

Barrenness, Righteousness, and Marital Faithfulness in Luke 1:6-7, 25: Implications for Infertility Practices in West African Christian Communities

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Description

This study explores barrenness in Luke 1:6–7, 25 as a theological theme that affirms righteousness despite infertility and offers a pastoral framework for addressing stigma in African Christian contexts.

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Abstract

Barrenness in Gospel of Luke 1:6-7, 25 was examined as a pastorally significant issue with implications for marital faithfulness in African Christian communities, where infertility often carried social stigma and shaped marital expectations. Although Lucan scholarship had widely explored the infancy narrative, limited attention had been given to the theological significance of barrenness for infertility practices and marital ethics in African Christian contexts. This study therefore investigated Luke's portrayal of barrenness, its relationship to covenantal righteousness and marital fidelity, and its relevance for contemporary ecclesial responses to infertility. A qualitative interpretive approach grounded in spiral hermeneutics was employed, integrating textual, narrative, and socio-historical analysis with African contextual and feminist theological perspectives. The findings show that Luke presents barrenness as compatible with righteousness and faithful marriage, thereby challenging assumptions that equate fertility with divine favour or marital legitimacy. The study concludes that Luke's theology of barrenness provides a constructive biblical framework for compassionate, contextually grounded, and pastorally responsible engagement with infertility in African Christian communities.

Keywords: Barrenness; Righteousness; Marital faithfulness; Luke 1:6-7, 25; Infertility; African Christian Communities.

INTRODUCTION

Barrenness and infertility are enduring human experiences that have generated sustained theological reflection across biblical traditions and continue to shape marital realities in many contemporary societies. In the ancient Mediterranean world, childbearing was closely associated with identity, lineage, covenantal continuity, and divine favour. Infertility was therefore not merely a biological condition but a profound social and religious disruption affecting honour, belonging, and marital stability (Frymer-Kensky, 1995; Meyers, 2013). These assumptions remain influential in many African Christian contexts, where marriage is widely perceived as

incomplete without children and infertility often attracts stigma, blame, and social marginalisation, particularly for women (Magezi, 2017; Mbiti, 1991). Consequently, infertility continues to pose significant ethical and pastoral challenges for Christian communities committed to marital fidelity, compassion, and justice.

Within the Gospel of Luke, barrenness is prominently introduced in the opening chapter through the narrative of Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5-25). Luke situates their childlessness within a theological framework combining righteousness, divine timing, and salvific purpose. Although Elizabeth's barrenness is ultimately resolved through divine intervention, considerable narrative attention is devoted to the couple's life prior to conception. Luke explicitly describes them as righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord despite their prolonged infertility and advanced age (Luke 1:6-7). This portrayal invites theological reflection not only on miraculous birth but also on marital faithfulness, shared piety, and endurance in the absence of children.

The contemporary relevance of this Lucan portrayal becomes apparent when read in dialogue with African Christian contexts. In many African societies, infertility exerts considerable pressure on marriages and is often perceived as threatening marital legitimacy. Practices such as divorce, remarriage, polygyny, or informal unions are sometimes tolerated or encouraged as culturally acceptable responses to childlessness, despite Christian commitments to monogamy and marital permanence (Magezi, 2017; Oduyoye, 2004). Biblical texts, including Luke 1, are frequently invoked in pastoral settings to inspire hope for miraculous conception. While such readings affirm divine agency, they may inadvertently reinforce the assumption that fertility validates marriage, thereby marginalising couples who remain childless.

Despite sustained scholarly engagement with Luke 1:5-25, interpretation has focused predominantly on its narrative, christological, and salvation-historical dimensions (Bock, 2012; Bovon, 2002; Brown, 1994; Fitzmyer, 1981; Green, 1997; Pao & Schnabel, 2007; Tannehill, 1991). Although the couple's righteousness and enduring marital union are acknowledged, these features are rarely explored as a theological response to childlessness. Similarly, African biblical interpretation has often privileged themes of miraculous reversal, divine power, and breakthrough, with limited attention to the narrative's implicit affirmation of marital faithfulness in the midst of unresolved infertility (Adamo, 2015; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013; Bediako, 1995; Kalu, 2008; Oduyoye, 1995). Thus, while Luke 1 has been widely studied, its specific theological significance for infertility practices and marital ethics within African Christian contexts remains underexplored.

African feminist theologians offer important counter-readings that challenge theological frameworks measuring women's worth primarily through reproductive success and expose the pastoral harm caused by intervention-focused interpretations of infertility (Kanyoro, 2002; Nadar, 2012; Oduyoye, 1995; Phiri, 2004). From this perspective, infertility becomes a site for reflection on dignity, companionship, resilience, and mutual faithfulness rather than a marker of failure or deficient faith (Oduyoye, 2015; Phiri & Nadar, 2010). These

insights underscore the need for a reading of Luke 1 that attends to the ethical and relational dimensions of barrenness alongside its salvific significance.

This study addresses a critical gap in Lucan scholarship, which has largely prioritised christological and salvation-historical readings while giving limited attention to the ethical and marital implications of barrenness. Furthermore, in many contemporary West African Christian contexts, particularly within pastoral and ecclesial settings where fertility is closely tied to marital legitimacy and divine favour, biblical interpretations of infertility often reinforce fertility-centred norms. Against this backdrop, this study advances a theological reading of Luke 1:6-7, 25 that explicitly dissociates reproductive capacity from covenantal righteousness and marital integrity, thereby offering a constructive framework for rethinking infertility within West African Christian contexts.

Flowing directly from this argument, the primary aim of the study is to examine how Luke 1:6-7, 25 constructs the relationship between barrenness, righteousness, and marital faithfulness, and to assess the implications of this construction for infertility practices in African Christian communities. To achieve this aim, the study pursues four objectives: (1) to analyse Luke's depiction of Zechariah and Elizabeth's barrenness within its literary and theological context; (2) to explore the relationship between barrenness and marital faithfulness in the narrative; (3) to critically engage African Christian infertility practices in light of the Lucan portrayal; and (4) to propose theological insights that can inform more compassionate and faithful Christian responses to infertility..

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive biblical-theological methodology grounded in spiral hermeneutics, appropriate for exploring the theological and ethical dimensions of barrenness in Luke 1:6-7, 25 and their relevance for African Christian infertility practices. The analysis integrates close textual, narrative, and socio-historical examination within the context of Second Temple Judaism, allowing the Lucan narrative to be understood both on its own terms and in dialogue with contemporary contexts.

The research proceeded in several stages. First, Luke 1:6-7 and 1:25 were selected for careful literary and theological analysis, focusing on the portrayal of Zechariah and Elizabeth, barrenness, and marital faithfulness. Second, socio-historical insights from Second Temple Judaism were employed to situate the narrative within its cultural and religious context. Third, African contextual and feminist theological literature on infertility, marriage, and pastoral care was reviewed and engaged as interpretive dialogue partners. Fourth, the study moved iteratively between text and contemporary context, following the spiral hermeneutical approach to ensure reciprocal illumination. Finally, theological and pastoral implications were articulated, highlighting practical guidance for African Christian communities.

As a non-empirical, text-based study, the research relied on biblical texts and peer-reviewed scholarly literature; no human participants or fieldwork were involved. This methodological framework enables the study to answer the research questions by connecting

careful exegesis of the Lucan text with ethical and pastoral reflection on infertility practices in African Christian contexts (Osborne, 2006; Thiselton, 2009; West, 2016).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Exegesis of Luke 1:6-7, 25

Literary, Canonical, and Cultural Context of Luke 1

Luke situates Zechariah and Elizabeth within Israel's literary and canonical memory. The infancy narrative functions as a theological bridge, drawing on Old Testament traditions of barrenness while anticipating God's salvific work (Oyeniya, 2025). Examples such as Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, and Samson's mother consistently depict barrenness as resolved through divine intervention, thereby emphasising God's initiative rather than human capacity (Gen 18:10-14; 1 Sm 1:1-20) (Bovon, 2002; Jeremias, 2021).

Luke retains these motifs but shifts the narrative emphasis toward moral and relational character. Zechariah and Elizabeth are presented as righteous and covenantally faithful, suggesting that personal worth and covenant standing are not defined by fertility (Luke 1:5-6) (Nolland, 1989; Oyeniya, 2025). Their story forms a literary diptych with the annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:26-38), highlighting continuity with Israel's story while allowing the account of barrenness to stand as a theologically complete narrative in its own right. Within this framework, childlessness does not undermine righteousness or marital fidelity (Brown, 1993)

From a cultural-historical perspective, fertility in the Second Temple period was closely associated with social legitimacy, particularly for women (Stone, 2022). Against this backdrop, Luke's emphasis on righteousness despite childlessness implicitly challenges prevailing assumptions that equated fertility with moral standing or divine approval. Barrenness thus functions descriptively rather than evaluatively, while covenant fidelity is foregrounded as the primary marker of faithfulness.

Righteousness and Barrenness (Luke 1:6-7)

Luke 1:6 characterises Zechariah and Elizabeth as ἦσαν δὲ δίκαιοι ἀμφότεροι – ἐναντίον τοῦ θεοῦ, πορευόμενοι ἐν πάσαις ταῖς ἐντολαῖς καὶ δικαιώμασιν τοῦ κυρίου ἄμεμπτοι ("both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord") (NRSV). The Greek term δίκαιοι denotes covenantal righteousness, faithful participation in Israel's covenantal obligations rather than moral perfection (Oyeniya, 2025; Sanders, 1992; Wright, 1996). The participle ἄμεμπτοι further underscores sustained integrity within the covenantal relationship (Moraff, 2023).

Luke 1:7 connects the couple's righteousness (v. 6) with their barrenness through the coordinating conjunction καί ("and"), not through an adversative marker. This syntactical choice is theologically significant. Rather than presenting infertility as a contradiction of their righteousness, Luke juxtaposes the two realities without causal explanation (Green, 1997). Their blameless obedience and childlessness coexist within the same covenantal framework. The structure of the sentence thus resists any implication that barrenness negates

righteousness or signals divine disfavour. Instead, Luke's coordination of these clauses underscores that covenant fidelity is not contingent upon reproductive fulfillment.

Luke's narrative construction thus presents righteousness as covenantal and relational, shared by both spouses, and independent of reproductive outcomes. By juxtaposing explicit covenant righteousness with explicit barrenness, the Lucan narrative invites a reconsideration of simplistic retributive theologies. Barrenness is presented as a lived condition rather than a theological judgment, thus permitting marital integrity to remain conceptually independent of fertility.

Divine Agency and the Removal of Reproach (Luke 1:25)

Elizabeth's response following conception foregrounds divine agency: ὅτι Οὕτως μοι – πεποίηκεν κύριος ἐν ἡμέραις αἷς ἐπέϊδεν – ἀφελεῖν ὄνειδος μου ἐν ἀνθρώποις (Luke 1:25) is translated in NRSV as "Thus the Lord has done for me ... to take away my reproach among people." God is the explicit acting subject, underscoring that fertility is narrated as a divine gift rather than a reward for righteousness (Bovon, 2002). The verb *πεποίηκεν* conveys intentional divine action, while *ὄνειδος* denotes the social stigma associated with childlessness.

Significantly, the narrative does not retroactively ground Elizabeth's righteousness in her conception. Her covenantal standing precedes divine intervention, reinforcing the distinction between righteousness and fertility (Green, 1997). The phrase "when he looked upon me" resonates with Old Testament visitation language associated with divine compassion and redemptive concern (Ps. 33:18; 1 Sm. 1:11) (Brown, 1993). Within Luke's theological framework, fertility restores social dignity but does not establish intrinsic worth. Righteousness and marital faithfulness remain theologically prior to conception.

Barrenness and Marital Faithfulness in Luke 1

The exegesis reveals several interrelated dimensions of marital faithfulness embedded in Luke's portrayal of Zechariah and Elizabeth. First, the couple is depicted as a single, enduring marital unit. The absence of any reference to polygyny, divorce, or alternative marital arrangements implicitly presents sustained monogamy as congruent with covenantal obedience (Fitzmyer, 1981; Nolland, 1989). Second, despite prolonged barrenness and advanced age, the marriage remains intact and spiritually fruitful (Luke 1:7). This narrative portrayal stands in contrast to wider Mediterranean practices in which infertility, particularly female infertility, could justify divorce or remarriage (Green, 1997). Third, Luke locates marital righteousness in obedience to God rather than in reproductive success. Children are portrayed as gifts of divine grace rather than prerequisites for marital legitimacy or spiritual worth (Bovon, 2002; Fitzmyer, 1981; Wright, 1996). Together, these narrative elements present marital faithfulness as independent of procreation and grounded instead in covenant loyalty, endurance, and shared piety.

Discussion and Theological Implications (Exegetical Synthesis)

Luke's narrative carefully distinguishes yet holds together righteousness, barrenness, and divine agency. Covenant fidelity and marital integrity are portrayed as realities that exist independently of fertility, thereby challenging assumptions, both ancient and contemporary, that equate childbearing with moral, spiritual, or social legitimacy. Divine initiative remains central, affirming God's sovereignty while resisting interpretations that collapse fertility into reward.

The account also foregrounds the social and pastoral dimensions of infertility, particularly the experience of reproach, while refusing to define personal worth through reproductive outcomes (Stone, 2022). In comparison with broader New Testament discussions of marriage (e.g., 1 Cor 7:3-5; Eph 5:22-33), Luke's emphasis lies not on reproduction but on relational integrity and covenantal faithfulness.

By foregrounding these ethical and relational dimensions, this study extends previous scholarship that has focused primarily on the literary or christological functions of Luke 1 (Brown, 1994; Parsons, 2015). The exegetical findings establish a theological foundation for the subsequent contextual analysis, which examines how Luke's portrayal of barrenness and marital faithfulness can critically engage African Christian pastoral and ecclesial praxis, particularly in contexts where infertility continues to carry significant social stigma.

Infertility Practices in West African Christian Communities

In fulfilment of the third objective, this section examines infertility practices in West African Christian communities as documented in theological, biblical, and sociological literature, in dialogue with the Lucan portrayal of barrenness (Luke 1:6-7, 25). The discussion does not draw on empirical fieldwork but engages critically with peer-reviewed studies that analyse how infertility is culturally interpreted, theologically framed, and pastorally addressed within West African Christian contexts. The analysis highlights the cultural, marital, theological, and pastoral dimensions of infertility and is organised under four interrelated themes.

Cultural Pressures and Gendered Blame

Existing literature consistently indicates that infertility in many African contexts is socially constructed primarily as a female problem, even though male infertility contributes significantly to reproductive challenges (Dyer et al., 2002; Oyeniya, 2021). Women are frequently subjected to exclusion, derogatory labelling, and social marginalisation, whereas men experience comparatively limited censure. Fertility is closely tied to social identity, lineage continuity, and marital legitimacy, shaping communal perceptions of womanhood and marriage (Ekpor et al., 2025; Sesay, 2024).

Scholarly analyses further observe that biblical narratives, including Luke 1, are often mobilised in ecclesial and pastoral discourse to interpret childlessness either as a spiritual trial or as a marker of deficiency (Chitando, 2007). Read against this background, Luke's affirmation of Elizabeth's righteousness prior to conception functions as a theological counter-narrative, decoupling moral and marital integrity from reproductive capacity.

Marital Responses to Infertility

Studies of African Christian marital practices describe a range of culturally conditioned responses to infertility, including separation, divorce, remarriage, polygyny, or conditional marital arrangements oriented toward reproduction (Acheampong, 2015; Dyer et al., 2019; Oyeniya, 2021). These responses are often shaped by extended family pressures, inheritance concerns, and expectations of lineage continuity.

The literature also notes that infertility can disrupt family dynamics, ritual participation, and property succession, prompting couples to seek both biomedical and traditional interventions. When read in dialogue with these documented practices, Luke 1 offers a theological resource that affirms the possibility of sustained marital faithfulness despite prolonged childlessness, thereby challenging cultural assumptions that equate fertility with marital legitimacy.

Theological Tensions

Scholars of African Christianity identify persistent tensions between cultural expectations surrounding fertility and Christian theological commitments to marital fidelity and unconditional love (Chitando, 2016). While Christian doctrine affirms marriage as a covenantal relationship, pastoral practice can inadvertently reinforce stigma when fertility is implicitly treated as evidence of divine blessing. Luke 1 is engaged here not as a prescriptive blueprint for practice, but as a theological orientation offering principles and ethical insight.

The literature further observes that many African Christian couples navigate infertility by integrating medical interventions with prayer, fasting, and communal support, reflecting a negotiated understanding of divine providence and human agency (Oyeniya, 2021). Within this theological landscape, biblical exemplars such as Elizabeth, Hannah, and Sarah are frequently invoked to sustain hope while also revealing the need for interpretive approaches that resist reductive or instrumental readings of fertility.

Pastoral and Prayer Responses

Analyses of African Christian pastoral practice describe a range of responses to infertility, including counselling, intercessory prayer, fasting, prophetic ministry, and peer support structures (Dyer et al., 2019; Van Balen & Bos, 2009). These practices are presented in the literature as mechanisms for fostering emotional resilience, marital cohesion, and communal belonging rather than as guarantees of biological outcomes.

The integration of biomedical treatment with faith-based practices is often framed as a pragmatic and theologically informed response, enabling couples to affirm both divine sovereignty and responsible human agency. At the same time, scholars caution against pastoral approaches that tacitly legitimise culturally sanctioned practices such as polygyny or divorce when these undermine relational integrity and gender justice.

Taken together, the literature portrays infertility in African Christian contexts as a complex intersection of culture, marriage, ethics, and theology rather than a purely biomedical condition. Women are disproportionately blamed, marital responses are shaped by cultural

expectations, and pastoral practices seek to mediate stigma while sustaining faith and communal inclusion. Within this interpretive landscape, biblical narratives function as significant ethical and theological resources, capable of both reinforcing and critiquing prevailing assumptions.

These findings establish a critical context for the subsequent discussion, which explores how Luke's theology of barrenness and marital faithfulness can function as a corrective framework for African Christian pastoral and ecclesial praxis.

Lucan Theology as Corrective for African Christian Praxis

This section addresses the fourth objective by showing how Luke 1:6-7 and 1:25 provide theological resources for reimagining African Christian responses to infertility. Read within Luke's narrative theology, the account of Zechariah and Elizabeth challenges fertility-centred constructions of marital worth and offers an alternative framework grounded in divine grace, covenant fidelity, and communal inclusion (Chitando, 2007).

Childbearing as Divine Gift, Not Moral Obligation

Luke portrays Zechariah and Elizabeth as "righteous before God" despite childlessness, reframing fertility as neither a moral achievement nor a prerequisite for social legitimacy (Luke 1:6-7). Elizabeth's conception is narrated as a direct act of divine intervention (Luke 1:25), emphasizing the contingent and gifted nature of human fertility (Green, 1997). This perspective disrupts cultural logics prevalent in many African contexts that equate reproductive success with divine favour, marital fulfilment, or womanly worth (Chitando, 2007; Oyeniya, 2021). Fertility, understood as God's gift rather than human merit, enables communities to affirm childless couples as full participants in God's covenantal purposes (Van Balen & Bos, 2009).

Reconstructing Marital Faithfulness Beyond Reproduction

Luke foregrounds covenant loyalty and ethical integrity over reproductive outcomes. Zechariah and Elizabeth's righteousness precedes and exists independently of parenthood, showing that marital faithfulness is measured by relational fidelity, obedience to God, and mutual commitment rather than the production of offspring (Luke 1:6) (Green, 1997). This challenges cultural practices that condition marital legitimacy on fertility, including polygyny, divorce, or provisional unions aimed at securing heirs (Acheampong, 2015; Dyer et al., 2019). Luke's narrative thus offers a theological framework capable of critiquing African Christian ethics in contexts where marriage is reduced to reproductive utility (Chitando, 2016).

Theological and Pastoral Implications

The exegetical analysis of Gospel of Luke 1:6-7, 25, read in dialogue with documented infertility practices in African Christian communities, yields several theological and pastoral implications. These implications emerge not from abstract doctrinal construction but from the

narrative logic of Luke itself, in which righteousness, barrenness, and divine agency are held together without collapsing into retributive explanation.

Reframing Fertility within Divine Sovereignty

Luke's portrayal of Zechariah and Elizabeth situates fertility within the sphere of divine initiative rather than human merit. Their righteousness precedes conception, and Elizabeth's pregnancy is explicitly attributed to the Lord's action (Luke 1:25). Fertility is therefore narrated as divine gift rather than covenantal entitlement. For African Christian communities, this theological orientation invites a reframing of infertility. If fertility is gift rather than proof of divine approval, then childlessness cannot function as evidence of spiritual deficiency, moral failure, or divine punishment. Pastoral teaching grounded in this narrative logic can help dismantle implicit theologies that equate reproductive success with divine favour.

Reconstructing Marital Integrity Beyond Reproduction

The Lucan narrative presents Zechariah and Elizabeth as a unified, enduring marital pair whose covenant fidelity remains intact despite prolonged barrenness. Their marriage is neither portrayed as deficient nor destabilized by the absence of children. Righteousness is relational and shared; it is not contingent upon reproductive fulfillment.

In contexts where infertility sometimes precipitates divorce, remarriage, or culturally sanctioned polygyny, Luke's narrative offers an alternative theological grammar of marriage. Marital legitimacy is grounded in covenant loyalty and obedience to God rather than in the production of heirs. This framework challenges fertility-contingent constructions of marriage and calls Christian communities to affirm the dignity and completeness of childless unions.

Addressing Stigma and Gendered Blame

The experience of ὀνειδος ("reproach") in Luke 1:25 acknowledges the social dimension of barrenness without endorsing it. Elizabeth's sense of reproach reflects communal perception, yet the narrative never attributes guilt or blame to her. On the contrary, her righteousness is explicitly affirmed prior to divine intervention.

This narrative tension has significant pastoral implications in African contexts where infertility is frequently gendered and women disproportionately bear social censure. A Lucan-informed theology resists assigning culpability on the basis of reproductive outcome and instead affirms shared covenant standing. Pastoral practice shaped by this perspective must actively challenge stigmatizing language, exclusionary customs, and interpretive frameworks that burden women with sole responsibility for childlessness.

Integrating Prayer, Medicine, and Ethical Discernment

Luke 1 affirms divine agency without negating human participation. Zechariah continues his priestly service; Elizabeth lives faithfully within her covenantal context. Divine action unfolds within ordinary obedience rather than as a replacement for it. In contemporary African Christian settings, couples often navigate infertility through both biomedical treatment

and faith-based practices such as prayer and fasting. A theology grounded in Luke's narrative can affirm this integration, provided that such practices are framed within divine grace rather than desperation or coercion. Ethical discernment must ensure that medical or spiritual interventions do not compromise marital fidelity, gender justice, or personal dignity.

Cultivating Ecclesial Communities of Inclusion

Finally, Luke's narrative invites ecclesial communities to embody the same theological vision it proclaims. If righteousness and covenant belonging are not conditioned by fertility, then churches must resist subtle hierarchies that privilege parents over childless couples. Inclusion, recognition, and leadership opportunities should not be implicitly tied to biological parenthood. By internalising Luke's dissociation of righteousness from reproductive capacity, Christian communities can cultivate environments marked by compassion, justice, and shared dignity. In such communities, infertility is neither romanticised nor stigmatised but accompanied with pastoral sensitivity and theological depth.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that Gospel of Luke 1:6-7, 25 presents barrenness and righteousness as coexisting realities within covenant life, thereby dissociating reproductive capacity from covenant standing and marital legitimacy. The study demonstrates three key findings. First, Luke explicitly affirms Zechariah and Elizabeth's righteousness prior to and independent of conception. Second, fertility is framed as a divine gift rather than a moral validation of individuals or marriages. Third, childlessness is portrayed not as theological judgment but as a lived human condition within faithful covenant life. This contributes to Lucan scholarship by foregrounding the theological significance of barrenness itself, beyond its role in salvation history. It also shows how careful exegesis can challenge entrenched assumptions about fertility, righteousness, and marital integrity, particularly within African Christian contexts. The study suggests that future research may explore other biblical infertility narratives, reception history within African Christianity, and interdisciplinary engagements with pastoral practice and reproductive ethics.

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