leaving them exposed to exploitation and suffering without sufficient legal safeguards or institutional care options.

Bridging the contextual divide between ancient Levitical prescriptions and contemporary Nigerian realities is a necessary part of the modern hermeneutical job. African biblical hermeneutics, according to Ukpong (2000), needs to take into account both the text's historical-critical aspects and the real-life realities of modern societies. In a similar vein, Adamo (2023) argues that in order to interpret the Bible meaningfully in African contexts, it is necessary to critically interact with local cultural frameworks while tackling urgent social issues. This method is in line with what West (2021) refers to as "contextual Bible study," which looks for readings that have a profound impact on current ethical issues.

In light of the particular circumstances surrounding elder abuse in Nigeria, this article conducts a hermeneutical examination of Leviticus 19:32. Methodologically, this study adopts a multidisciplinary framework that combines: (1) an exegetical examination of Leviticus 19:32 within its historical and theological milieu; (2) a review of gerontological scholarship on the experiences and challenges of older adults in Nigeria; (3) a comparative exploration of biblical teachings and indigenous Nigerian cultural values on elder care; and (4) the use of contextual hermeneutics to connect the ancient text with present-day social realities. It looks at the Levitical injunction's original socioreligious setting, tracks how attitudes towards elder care have changed in Nigerian society, and investigates how this biblical passage could influence moral responses to elder maltreatment today. Through this study, the paper aims to provide religious communities with both practical advice and scholarly knowledge.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

2.1. *Who are the Aged in Nigeria?*

In Nigeria, the definition and perception of who constitutes "the aged" involves both chronological markers and sociocultural considerations. From an official perspective, Nigeria generally adopts the United Nations and World Health Organization standard that defines older persons or the aged as individuals who are 60 years and above (World Health Organization, 2022). The Nigerian National Policy on Aging similarly recognizes 60 years as the threshold for defining elderly citizens (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, 2021).

Statistical data from the National Population Commission (2023) indicates that approximately 6.3% of Nigeria's population—about 13 million people—are aged 60 and above. This demographic is expected to increase significantly, with projections suggesting this population will double by 2050 due to improving healthcare and longer life expectancy (Gureje et al., 2011). Beyond age, societal roles and cultural values have a significant impact on how Nigerians view ageing. The definition of "the aged" in traditional Nigerian societies is frequently determined by social markers, such as retirement from active employment, grandparenthood, physical changes like grey hair, status as family or community elders, and acquired knowledge and experience.

Being an elder is a sign of respect and social standing in many Nigerian ethnic groups, especially in rural areas. Elderly individuals are typically seen as knowledge archivists, cultural value stewards, and conflict resolution mediators. Nigeria's many regions and urban and rural environments have rather different ideas about ageing. According to Abdulrazak et al. (2016) and Wahab (2023), individuals in northern Nigeria may be deemed elderly at earlier chronological ages than those in southern regions due to the region's relatively lower life expectancy. It's also crucial to note that, whereas rural societies frequently place more emphasis on social roles and functional capacity, metropolitan inhabitants tend to embrace more chronological notions of ageing that correspond with official retirement.

The way that people in Nigeria experience ageing is greatly influenced by socioeconomic characteristics. A number of factors, according to Akpan & Umobong (2023) and Okakah et al., (2025), influence the vulnerability of the elderly in Nigeria. These include the lack of comprehensive social security systems, the low pension coverage (affecting only 10% of the elderly), the decline of traditional family support systems, the rising number of younger generations migrating from rural to urban areas, gender disparities (elderly women often face greater challenges), health status, and access to healthcare. In Nigeria, the concept of "the aged" is a complicated fusion of culturally viewpoints, contextual elements, and chronological standards. Even if government policies use the those persons that are above the age of 60 definition of the aged, taking into account Nigeria's varied cultural settings, economic realities, and quickly evolving social structures that influence the ageing process is necessary to comprehend who the country's elderly are. While Nigeria officially classifies individuals aged 60 and above as elderly, a full understanding of ageing must consider the nation's diverse cultures, economic conditions, and rapidly changing social dynamics that shape how old age is defined and experienced.

2.2. Experiences of the Aged in Nigeria

Traditional cultural values, financial considerations, health issues, and shifting societal structures all interact in a complicated way to form the experiences of older Nigerians. These complex sensations are examined in this examination from a number of angles. Elderly individuals have historically had great respect in Nigerian civilisations as archives of information, wisdom, and ancestry. In the past, elders were valued for their ability to preserve family histories, oral traditions, and

communal beliefs. They served in ceremonial capacities during customary ceremonies and festivities, and their advice was sought for significant choices. But there has been a substantial change in this age-old reverence.

Changing interactions between generations have been caused by a number of causes, including urbanisation, modernisation, and Western influences. The elderly's historical social prominence has diminished due to the breakdown of extended family structures, especially in urban regions. According to Wahab & Oludasa (2012) and Oladeji (2023), while respect for elders remains an expressed cultural value across Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups, practical demonstrations of this respect have declined in contemporary society.

The economic experiences of the older people in Nigeria are marked by a great deal of disparity and fragility. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2023), only roughly 10% to 15% of older Nigerians, mostly those who were employed in the official sector, have access to formal pension plans. The great majority of people who worked in the unorganised sector or in agriculture would not have financial security when they retire. The economic experiences of the elderly vary widely depending on a number of factors, such as geographic location (urban versus rural), prior occupation and educational attainment, presence of adult children with resources and willingness to support, gender (of which older women tend to experience greater economic hardship), and urban versus rural location (of where urban elderly generally have better access to services).

Many elderly Nigerians continue working well beyond typical retirement age out of necessity rather than choice. According to Ajiboye et al. (2022), approximately 65% of rural elderly continue subsistence farming or trading activities despite declining physical strength and health challenges. Health experiences represent a significant challenge for Nigeria's aged population. Gureje et al. (2011) reported high prevalence of chronic conditions including hypertension (45-55%), arthritis (40%), visual impairment (30%), and diabetes (15-20%) among Nigerians over 65. These conditions are exacerbated by limited access to specialized geriatric care, as Nigeria has fewer than 100 geriatric specialists nationwide (Nigerian Medical Association, 2022).

Access to healthcare is still a problem; according to Akpan & Umobong (2023) and Okakah et al., (2025), only around 5% of older Nigerians have health insurance; out-of-pocket medical costs are a major financial burden; elderly people in rural areas have a harder time getting to medical facilities; and traditional medicine is still

a valuable resource for healthcare, particularly in areas where modern healthcare is unavailable. Nigerian elders' living arrangements are a reflection of their cultural choices as well as their financial needs. Co-residence with adult children and grandchildren (most prevalent in rural areas), living independently with a spouse (more prevalent in urban middle-class contexts), living alone (especially among elderly widows), and institutional care (very limited and culturally stigmatised) are some of the common patterns that Mbam et al. (2022) identified. Even though intergenerational households are still prevalent, economic challenges, decreasing family sizes, and the movement of younger generations to cities are placing more and more demand on traditional family-based care systems.

A growing concern in Nigeria is the increasing prevalence of elder abuse. Research by Akpan and Umobong (2023) identified several forms of mistreatment experienced by the aged such as financial exploitation and property grabbing, emotional and psychological abuse, physical abuse, neglect and abandonment, and accusations of witchcraft (particularly affecting elderly women). Their study found that approximately 30% of elderly Nigerians reported experiencing some form of mistreatment, with higher rates among those with cognitive impairments, physical disabilities, or without immediate family support.

The older population in Nigeria exhibits a wide range of social participation levels. Many older Nigerians rely heavily on religious institutions for their social life; churches and mosques offer a sense of community, spiritual support, and occasionally material aid. Kinship networks, traditional councils, and community age-grade affiliations continue to be significant social structures, particularly in rural areas. In urban areas where traditional community institutions have eroded, social isolation is a common occurrence for older Nigerians. For many people, social participation is further limited by poverty, health issues, and limited mobility. Nigeria is in a state of change, and the lives of its elderly reflect this, as traditional values of respect for elders and family-based care systems coexist uncomfortably with urbanisation, modernisation, and economic pressures (Ene et al., 2024). Even though societal norms still place a high value on respect for the old, in practice these norms are frequently not met, leaving an ageing population vulnerable.

2.3. Implications of Abuse of the Aged in Nigeria

The abuse of elderly people in Nigeria carries profound and far-reaching implications across individual, family, community, and national levels. These consequences extend beyond immediate harm to the victims, affecting social fabric, healthcare systems, and cultural values. At the individual level, elder abuse results in severe physical and psychological consequences for victims. Increased frailty, worsening of pre-existing illnesses, and new injuries directly linked to physical abuse are all examples of the physical health decline experienced by the elderly. Elderly people who have experienced abuse are more likely to arrive at medical institutions with injuries, worsened chronic illnesses, and mental health emergencies (Federal Ministry of Health, 2022). When elderly victims of abuse eventually seek medical attention, it is frequently delayed, leading to more involved and expensive procedures.

There is also the mental health impacts. According to Gureje et al. (2011) there are significantly higher rates of depression (37%), anxiety (28%), and post-traumatic stress symptoms (19%) among elderly Nigerians who reported experiencing abuse compared to non-abused counterparts. There are also premature mortality. A longitudinal study by Oladeji (2023) indicated that abused elderly individuals had a 63% higher mortality risk over a five-year period compared to those not experiencing abuse.

The problem of social isolation is one among them. Because of their embarrassment, fear, or mobility issues brought on by abuse, victims frequently stop participating in social activities. Economic instability among the elderly includes financial exploitation, a prevalent type of elder abuse in Nigeria that frequently leaves victims destitute and unable to provide for their basic necessities.

Elder abuse causes cognitive dissonance in communities that firmly identify with Christianity and Islam, the two main religions in Nigeria, as they are in stark contrast to their primary beliefs. The implications of elder abuse in Nigeria are multidimensional and profound, affecting not only the direct victims but also families, communities, institutions, and the nation's cultural fabric. As Nigeria's elderly population continues to grow rapidly, projected to reach 25 million by 2050 (National Population Commission, 2023), addressing these implications becomes increasingly urgent. The situation calls for comprehensive responses that engage traditional value systems, strengthen family support structures, develop formal

protective mechanisms, and create intergenerational dialogue about the place and treatment of the aged in contemporary Nigerian society.

2.4. Care for the Aged in Leviticus 19:32

Leviticus 19:32 states: "Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the LORD." This verse appears within the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26), a collection of laws emphasizing Israel's call to reflect God's holiness in all aspects of life. The Hebrew text of Leviticus 19:32 contains several significant elements. First, "מִפְּנֵי שֵׁבַת תָּקוּם" (mippñê sêbâ tākûm) - "You shall rise before gray hair" or "before the aged" (Milgrom, 2004). The term sêbâ specifically refers to gray hair as the visible marker of advanced age. Second, "וְהָדַרְתָּ פָּנֵי זָקֵן" (wěhādartā pñê zāqēn) - "Honor the face of an elder." The verb hādar carries connotations of adorning, glorifying, or showing honor (Wenham, 2020). Third, "וְיָרָאתָ מֵאֱלֹהֶיךָ" (wěyārē' tā mē'ēlōhêkā) - "And fear your God." This phrase directly connects reverence for God with respect for the elderly (Hartley, 2018). According to Rooker (2021), this verse establishes a theological foundation for elder care by linking respect for the aged with reverence for God. The juxtaposition suggests that honoring the elderly is an expression of honoring God himself.

In ancient Near Eastern societies, including Israel, elders held significant social positions as judicial figures: Elders sat at city gates to render judgments (Deuteronomy 21:19; Ruth 4:1-12), council members: They advised leaders and represented community interests (Numbers 11:16-17), wisdom repositories: Their life experience made them valuable sources of knowledge (Job 12:12) and family and clan leaders: They provided authority and guidance within kinship structures (Genesis 50:7). Meyers (2022) notes that in ancient agrarian societies with limited literacy, elderly members served as "living libraries," preserving cultural memory and practical knowledge. The command to "rise in the presence" of an aged person represents a physical demonstration of respect acknowledging this social position.

The phrase "I am the LORD," which emphasises that this edict has divine authority, comes at the end of the passage. According to Brueggemann (2019), respecting the elderly recognizes the image of God present in all humans regardless of age, ability, or social utility. Gane (2020) argues that the placement of this command within Israel's holiness legislation identifies elder care as part of Israel's distinctive communal ethics that set them apart from surrounding nations. Milgrom

(2004) suggests that this command reinforces the covenant's intergenerational nature, where honoring previous generations becomes a religious obligation.

According to Leviticus 19:32, standing in front of an elderly person is a tangible sign of respect. This idea was extended into more extensive caring obligations by Rabbinic interpretation. According to the Babylonian Talmud (Kiddushin 32b–33a), showing respect for elders entails not sitting in their proper spot, not disputing what they say, helping them walk, and attending to their physical needs. These interpretations show how the idea was put into practice in Israelite culture, where honour went beyond token acts to include tangible assistance and concern.

The command to honour the elderly stood in some contrast to practices in surrounding cultures. While elderly wisdom was generally respected in ancient Near Eastern societies, Durham (2023) notes that in times of resource scarcity, the elderly could face abandonment or marginalization as "unproductive" members of society. The Levitical command establishes care for the aged as a non-negotiable moral obligation regardless of economic conditions. As Fretheim (2022) observes, this reflects a theological anthropology where human worth derives from divine relationship rather than productive capacity.

While modern contexts differ significantly from ancient Israel, scholars identify several enduring principles in Leviticus 19:32 such as recognition of dignity. Childs (2021) argues that the text establishes the intrinsic dignity of elderly persons as a theological principle transcending cultural context. Furthermore, the order to "rise" places more emphasis on outwardly displayed respect than on sentimental feelings. According to Gerstenberger (2018), the placement of this command in community legislation suggests elder care is a social responsibility, not merely a family matter. The connection to fearing God indicates that treatment of the elderly carries spiritual significance beyond social convention (Hartley, 2018). Leviticus 19:32 establishes elder care as a fundamental moral and religious obligation within the covenant community. By linking respect for the aged with reverence for God, this text elevates elder care from merely cultural courtesy to theological imperative. The command encompasses both symbolic gestures of respect (rising) and practical expressions of honor and care. As Wright (2020) concludes, this text provides a biblical foundation for elder care that transcends utilitarian values, grounding the treatment of the aged in divine command and human dignity.

2.5. A Hermeneutics of Leviticus 19:32 in the Nigerian Context

Leviticus 19:32 offers Nigeria not just a religious text but a transformative ethos for elder care that both affirms traditional cultural values and addresses contemporary challenges. Leviticus 19:32 declares: "Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the LORD." This biblical directive establishes a powerful connection between honoring the elderly and honoring God, presenting elder care as a sacred obligation rather than merely a social convention. When applied to the contemporary Nigerian context, this ancient text offers profound insights relevant to addressing the growing challenges of elder care in Nigeria's rapidly changing society.

The verse positions respect for the elderly as a divine imperative, binding on the community irrespective of economic circumstances. This elevates elder care from discretionary kindness to moral obligation. In Nigeria, where Christianity and Islam both emphasize respect for elders, this theological grounding provides a powerful basis for promoting elder care as a religious duty transcending ethnic differences.

By linking respect for the elderly with reverence for God ("and revere your God"), the text suggests that how one treats the aged reflects one's relationship with God. This could be particularly significant in Nigeria's highly religious society, where faith motivations often drive social behavior. Religious institutions—churches and mosques—could leverage this theological connection to promote elder care as an expression of authentic faith.

The command to "rise" and "show respect" is not contingent on the elder's productivity, wealth, or continued capability. This unconditional respect challenges utilitarian attitudes that may devalue the elderly when they no longer contribute economically—a growing issue in Nigeria's increasingly market-driven society.

The Levitical command aligns with traditional Nigerian values across ethnic groups. As Agbawodikeizu et al. (2022) noted, Nigerian cultures traditionally venerated elders as repositories of wisdom, mediators, and living links to ancestral heritage. The biblical text reinforces these indigenous values that accorded elders special status in community life.

However, Nigeria is experiencing rapid social transformation that threatens traditional elder care systems (Agwu et al., 2024). Young adults increasingly migrate to cities or abroad, creating physical distance from elderly relatives who often remain in rural areas. Leviticus 19:32 challenges Nigerians to develop new

mechanisms for "showing honor" across geographical distances. Financial constraints make elder support increasingly difficult for many families. The biblical principle suggests communities should develop collective approaches to elder care rather than leaving it solely to immediate families. Western-influenced values emphasizing individual achievement and nuclear families have eroded traditional communal responsibility for elders. The biblical text's placement within community legislation reminds Nigerians that elder care is a collective, not merely individual, responsibility.

Leviticus 19:32 begins with a symbolic gesture—"rise in the presence of the aged"—but ancient Hebrew interpretations expanded this to include material support. Similarly, in Nigeria, respect for elders should extend beyond ceremonial deference to practical care addressing actual needs. This includes health care access which entails establishing elder-friendly healthcare services that accommodate mobility limitations, chronic conditions, and geriatric needs. It also includes economic security which entails developing comprehensive pension systems and social security programs that extend beyond formal sector workers to include informal workers who constitute the majority of Nigeria's workforce. There is also the need to create age-appropriate housing solutions for a society transitioning from traditional compound living to modern housing arrangements. Legal protections for the aged cannot be underestimated. This include implementing and enforcing laws protecting elderly Nigerians from abuse, property seizure, and abandonment.

Given the religious framing of Leviticus 19:32 and the influential position of religious institutions in Nigeria, churches and mosques can play pivotal roles. First is the enthronement of theological teaching on the aged. This should include emphasizing elder care as a religious obligation through sermons, study materials, and community education. Second, is the inclusion of practical programs such as establishing elder support initiatives such as visitation programs, healthcare clinics, and financial assistance funds. Third, is the creation of structured opportunities for interaction between youth and elders to rebuild relationships fragmented by urbanization and migration. Fourth, is the development of community mechanisms to ensure vulnerable elders receive proper care and to intervene in cases of neglect or abuse.

Leviticus 19:32's emphasis on honor provides a strong foundation for confronting the growing problem of elder abuse in Nigeria. The command challenges various forms of mistreatment such as physical and emotional abuse, financial exploitation, neglect and stigmatization. The command to "show respect"

contradicts any form of physical violence or emotional cruelty toward elders. The biblical principle opposes the increasing problem of property grabbing and financial abuse affecting many Nigerian elders. The active nature of the command ("rise" and "show respect") counters passive neglect of elderly needs. There is also the need to discourage the accusations of especially elderly women as witches.

3. CONCLUSION

The intersection of Leviticus 19:32 with the contemporary Nigerian context offers profound insights for addressing the challenges faced by the aged in Nigerian society. This ancient biblical text—"Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God"—provides a theological foundation that resonates deeply with traditional Nigerian values while offering corrective principles for current practices. The command to honor the elderly in Leviticus establishes respect for the aged as a divine mandate rather than merely a cultural preference. This theological grounding can reinforce and revitalise Nigeria's traditional reverence for elders, which has been increasingly eroded by modernisation, urbanisation, and economic pressures. By reconnecting elder care to spiritual obligation, religious communities in Nigeria can play a crucial role in challenging the growing marginalisation and abuse of elderly citizens.

Leviticus 19:32 emphasises that respect must be demonstrated through concrete actions—rising in the presence of the elderly—rather than merely professed as an abstract value. This practical dimension challenges Nigerian families, communities, and institutions to translate expressed cultural values about elder reverence into tangible support systems. Such practical expressions might include improved healthcare access, financial security measures, elder abuse prevention programmes, and meaningful social inclusion for the aged. The theological connection between honouring elders and revering God suggests that mistreatment of the aged represents not only a social failing but a spiritual one. This perspective can be particularly effective in mobilising Nigeria's religious communities—where Christianity and Islam both emphasise care for the elderly—to advocate for and implement elder care initiatives.

Religious institutions, with their extensive networks reaching into both urban and rural areas, are uniquely positioned to bridge the growing "care deficit" experienced by many elderly Nigerians. As Nigeria continues its demographic transition toward an ageing population, the principles embedded in Leviticus 19:32

offer a valuable framework for developing culturally appropriate and spiritually grounded approaches to elder care. By drawing upon both ancient wisdom and contemporary insights, Nigerian society can work toward a future where the dignity of the aged is upheld, their contributions valued, and their needs addressed through comprehensive support systems—fulfilling both cultural ideals and spiritual obligations regarding those who have reached the venerable stage of grey hair.

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