

Righteousness in Luke 1:6: Considering marital stability amid barrenness in Nigerian societies

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The study explores the role of a righteous lifestyle in the marital stability of Zechariah and Elizabeth, particularly in the context of their struggles with barrenness, as detailed in Luke 1:6. Previous studies have primarily focused on righteousness as a bridge between the Old and New Testaments and its liturgical implications, overlooking its relevance to marital stability in the face of barrenness. This study used an interpretive design to explore the challenges of infertility in Nigerian societies. The research involved in-depth interviews with 72 participants, including 30 individuals currently experiencing infertility (CEI), 24 people who had previously faced infertility (PFI) and 18 fertility specialists (FS) from the towns of Òsogbo, Ilé-Ifè and Ilésà in Òsun State, Nigeria. These towns were chosen because of their cosmopolitan nature and diverse populations. The study used a grammatical-historical approach to interpret the biblical text and analysed the data exegetically. The findings indicate that a righteous lifestyle, characterised by godly moral acts, covenantal relationship and communal identity in God, contributed to Zechariah and Elizabeth's marital stability despite their barrenness and advanced age.

Contribution: The article contributes new insights into how Zechariah and Elizabeth's 'righteousness' not only reflects personal piety but also serves as a source of social support, marital stability and unwavering commitment to each other despite societal pressures related to childlessness.

Keywords: righteous lifestyle; Luke 1:6; marital stability; Zachariah and Elizabeth; barrenness challenges; Yorùbá Christians in Òsun State; Nigerian societies.

Introduction

The alarming rate of marital instability is a vital issue that necessitates marital stability in Nigerian societies. As Ambakederemo and Ganagana (2006) rightly note, over time, the instability of marriage has impacted the growth and development of numerous Nigerian households and children. They also attributed the causes of this menace to a lack of love and trust, antisocial behaviours, economic factors, socio-cultural influences and sex-related issues. Marital instability may also be traceable to marital challenges such as childlessness, disagreement, divorce, conflict, hatred, uncontrolled anger and abuse. Many couples lack the mechanism to resolve marital challenges in Nigerian societies. To this effect, there is a need to seek means of marital stability, especially amidst barrenness challenges.

The concept of righteousness, especially in its forensic or legal sense regarding an individual's standing before God, has attracted broad scholarly attention. West (2023) emphasises both its legal and social dimensions, while Paul (2019) explores its ethical implications. Schröter (2017) investigates how divine righteousness intersects with human law in the New Testament. Davidson (2018) analyses justification and its theological implications for one's relationship with God. Starling (2014) uses Paul's teachings to examine legal metaphors such as covenants and courtrooms. Viljoen (2013) explores righteousness in the Sermon on the Mount as a marker of identity. Wright (2013) and Hays (1996) move beyond legal interpretations, presenting righteousness as covenantal and communal, reflecting God's faithfulness and calling for communal justice. In African contexts, scholars have examined marriage and infertility as deeply rooted in cultural and religious norms. Baloyi (2009) challenges traditional stigmas around childlessness in black African Christian communities. Ademiluka (2021) presents a biblical view of infertility relevant to Nigerian Christians. Diko (2024), Oti-Boadi and Asante (2017) and Ganasah (2008) all address the societal and religious dimensions of infertility. However, the

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relevance of righteousness to marital stability amid infertility in Nigerian society remains underexplored. This study aims to address this significant gap.

In Luke 1:6, Luke portrays the place of a righteous lifestyle towards marital stability amid the barrenness challenges of Zechariah and Elizabeth. The text reveals that despite the barrenness that threatened the stability of the marital life of the couple, the two of them were righteous and blameless in God's evaluation. As a result of their righteous lifestyle, the couple lived together in peace and happiness, and that thorough agreement existed between them (cf. Lk 1:60, 63) (Hendriksen 1980). The place of righteousness, as detailed in this text, calls the attention of Christians towards marital stability amidst infertility challenges. This is because their marital life emphasised and exemplified more on other purposes and benefits of marriage, such as companionship, mutual support and shared joy, rather than erroneously over-emphasised the value of having children at the detriment of other benefits of marriage.

The grammatico-historical method is applied to interpret the selected biblical text, while interpretive design is used to explore the challenges of infertility in Nigerian societies. Grammatico-historical approach proposes that a complete understanding of Scripture's meaning requires considering its grammar, syntax, and historical context (Fee 1983; Fryer 1987). Besides, interpretive design creates meaningful visitor experiences by blending storytelling, design and communication to interpret stories, history, culture or nature. It aims to spark curiosity, evoke emotion and foster personal connections, going beyond presenting facts to inspire deeper understanding (Beck & Cable 2002; Ham 1992). In-depth interviews were conducted with 72 participants: 30 individuals currently experiencing infertility (CEI), 24 who had previously faced infertility (PFI) and 18 fertility specialists (FS) from the towns of Òsogbo, Ilé-Ifè and Ilésà in Osun State, Nigeria (see Appendix 1). These towns were chosen because of their cosmopolitan nature and diverse populations. The data were analysed through exegetical methods. The study raises key questions about the role of a righteous lifestyle in marital stability, particularly referencing the biblical example of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Specifically, it seeks to understand how such a lifestyle influences marital stability in Nigerian societies, especially among Yorùbá Christians in Osun State. This study therefore, examines righteousness in Luke 1:6 and its relevance to marital stability amidst infertility challenges in Nigerian societies.

The context of Luke 1:6

In Luke 1:5–25, where Luke 1:6 is located, the Gospel writer emphasises the historical context of the events he narrates. Luke aims to present a historical account in an orderly sequence (Lk 1:3). His stories unfold chronologically, with time references throughout his Gospel (Lk 1:5, 26, 56, 59; 2:42; 3:23; 9:28). Unlike other Gospel writers, Luke links his narrative to broader Jewish and Roman history, reflecting both individual and national significance (McNeal 2003:1057).

The divine presence in this pericope is shown through the fulfilment of God's promises, particularly in the marital life of Zechariah and Elizabeth and the larger redemptive history of Israel. Marshall (1978:162), as quoted by Karris, links the birth narrative of John the Baptist to similar Old Testament (OT) events (Karris 2022). Brown (1984) further affirms that the account in Luke 1:13–17 builds on earlier traditions about John, such as those found in Luke 3:1–20 and 7:18–35, and is not from a separate Baptist source. Thus, Luke's narrative closely mirrors OT birth announcements.

Luke introduces Zechariah's family in Luke 1:5, noting that this couple comes from two priestly families. Zechariah belongs to the division of Abijah, while Elizabeth descends from Aaron. The events of Luke 1:5–25 take place during the reign of King Herod, between 37 and 4 B.C., which places the birth of John within a well-documented historical period (Barker & Kohlenberger 1994; Bauer, Arndt & Gingrich 1978; Carson et al. 1994; Trilling 1990). Scholars such as Karris (1990) and Buttrick (1980) have debated the exact timing of these events, but Morris (1976) argues that Luke places the narrative near the end of Herod's reign. This historical context is significant because it situates the story in a time of political tension under Herod, who was known both for his extensive building projects and his cruelty, including the infamous massacre of the Bethlehem infants (Bock 1994; Nolland 1989). During Herod's reign, which was marked by corruption and decadence, Zechariah and Elizabeth are depicted as upright and faultless in the eyes of the Lord (Lk 1:6), highlighting their contrast to the surrounding moral decay (Hendriksen 1980).

Luke's story in Luke 1:5–25 links the time of the OT to the NT. A comparison between Malachi 4:5–6 and Luke 1:11–17 shows that after 400 years of silence, God's intervention is signalled by the angel's announcement to Zechariah that his barren wife will bear a son, John, who will prepare the way for the Messiah (Deffinbaugh 2004). This moment marks the beginning of the messianic era and the realisation of the promises of God to Israel (ed. Dockery 1992). Morris (1976) confirms that Luke's account brings the messianic age to the forefront, bridging the gap between the OT and NT through the continuation of salvation history. The biblical language and thematic connections in the pericope demonstrate this continuity.

The temple, where Zechariah serves as a priest, plays a significant role in this narrative. In Luke 1:9, Zechariah enters the sanctuary to offer a sacrifice, and it is here that the angel announces the forthcoming birth of John, the forerunner of the Messiah. This scene underscores the religious context of the time and highlights the piety of Zechariah and Elizabeth, who remain righteous despite their childlessness (Lk 1:6) (Pao & Schnabel 2007).

The narrative of barren women in Luke 1:5–2:52 echoes a long OT tradition, with stories like that of Sarah, Hannah and others, whose children played key roles in Israel's redemption (Pao & Schnabel 2007). Karris (1990) notes that Luke's portrayal of the birth of John parallels to the design of

these OT birth stories, where the reversal of a barren woman's condition symbolises God's intervention in the salvation of the story of Israel's past. John and Jesus' births thus reflect God's presence among His people and the fulfilment of His covenantal promises (Brown 1984; Fitzmyer 1981; Green 1992; Karris 1990; Pao & Schnabel 2007).

In Luke 1:5–25, God begins His redemptive work anew through the announcement of John's birth, after 400 years of silence (Deffinbaugh 2004). Bock (1994) emphasises that in the OT, God's plan centred on Israel as the model people through whom His grace would be demonstrated (Gn 12:1–3). Luke uses OT imagery and language to connect the birth of John with the broader narrative of God's salvation plan. The historical context of Luke 1:5–25 shows that God is not only fulfilling His promises to Israel but also addressing the personal needs of Zechariah and Elizabeth, who were both righteous and blameless but had no children. The birth of John fulfils their desire for a child and signals the arrival of the forerunner to the Messiah (Dillon 2013; Luck 1970; Hamm 2003). Thus, the narrative highlights both personal and national dimensions of God's salvation plan.

Exegesis of Luke 1:6

Luke 1:6 presents Zechariah and Elizabeth as a couple who lead upright lives despite facing the challenge of barrenness. The verse is divided into two clauses for easier focus: Clause 1 – ἦσαν δὲ δίκαιοι ἀμφοτέρω – ἐναντίον τοῦ θεοῦ, and clause 2 – πορευόμενοι ἐν πάσαις ταῖς ἐντολαῖς καὶ δικαιομασίαις τοῦ κυρίου ἄμεμπτοι. Clause 1 – And they were both righteous in the sight of God, and Clause 2 – living according to all the Lord's commandments and regulations without fault. These clauses highlight their moral integrity and adherence to God's commandments, which are foundational to the couple's stability and marital life.

The term δίκαιοι ['righteous'] in the passage, primarily derived from the Hebrew concept of צְדִיק לִפְנֵי יְהוָה meaning 'righteousness before Yahweh', emphasises moral righteousness according to God's standards (Marshall 1984). In this context, righteousness is not just an external show but an inward, ethical conformity to divine law. The couple's righteousness, therefore, reflects an imparted moral quality rather than an inherent sinlessness. Their uprightness and obedience to God's commandments (the Torah) were integral to their marital and spiritual well-being.

The term δίκαιοι ['righteous'] is in the nominative case and masculine gender plural form of the adjective δίκαιος, meaning 'right, just, righteous' (Bauer, Arndt & Gingrich 1975). The use of the adjective δίκαιοι, in its original Greek context, is linked to fulfilling obligations, observing legal norms and moral virtues. This term, though rooted in Greek philosophy and culture, carries significant OT influence, especially in how it applies to the righteous person's relationship with God and society (Bauer, Arndt & Gingrich 1975; eds. Kittel & Friedrich 1989). In the New Testament, it refers to those who fulfil God's law and maintain a close

relationship with Him, as seen in figures like the couple (Lk 1:6), Simeon (Lk 2:25) and Cornelius (Ac 10:22). Therefore, the righteousness of Zechariah and Elizabeth is based on their fidelity to God's law and moral behaviour.

The Bible also refers to two types of righteousness in biblical theology: righteousness by imputation and righteousness by impartation (Hendriksen 1966). While imputed righteousness is received through faith, imparted righteousness is achieved through obedient actions. Regarding Zechariah and Elizabeth, their righteousness is imparted through their diligent observance of the law. This is consistent with the interpretation that their righteousness stems from their strict adherence to the Torah and not from any claim of sinlessness (Bock 1994; Plummer 1990).

While they were righteous, it is important to clarify that this does not imply they were without sin. The term ἄμεμπτοι ['blameless'] does not suggest sinless perfection but indicates that, despite their human flaws, they lived in such a way that they were free from blame in God's eyes (Geldenhuis 1951). Their righteousness was evident in both their actions and their hearts, reflecting their sincerity in observing the commandments. Unlike the Pharisees, whose righteousness could be superficial, Zechariah and Elizabeth's righteousness was a result of their genuine faithfulness and moral conduct (Lazar 2020).

Besides, in biblical and Jewish contexts, δικαιοσύνη [righteousness] takes on covenantal and relational connotations. In Second Temple Judaism, righteousness included obedience to the Torah, almsgiving and piety (Sanders 1977; Wright 1992), combining legal and ethical aspects (Sirach 35:2; Tobit 12:9). The Dead Sea Scrolls highlight divine election and communal righteousness (1QS I.1–II.26). Luke's use of righteousness aligns with this tradition but also emphasises a Christological theme, contrasting Zechariah and Elizabeth's righteousness with leaders who reject Jesus (Green 1997). This implies that in Luke 1:6, the righteousness of this couple prepares the way for the new covenant inaugurated by the Messiah (Green 1997). Therefore, their righteousness does not only denote moral virtue but also covenantal faithfulness (Bock 1994). In addressing Pauline and Lukan view of righteousness, both Wright (2013) and Hays (1996) shift the theological discussion of righteousness from an individual legal standing before God to covenantal relationship and community identity. For Paul and Luke, righteousness is deeply rational: it reflects God's faithfulness to His promises and calls for a community that lives out God's justice in the world. This implies that the righteousness of this couple also involves a covenantal relationship and communal identity.

The phrase ἐναντίον τοῦ θεοῦ ['before God'] refers to God's judgement or evaluation of their lives, rather than human perception. It underscores that their righteousness was not based on outward appearances but on God's assessment of their heart and behaviour (Bauer, Arndt & Gingrich 1995; ed. Dockery 1992). The righteous lifestyle of

Zechariah and Elizabeth is not merely for public display but is a result of their sincere devotion to God, even amidst the personal struggle of barrenness.

Overall, the description of Zechariah and Elizabeth in Luke 1:6 illustrates the importance of a righteous, God-centred life characterised by ethical conduct, strict observance of the Torah and sincere faithfulness to God, even in the face of personal challenges, such as barrenness and the societal pressures related to childlessness. Their life serves as a model of moral and spiritual integrity, grounded in both their obedience to God's commandments and their deep, unwavering faith, as well as covenantal faithfulness and communal identity. As a result, they did not compromise their faith in God and did not allow the challenge of barrenness to destabilise their marriage.

Clause 2 – πορευόμενοι ἐν πάσαις ταῖς ἐντολαῖς καὶ δικαιομασιν τοῦ κυρίου ἄμεμπτοι is translated as living in the full obedience to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord without fault. This clause is grounded in Hebrew expressions found in the OT, such as Deuteronomy 28:9, 1 Samuel 8:3, 5 and 1 Kings 11:14, and it signifies a life of devotion and obedience to God's comms. The Greek verb πορευόμενοι (present participle of πορεύομαι) typically means 'to go', 'to proceed' or 'to travel', but in this context, it carries the connotation of 'conducting oneself', 'living' or 'walking' in a moral and obedient way (Bauer, Arndt & Gingrich 1975). W. Radl (1990) affirms that the word in this context implies living in a way that is either positively or negatively aligned with God's commands, and here, it is used in the positive sense, reflecting the faithful obedience of Zechariah and Elizabeth. This idiomatic use of πορευόμενοι emphasises their consistent adherence to God's law, particularly the Torah, during their lives, even in the face of challenges such as childlessness.

The adjective πάσαις, derived from the Greek word πᾶς [meaning 'all' or 'every'], is in the dative plural form and points to the comprehensive nature of their obedience. Zechariah and Elizabeth are depicted as living according to all the commandments of God, showing complete and unwavering faithfulness, even when faced with personal trials, such as their inability to have children.

ἐντολαῖς ['commandments'] is another key term in the clause. It is a dative feminine plural noun, derived from ἐντολή, which means 'comm', 'order', 'law', 'writ' or 'decree' (Bauer, Arndt & Gingrich 1975). In the New Testament, this term refers primarily to divine commandments, particularly the Torah. In Luke's Gospel, ἐντολή often refers to the commandments of God and reflects the purity and integrity of one's relationship with God (Lk 1:6; 18:20; 23:56). Luke, therefore, uses the word here to refer to the commandments of the Torah, underlining that the stability of Zechariah and Elizabeth's marital relationship was rooted in their adherence to these divine laws.

The term δικαιομασιν ['ordinances'] is the dative plural noun, derived from δικαίωμα, which refers to a regulation, requirement or legal commandment. It often signifies a right or a righteous deed (Bauer, Arndt & Gingrich 1975). In the context of Luke 1:6, it reflects the ordinances or regulations of the Mosaic Law, indicating that Zechariah and Elizabeth were not just observing the basic commandments but were also living by the broader principles of God's justice and righteousness as laid out in the Torah (Bruce 1990; Laurin 1984). The LXX (Septuagint) often uses δικαίωμα as the translation for Hebrew words like *hōq* [statute] and *mišpāt* [legal norm], which reinforce the idea of a law that has long-lasting significance and is closely tied to the divine will (ed. Dockery 1992). Thus, δικαιομασιν in Luke 1:6 further supports the notion of complete and faithful adherence to God's law, which in turn points to the blamelessness of the couple in the eyes of God.

The adjective ἄμεμπτοι ['blameless'] is also critical in this passage. It derives from ἄ [a negative particle] and μεμπτός [blameworthy], meaning 'blameless', 'faultless' or 'perfect' (Bauer, Arndt & Gingrich 1975). The term ἄμεμπτοι indicates that Zechariah and Elizabeth were considered morally upright and free from blame in their relationship with God (Constable 2017; Brown 1994). However, this does not suggest sinless perfection, as Luke 1:18–20 shows that Zechariah struggled with belief when he questioned the angel's announcement. This suggests that ἄμεμπτοι does not imply that Zechariah and Elizabeth were without sin, but rather that they were faultless in their obedience to God's commands. Their childlessness, which was often viewed as a result of sin or divine displeasure in Jewish thought (as seen in the OT), was not because of any fault on their part. Luke uses this term to counter the common belief that barrenness was a punishment for sin, showing that even righteous people could face the trial of infertility.

Moreover, ἄμεμπτος has parallels in the Hebrew word *tam*, which is used to describe the righteousness of figures like Noah (Gn 6:9) and Job (1:8). This suggests that Luke portrays Zechariah and Elizabeth as embodying a righteous lifestyle in the same way that these OT figures did. Despite their challenges, including childlessness, they were faithful and obedient to God. Luke uses these terms – δίκαιοι ['righteous'] and ἄμεμπτοι ['blameless'] – to challenge the conventional Jewish understanding of barrenness and demonstrate that childlessness is not necessarily a punishment for sin (Keener 1993).

This teaching is particularly important because, in the cultural context of the time, many Jews believed that having children was a sign of divine blessing, and barrenness was often seen because of sin (Buttrick 1980; Fitzmyer 1981). By referring to Zechariah and Elizabeth as righteous and blameless, Luke emphasises that their infertility was not a result of their sinfulness. Instead, childbearing is presented as a gift from God that He gives according to His will, not a direct consequence of religious purity or moral behaviour.

Therefore, Luke 1:6 underscores the importance of a righteous lifestyle, which is reflected in godly moral actions, as the foundation of marital stability for Zechariah and Elizabeth. Their adherence to the Torah and their obedience to God's commandments enabled them to maintain their relationship, even without children. This serves as a model for marital stability in the face of infertility, suggesting that mutual support, companionship and faith in God are central to a fulfilling marriage, rather than focusing solely on the need for children.

For contemporary readers, particularly in African cultures where infertility often leads to divorce, polygyny, remarriage, concubinage, syncretism or other forms of social pressure, the example of Zechariah and Elizabeth offers a valuable lesson. Their story demonstrates that marital stability does not depend on the ability to have children but on a righteous, faithful relationship with God, adherence to His commandments, covenantal relationship and communal identity. This perspective can challenge prevailing cultural norms and help shift the focus from childbearing to the broader purposes of marriage, such as companionship, mutual support and shared joy (Oyeniyi 2021).

Barrenness in Nigerian societies

The issue of barrenness, particularly among the Yorùbá Christian communities in Ōsun State, Nigeria, is a profound socio-cultural concern, deeply intertwined with societal norms and religious expectations. In this context, infertility is perceived as one of the worst personal and social misfortunes, where childbearing is seen as not only a biological imperative but also a moral and religious duty. For many, childbearing symbolises the ultimate fulfilment of marital and societal obligations, leading many infertile couples to adopt un-Christian practices like divorce, remarriage, polygyny, concubinage or syncretism to resolve their issues (Oyeniyi 2021).

In the Yorùbá community, the perception of barren individuals varies based on societal norms and cultural values. According to the 72 respondents interviewed, barrenness is universally acknowledged as a significant personal and social issue. However, the nature of community response differs based on the individual's behaviour and reputation.

Social perceptions of barrenness

The societal reactions to childlessness can be categorised into three main responses: sympathy, accusation and stigmatisation. Sympathy is often extended to barren women who are perceived as blameless, with infertility regarded as a curse or a sickness (Ilesanmi 2013). Many respondents in the community attribute such situations to fate or the will of God. This belief system is reinforced by local proverbs and prayers, which emphasise the importance of divine timing and mercy in overcoming infertility.

For instance, women who remain childless for an extended period are often seen as subjects of sympathy, and their

neighbours may provide support in the form of prayers, traditional remedies and encouragement. Common Yorùbá expressions like '*àkókò Ọlórún ló ju*' [God's time is the best] and '*Ilẹ̀ áánu Ọlórún kii sù*' [God's mercy is never late] are used to comfort barren women.

However, the community's response becomes more complicated when a woman's personal conduct deviates from societal expectations. Women who have histories of actions like abortion, promiscuity or violating cultural taboos are more likely to be stigmatised. In such cases, infertility is viewed not as a fate but as the result of moral failings, and the community tends to shift from sympathy to accusation, blaming these women for their infertility. As a result, these women often face harsh treatment, including verbal abuse, name calling and social exclusion (Pearce 2003).

The stigma of infertility

The stigma surrounding barrenness is particularly severe for women. Infertile women, especially those with questionable reputations, are often socially marginalised, experiencing feelings of isolation, sadness and guilt. The inability to bear children in the Yorùbá community is seen as a failure to fulfil essential cultural expectations, especially the responsibility of motherhood. Women are expected to contribute to the family's honour and legacy by bearing children, and childlessness can make them feel incomplete or unworthy (Ilesanmi 2013).

Infertile women are sometimes accused of witchcraft or spiritual possession, believed to be the cause of their inability to conceive. This superstition further deepens the social stigma and often leads to public shaming. They may be given derogatory names such as '*àgàn*' [barren] or '*irati kò lómọ nínú*' [empty palm kernel], reinforcing their marginalised status. Some may even be ostracised or considered to be cursed (Koster-Oyekan 1999).

In interviews, respondents noted that barren women, particularly those with questionable personal conduct, often experience ridicule from family, friends and society at large. These women, according to Pearce (2003), may be excluded from important social gatherings or discussions regarding family life, further cementing their status as 'non-persons' within the community.

The male perspective

While the societal focus on infertility tends to be more pronounced for women, respondents noted that men are also subjected to some degree of scrutiny when they are unable to father children (Fadipe 1970). However, male infertility is less emphasised in the community. When men are found to be infertile, they are sometimes considered impotent or incapable. In cases where a wealthy man remains childless, there may be rumours suggesting that he has engaged in rituals, such as donating his manhood to a herbalist for material wealth, further contributing to social stigma (Ajibade 2005; Fadipe 1970).

Despite these perceptions, there is a tendency in Yorùbá society to focus more on the woman's role in fertility, with infertility more often blamed on the woman, even though modern medical studies indicate that male infertility is just as prevalent as female infertility. This disparity highlights the cultural bias in favour of women fulfilling the maternal role, with male infertility rarely discussed in traditional contexts.

The emotional toll on barren individuals

The emotional consequences of barrenness are especially pronounced for women. Many infertile individuals experience feelings of inadequacy, isolation and low self-worth. Interviews with respondents revealed that some women who are unable to conceive often feel as though they have failed not only their families but also their communities and God. The societal pressure to bear children makes them feel incomplete or less valuable (Ilesanmi 2013).

In Yorùbá society, the presence of children in marriage is critical to the stability of the union. Children are seen as essential for ensuring inheritance, providing for the parents in old age and securing the family's cultural and religious continuity. Therefore, infertility threatens not just individual self-esteem but also the family's social standing and future. For many women, motherhood is integral to their societal identity, and the inability to fulfil this role can result in a sense of personal failure (Hallgren 1988; Okon 2012).

Spiritual and medical perspectives

In some cases, infertility is also viewed as a spiritual or supernatural affliction. Barren women may be advised to seek out diviners or spiritual leaders who claim to have the ability to uncover the hidden causes of infertility and offer remedies. These beliefs reflect a blend of traditional spiritual practices with the more contemporary Christian worldview, creating a syncretic approach to resolving infertility.

Modern medical knowledge, however, as respondents suggest that infertility can be caused by a range of factors, including health issues in either partner. Medical specialists, like fertility doctors, note that male infertility is often overlooked in traditional Yorùbá society, even though it is just as common as female infertility (Lock & Nguyem 2010).

In conclusion, the issue of barrenness in Òsun State is a complex and multifaceted social problem. It reflects a deep-seated cultural and religious belief system where childbearing is closely tied to personal honour, marital stability and societal expectations. While sympathy is extended to those who are seen as blameless, the community's response is shaped by factors such as moral conduct, personal reputation and traditional beliefs. Women, in particular, face intense emotional and social challenges, as their infertility is often viewed as a personal failing, leading to stigma, exclusion and even spiritual

accusations. In contrast, male infertility is less scrutinised, though it still carries its own set of societal judgements. The intersection of traditional beliefs, Christian values and modern medical knowledge shapes the understanding of infertility in this region, illustrating how barrenness remains one of the most significant personal and social challenges in Yorùbá society.

Luke 1:6 in context of Nigerian societies

Luke 1:6 portrays Zechariah and Elizabeth as a righteous couple whose righteous lifestyle and moral integrity before God sustained their marriage despite infertility and old age (Lk 1:7). This contrast between righteousness and barrenness is particularly relevant in Nigerian societies, where infertility is often viewed as misfortune or punishment for sin, frequently endangering marital stability within the cultural and religious context.

In many Nigerian cultures, procreation is viewed as the core purpose of marriage, and the absence of children can bring about social stigma, emotional distress and even marital breakdown (Isiugo-Abanihe 1994; Okon 2012). Women, in particular, are frequently blamed for infertility, regardless of its medical origin, and may face rejection, domestic violence or even the threat of polygamy (Oduyoye 2001). Within Christian circles influenced by prosperity teachings, barrenness is sometimes interpreted as evidence of divine disapproval or insufficient faith (Gifford 2001).

The narrative in Luke 1, however, challenges these assumptions. Zechariah and Elizabeth maintained their commitment to God and to each other despite their inability to have children. Their example shows that righteousness is not always rewarded with immediate blessings, and that marital unity can and should persist even in the face of such personal trials. Their story serves as a theological corrective to the notion that childlessness is incompatible with divine favour or marital fulfilment.

For Nigerian couples, the faithfulness of Zechariah and Elizabeth offers a model of mutual support and spiritual integrity amid reproductive challenges. Their relationship, rooted in shared devotion to God, highlights the importance of spiritual companionship in marriage – especially during seasons of disappointment. As Ukpong (1995) argues, biblical texts read contextually can both critique societal expectations and promote values that uphold human dignity and relational stability.

In sum, the righteousness of Zechariah and Elizabeth as depicted in Luke 1:6 underscores the potential for marital stability to be sustained through shared faith, despite the hardship of barrenness. This perspective encourages Nigerian Christian couples and communities to cultivate empathy, resilience and a deeper understanding of God's purposes beyond procreation.

Recommendations

The following recommendations provide practical and theological direction for Nigerian societies and Christian communities to promote marital stability through righteousness, compassion, equity and spiritual support in the face of infertility:

- **Redefine Righteousness and Marriage Values:** Highlight that righteousness is rooted in faithfulness to God, covenantal living and community identity – not merely in outward blessings. Marriage should be valued for companionship and spiritual partnership, not solely for procreation.
- **Combat Stigma and Gender Bias:** Challenge beliefs that view barrenness as a curse or a woman's fault. Uphold gender equality, shared responsibility and personal dignity in both cultural and church contexts.
- **Promote Faith-Based Marital Support:** Provide church-based counselling and mentorship to foster spiritual unity and strengthen marital bonds during infertility challenges.
- **Offer Emotional and Practical Support:** Create supportive environments – such as prayer groups, safe spaces and therapy – within churches and society to assist couples emotionally and spiritually.
- **Teach Balanced Theology and Patience:** Reject teachings that link suffering to sin. Encourage understanding that trials may coexist with God's favour and promote patience and trust in His timing.

Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of a righteous lifestyle in maintaining the marital stability of Zechariah and Elizabeth, especially when faced with the challenge of barrenness. Their righteousness, based on genuine faith rather than superficial appearance, helped them adhere to the Torah and remain steadfast in their marriage. While not sinless, they were blameless in their faith and marital relationship. The study emphasises that while their marriage was built on companionship, mutual support and shared joy, rather than an excessive focus on having children, Africans place undue emphasis on procreation at the expense of other marital benefits. This pressure often leads to un-Christian practices like divorce, remarriage and polygyny, driven by societal expectations surrounding childlessness. Therefore, this article encourages African Christian societies, especially in Nigeria, to adopt this virtuous approach in marriage, promoting stability and preventing un-Christian practices in the face of infertility challenges.

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The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contribution

O.D.O. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This study adhered to all ethical research standards that involve direct interaction with human or animal subjects. Ethical approval for this study was received from Ladoke Akintola University of Technology Teaching Hospital Ethics and Research Committee, Osoybo, Nigeria, on 12 March 2019 (Protocol no: LTH/EC/2019/03/402).

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Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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Appendix 1

TABLE 1-A1: Primary sources: List of interviewees.

S/N	Names	Sex	Status	Age	Address	Date
1.	Abio, P.A.	Male	PFI	68	Ilésà	11 February 2019
2.	Adeb, A.	Male	CEI	40	Ilésà	16 October 2018
3.	Ademo, J.	Male	CEI	45	Ilésà	19 October 2018
4.	Aden, T.	Female	CEI	38	Òsogbo	05 December 2018
5.	Adeo, M.A.	Female	PFI	55	Òsogbo	26 March 2019
6.	Adew, A.	Male	CEI	50	Òsogbo	17 December 2018
7.	Adewal, B.	Female	FS	40	Ilésà	03 January 2019
8.	Adewo, A.O.	Female	CEI	40	Òsogbo	26 March 2019
9.	Adewu, T.A.	Female	PFI	56	Òsogbo	26 March 2019
10.	Ademo, B.	Female	PFI	40	Òsogbo	05 December 2018
11.	Adeye, A.B.	Male	FS	56	Ilé-Ifè	10 March 2019
12.	Adeyo, S.	Female	CEI	40	Ilé-Ifè	11 November 2018
13.	Adi, M.	Female	PFI	50	Ilésà	03 January 2019
14.	Aja, A.	Female	CEI	42	Òsogbo	22 November 2018
15.	Aji, J.I.	Female	FS	90	Ilésà	04 March 2019
16.	Akangi, O.	Male	FS	70	Òsogbo	13 December 2018
17.	Akinto, T.A.	Female	PFI	50	Ilé-Ifè	18 April 2019
18.	Alobe, R.	Female	CEI	40	Ilésà	22 April 2019
19.	Arem, T.	Female	PFI	50	Ilé-Ifè	02 May 2019
20.	Arowo, B.A.	Female	CEI	50	Ilé-Ifè	25 April 2019
21.	Asiyan, M.O.	Male	FS	50	Òsogbo	25 March 2019
22.	Asubi, A.D.O.	Female	CEI	50	Òsogbo	26 March 2019
23.	Awo, O.A.	Female	PFI	68	Ilésà	24 April 2019
24.	Ayanto, S.	Male	CEI	40	Ilésà	25 April 2019
25.	Babalo, Z.A.	Male	FS	67	Ilé-Ifè	09 November 2018
26.	Bole, T.A.	Female	CEI	50	Ilésà	02 January 2019
27.	Dadu, S.O.	Female	PFI	56	Ilésà	17 November 2018
28.	Fade, D.A.	Female	FS	40	Òsogbo	25 March 2019
29.	Fama, E.A.	Female	CEI	40	Ilésà	22 April 2019
30.	Fasu, O.B.	Male	FS	58	Ilé-Ifè	25 April 2019
31.	Fato, T.	Female	FS	65	Ilésà	28 December 2018
32.	Gbada, W.O.	Male	CEI	50	Òsogbo	17 December 2018
33.	Ilemo, T.	Female	CEI	50	Ilé-Ifè	02 May 2019
34.	Isawuru, A.I.	Male	FS	54	Òsogbo	21 November 2013
35.	Jejo, O.	Male	PFI	70	Ilésà	11 February 2019
36.	Kolu, B.	Male	CEI	40	Ilésà	11 February 2019
37.	Komo, O.	Male	FS	55	Ilésà	03 January 2019
38.	Lami, A.	Female	CEI	50	Ilé-Ifè	25 April 2019
39.	Ogun, O.	Female	FS	50	Òsogbo	13 December 2018
40.	Ogunle, J.O.	Female	PFI	59	Ilésà	17 November 2018
41.	Ogunlo, C.O.	Female	CEI	40	Ilé-Ifè	25 April 2019
42.	Ogunwo, Y.R.	Female	PFI	50	Òsogbo	17 December 2018
43.	Ojela, G.	Female	CEI	54	Ilésà	22 April 2019
44.	Ojola, J.	Female	CEI	40	Ilé-Ifè	18 April 2019
45.	Okere, M.O.	Female	CEI	46	Ilésà	22 April 2019
46.	Okun, R.O.	Male	CEI	60	Òsogbo	17 December 2018
47.	Okunlo, M.A.	Male	PFI	67	Ilé-Ifè	23 January 2019
48.	Olade, J.O.	Female	PFI	52	Ilé-Ifè	28 October 2018
49.	Oladei, O.	Female	PFI	46	Ilé-Ifè	02 November 2018
50.	Olaji, S.A.	Male	FS	65	Ilé-Ifè	18 October 2018
51.	Olaose, T.B.	Female	CEI	38	Ilésà	02 May 2019
52.	Olasu, A.	Female	PFI	56	Òsogbo	05 December 2018
53.	Olowo, K.	Female	CEI	33	Ilé-Ifè	14 November 2018
54.	Olubodu, J.	Female	FS	58	Ilé-Ifè	08 October 2018
55.	Oluji, F.O.	Female	PFI	62	Ilé-Ifè	18 October 2018
56.	Omobo, D.A.	Female	PFI	55	Ilé-Ifè	25 April 2019
57.	Orisafun, A.	Female	FS	66	Òsogbo	22 November 2018
58.	Otan, I.R.	Male	FS	52	Òsogbo	17 December 2018
59.	Owola, M.F.	Female	CEI	40	Òsogbo	26 March 2019

Table 1-A1 continues on the next page →

TABLE 1-A1 (Continues...): Primary sources: List of interviewees.

S/N	Names	Sex	Status	Age	Address	Date
60.	Oyebe, G.A.	Female	CEI	40	Ilé-Ifè	02 May 2019
61.	Oyebi, M.I.	Male	PFI	55	Ilé-Ifè	30 October 2018
62.	Oyebu, J.A.	Male	FS	55	Ilé-Ifè	25 April 2019
63.	Oyemi, I.I.	Female	PFI	48	Ilé-Ifè	30 October 2018
64.	Oyeni, A.O.	Male	PFI	50	Òsogbo	17 November 2018
65.	Oyewu, F.	Male	PFI	50	Òsogbo	22 November 2018
66.	Oyinlo, T.K.	Male	PFI	50	Òsogbo	12 December 2018
67.	Salani, A.	Female	CEI	38	Òsogbo	26 March 2018
68.	Salasu, I.	Female	CEI	43	Òsogbo	04 November 2018
69.	Suda, K.E.	Male	PFI	65	Ilésà	02 November 2018
70.	Sunmo, S.	Female	CEI	40	Ilé-Ifè	01 November 2018
71.	Tolulo, E.O.	Female	CEI	50	Ilé-Ifè	18 April 2019
72.	Towo, R.A.	Male	FS	67	Ilésà	10 November 2018

FS, fertility specialist; CEI, currently experiencing infertility; PFI, previously faced infertility; S/N, serial number.