


Infertility in 1 Samuel 1:9–20 and Luke 1:5–25: Cultural and spiritual lessons for amaXhosa

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Infertility within amaXhosa, as in 1 Samuel 1:9–20 and Luke 1:5–25, bears a significant cultural stigma and is associated with ancestral and spiritual interpretations. In this article, I unmask the challenges of infertility in these two biblical scriptures through ancestralism and African spirituality as theoretical frameworks. In so doing, I concentrate on the cultural and spiritual lessons these biblical scriptures may offer to amaXhosa in contemporary contexts and beyond. This article made two notable findings. Firstly, the biblical experiences of Hannah and Elizabeth underscore how spiritual intercession and perseverance are fundamental in overcoming the challenges and destructive stigmas associated with infertility, which is directly echoed in the amaXhosa culture's reliance on ancestral intervention, spiritual guidance, offerings and rituals. Secondly, blending ancestral and African spirituality with contemporary medical techniques may create a more holistic window for addressing infertility within amaXhosa, where cultural heritage and modern resources coexist. Therefore, these findings draw on both the spiritual dimensions in the selected biblical texts and cultural parallels in amaXhosa traditions and customs, aiming to bridge ancient and contemporary understandings of infertility.

Contribution: This scholarly discourse contributes to a greater discernment of infertility by uncovering how ancestral and African spirituality provide cultural and spiritual support in addressing childbearing challenges within the amaXhosa community. Within this framework, by unmasking 1 Samuel 1:9–20 and Luke 1:5–25 through an indigenous African viewpoint, this article proposes a solidified framework that blends traditional ancestral practices with contemporary techniques for a holistic response to infertility.

Keywords: amaXhosa; African spirituality; ancestralism; biblical texts; infertility.

Introduction

Background

The Bible and amaXhosa culture intersect in their shared values of community, spirituality and reverence for family, though they express these through distinct religious and cultural contexts. The Bible's doctrines, especially on subjects like family and fertility, resonate with amaXhosa belief systems, permitting a constructive dialogue that blends biblical experiences with indigenous amaXhosa practices and philosophies. Having said this, I put forward that it is misguided to assume that the doctrines of the Bible could be seamlessly integrated with amaXhosa cultural belief systems without undermining the complexities of both. Such a reductionist method disregards the vastly entrenched distinctions between traditional knowledge systems and foreign religious constructs, ultimately diluting the legitimacy of both. Accordingly, divorcing the Bible from amaXhosa culture would be a miscalculated move given that it would overlook the ways in which biblical doctrines and amaXhosa belief systems complement each other, especially in areas like community support, family values and spirituality (Mtshiselwa 2011:671). This separation could also downplay the profundity of understanding that emerges from viewing these two disciplines together, losing the rich, culturally informed perspectives that arise when they are allowed to interact and inform one another. This being the case, the Bible holds a significant place in amaXhosa spirituality and ancestralism, blending with traditional belief systems to create a unique, hybrid faith practice. For amaXhosa, biblical experiences and dogmas resonate with ancestral customs, creating parallels between Christian spirituality and African spiritual values such as reverence for ancestors and communal harmony. However, I need to indicate that the unfortunate coexistence of the Bible with amaXhosa culture has led many Africans to wear a foreign cloak, stifling their legitimate identities and forcing them into the shadows of their own heritage. Like a tree trying to grow in a foreign soil, this forced blending has left many feeling

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uprooted, estranged from the wisdom of their ancestors while being tethered to the foreign doctrines that suffocate their true essence, ultimately becoming strangers in their own.

For the purposes of this scholarly discourse, infertility has long been a sensitive and culturally significant subject across societies, and its challenges could be addressed both in biblical experiences and within African communities such as those of amaXhosa (Diko 2024:3). In biblical accounts in particular, infertility appears as a trial of faith, tenacity and spiritual intervention, with notable biblical figures like Sarah, Hannah and Rachel grappling with childlessness (Ademiluka 2021:7; Susanta 2021:5). These biblical experiences not only underscore the emotional and social challenges of infertility but also highlight its cultural implications, where fertility is interwoven with identity, family ancestry and spiritual belief systems. For amaXhosa, fertility holds a similar cultural and spiritual value, profoundly entrenched in the communal and ancestral expectations that define family and social standing (Erlank 2017:252). Inevitably, infertility should be understood to imply the inability to conceive a child after one year of regular, unprotected sexual intercourse or the inability to carry a pregnancy to full term (Ntozakhe 2015; Sithole 2012). On the one hand, fertility refers to the ability to conceive children or produce offspring, frequently influenced by biological, environmental and cultural factors (Ntozakhe 2015:132). At the same time, the dialogue surrounding infertility among amaXhosa is an urgent and important subject for the very reason that it intersects with cultural, social and health matters that gravely affect families and communities.

Nonetheless, I contend that it is utterly misguided to elevate infertility to the status of a cultural catastrophe when it remains fundamentally beyond human control, influenced by biological and environmental factors that no amount of belief or tradition may alter. To place such an undue burden on individuals, as though infertility were a moral failing or a spiritual deficiency, mirrors a profound misunderstanding of both science and humanity. This misdirected focus only drives unnecessary shame and marginalisation, reducing complex, uncontrollable challenges to simplistic cultural and spiritual crises. It is nothing short of absurd to treat infertility as a social stigma or cultural curse as if, *and only if*, human biology should bend to cultural whims and ancestral expectations. This irrational fixation not only disregards medical realities but also insults the very essence of human dignity, reducing individuals to mere dishes of reproduction rather than acknowledging their complex, multifaceted humanity. Rather than cementing compassion, it cultivates a toxic, judgemental environment where scientific understanding is trampled by archaic beliefs that punish the innocent. Such backward thinking traps communities in a cycle of ignorance, ensuring that the very progress needed to address infertility is stifled under layers of superstition and societal shame.

Owing to these assertions, several factors have influenced the initiation of this scholarly discourse. Concerning amaXhosa, infertility is a widely problematic phenomenon that goes far beyond the individual, damagingly impacting the wider

community and family bloodline (Sewpaul 1999:743). The reason for the problematic nature of infertility within amaXhosa is that childbearing is regarded as a central component of one's identity and social standing. In other words, having children is viewed as a means of continuing the family bloodline, honouring ancestors and contributing to the broader community (Vivian 2022:11). As a direct result of this complication, a woman's inability to bear children continually carries a destructive social stigma, as it is perceived as a failure to honour the expected roles of motherhood and lineage preservation (Masenya 2019:2). No wonder, therefore, James (2015:91) suggests that 'motherhood' is problematic in the context of infertility because, within amaXhosa culture, there is immense societal pressure and expectation for women to bear children, making infertility a source of stigma, emotional distress and potential marginalisation. On the grounds of these indications, I argue that it is truly pathetic that, despite the community-based human experience of infertility, the burden is placed squarely on women's shoulders as though they alone are the cause of this complex challenge—completely disregarding the equally critical role of men in sex and reproduction. The obsessive focus on women's fertility, as though their entire worth is reduced to their ability to procreate, reflects an antiquated and misogynistic philosophy that is embarrassingly out of step with modern understandings of gender and biology. This archaic philosophy solidifies shame, discouraging open dialogue and creating an environment where women are treated as mere containers, while the broader and more nuanced realities of infertility are conveniently overlooked.

In so far as these debates are notable, in some cases of amaXhosa, infertility is discerned as a sign of spiritual disfavour, prompting the demand for rituals, consultations with spiritual leaders or seeking the intervention of ancestors through traditional practices to recover fertility or resolve the challenge (Diko 2024:5). Nonetheless, in the Bible, infertility is depicted as a concern that several women such as Sarah, Rachel and Hannah, face, continually accompanied by profound emotional anguish and social pressure (Gn 18:10–14; Gn 30:22–23; 1 Sm 1:9–20). Over and above this observation, the Bible offers plausible solutions, emphasising spiritual intervention and faith in God's timing. Within this context, infertility is resolved through miracles where women conceive after years of barrenness, solidifying the belief that God holds the power to bless or withhold fertility according to His divine will. These biblical experiences, therefore, highlight themes of perseverance, prayer and optimism, with women in the Bible frequently turning to God for help. This being the case, it is evident that in both the biblical and amaXhosa contexts, infertility is not just a personal challenge but a cultural and spiritual concern, one that invites collective support and spiritual intervention. It is not surprising, therefore, to note that Moore (2013:151) opines that in African societies, infertility is perceived as a reflection of spiritual or ancestral discontent, necessitating specific rituals and consultations with spiritual leaders or traditional healers to seek restoration of fertility.

Bearing this background in mind, this scholarly discourse has two aims to address. Firstly, to uncover cultural and spiritual perspectives into the challenges of infertility as reflected in 1 Samuel 1:9–20 and Luke 1:5–25, and how these perspectives may be applied to the experiences of amaXhosa. Secondly, to scholarly unmask the role of ancestral belief systems and African spiritual practices in addressing infertility, drawing lessons from biblical experiences to offer culturally resonant guidance and support for the amaXhosa community in judiciously dealing with infertility setbacks. Together, these two aims demonstrate that some of the infertility challenges that adversely affect amaXhosa could be mitigated or addressed by drawing on biblical experiences. Right from the onset, I must indicate that the two selected biblical texts are directly quoted from the New International Version of the Bible (NIV), published in 2011. By the same token, this scholarly debate is necessary owing to the reality that infertility remains a significant cultural and spiritual concern within the amaXhosa community, solidified by destructive stigmas and emotional distress. Because of this, by critiquing biblical experiences, this article seeks to offer culturally applicable and reasonable solutions and philosophies that could help address and mitigate the adverse impact of infertility in the amaXhosa context. In addressing the two aims of this article, I apply ancestralism and African spirituality as theoretical frameworks of interpretation and discussion.

Theoretical frameworks: Ancestralism and African spirituality

This article applies both ancestralism and African spirituality as theoretical frameworks of interpretation and discussion. By explanation, ancestralism is a central tenet in many African cultures, where ancestors are believed to play an active role in the lives of the living (Asante 1983:13). It is the belief that the ancestors, through spiritual presence and guidance, influence the community's welfare, health and fertility (Nweke 2022:273). At its core, ancestralism emphasises the cruciality of maintaining strong connections with one's ancestors through rituals, prayers and honour for traditions to receive their blessings and protection (Asante 1983:12). For this article, ancestralism discerns infertility as a potential spiritual and communal challenge, where the ancestors' role in fertility is significant. In the amaXhosa community, infertility is viewed not only as a biological concern but also as a spiritual one. As I argue elsewhere, this denotes that when ancestral blessings or interventions are thought to be withheld, infertility could be interpreted as a sign of ancestral displeasure or a failure to maintain proper relations with the ancestors. In the end, by addressing infertility using ancestralism, this scholarly dialogue explores how the amaXhosa community could seek reconciliation, perform healing rituals or honour ancestors to restore fertility. In brief, ancestralism offers a vibrant window through which to comprehend the complexities of infertility, as it intertwines the spiritual and community-based dimensions of the challenge, drawing attention to the central

role ancestors play in guiding and protecting the living. Therefore, by applying ancestralism to this scholarly discourse, the article invigorates the conversation, revealing how greatly connected spiritual practices and ancestral reverence are in addressing fertility challenges within the amaXhosa community.

On the other hand, African spirituality is an overarching construct encompassing various indigenous religious belief systems and practices across African cultures (Edwards 2015; Mlisa & Nel 2015; Olupona 1993). Importantly, African spirituality is centred on the belief in a supernatural presence that governs the universe, with spiritual forces that are constantly in interaction with humanity. This theoretical viewpoint acknowledges the interconnectedness and chemistry of the physical, spiritual and ancestral worlds, and recurrently grants attention to healing, balance and harmony with nature and the cosmos (Masuku 2021:4). Therefore, it stands to reason that African spirituality is premised on the notion that all things have the quintessential essence or Spirit of the Creator within them, be they animate or inanimate in nature. At the same time, African spirituality simply acknowledges that belief systems and practices touch on and inform every facet of human life, and therefore, African religion cannot be divorced from the everyday or mundane. It is clear, therefore, that African spirituality discerns infertility concerning the spiritual forces that influence human existence. For amaXhosa, African spirituality blends both ancestral belief systems and the recognition that spiritual imbalance or the interference of malevolent forces leads to infertility. Fertility, therefore, is not just a biological phenomenon but a spiritual one that requires intervention strategies from supernatural forces. As previously mentioned, this article explores how spiritual practices such as prayer, offerings and seeking the help of spiritual leaders or traditional healers offer reasonable solutions for infertility, drawing parallels to biblical accounts where divine intervention plays a central role in resolving infertility challenges. Collectively, these two theoretical frameworks – ancestralism and African spirituality – provide a critical standpoint to examine infertility as a challenge that transcends physical biology, urging the amaXhosa community to view it from a cultural and spiritual standpoint. Considering that the theories of interpretation and discussion have now been explained, it is prudent to focus on the thrust of this article.

Interpretation and discussion

1 Samuel 1:9–20

In 1 Samuel 1:9–20, the biblical experience of Hannah's prayer at the Tabernacle offers a profound exploration of infertility, prayer and spiritual intervention. When viewed and analysed through ancestralism and African spirituality, this biblical passage gains additional layers of cultural and spiritual meaning. For amaXhosa, an indigenous South African community, ancestral reverence and spiritual practices are central elements that provide a philosophical understanding

of Hannah's experience. As evident in this biblical scripture, Hannah's unfathomable prayer in 1 Samuel 1:10–11, where she 'wept bitterly' and 'made a vow', mirrors a ritualistic call for spiritual intervention. In the context of amaXhosa, infertility is continually viewed not just as an organic setback, but as a spiritual challenge that necessitates a connection with *both the ancestral spirits and the Creator* (Mothelesi & Mhele 2024:51–52). Much like Hannah's petition, amaXhosa believes that ancestral spirits hold significant power in influencing fertility. Under these circumstances, I submit that the blatant and common misunderstanding of amaXhosa's vastly impactful ancestral spirituality shows just how shallow and simplistic outsiders can be when attempting to comprehend their multifaceted culture. It is, in fact, humiliating that such profound and nuanced traditions continue to be reduced to mere 'paganistic' or 'demonic' practices when in reality, the amaXhosa's reverence for ancestral wisdom and its spiritual practices should position them as a model of a serious, grounded and intellectually sophisticated nation. This is based on the premise that the act of praying to God (or *uThixo* in the isiXhosa language), for children parallels the amaXhosa practice of invoking the ancestors to intercede for blessings, including fertility.

It should also be noted that in the amaXhosa culture, there are two categories of ancestors. Firstly, there are those who are living and highly valued, such as the oldest dog, tree, person or anything deemed spiritually connected by a specific family, and they are called *izinyanya*. Secondly, those who have departed the physical world are called *iminyanya*. Linguistically, this suggests that the terms *izinyanya* and *iminyanya* represent distinct categories based on the state of existence. This distinction between the two terms mirrors a deliberate cultural and linguistic differentiation between the living and the deceased in relation to spiritual and ancestral values. Therefore, an uncomfortable question must be asked: Is it not ironic that those who have long dismissed isiXhosa and the amaXhosa as languishing in the shadows of a 'dark continent' fail to recognise the intellectual complexity in their distinction between *izinyanya* and *iminyanya*? Perhaps those who regard African cultures as primitive may reconsider, given that such linguistic and spiritual nuances reflect a level of sophistication they seem so eager to overlook.

In any event, in 1 Samuel 1:11, when Hannah makes a vow, she says, 'if you will look on the affliction of your servant and remember me, and not forget your servant but will give to your servant a son ... then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life'. This biblical vow epitomises a spiritual transaction – one that is also evident in amaXhosa spiritual practices where offerings or vows are made in exchange for spiritual and ancestral favours. In the context of amaXhosa, similar vows or offerings are frequently made in anticipation of receiving blessings, whether they be for fertility, health or prosperity. For example, some amaXhosa families offer a goat to their ancestors in the desire to ensure fertility and the security of their children (Ntombela 2016:258). Similarly, a person seeking prosperity may make offerings of maize or

drink in hopes of receiving blessings for financial success (Bogopa 2010:17). On account of these circumstances, I argue that this vow mirrors the ritualistic and spiritual discernment of the importance of relationships with both the Creator and the ancestors. In addition to this assertion, I put forward that a common misconception is the notion that spiritual transactions, such as those seen in Hannah's vow and in amaXhosa spiritual practices, are purely transactional in a materialistic sense, reducing the vow to a mere exchange for tangible benefits (Swanton 1917:463). It is almost absurd to reduce amaXhosa practices to mere transactional exchanges as if their spiritual offerings are nothing more than a bartering system for material gain. This shallow philosophy is akin to mistaking the sacred, intricate dance of African cosmic alignment for a simple handshake – entirely dismissing the profound relational and devotional elements that bind amaXhosa to their Creator and ancestors in a way that transcends mere earthly transactions.

Building on these scholarly declarations, African spirituality, particularly among amaXhosa, is established in the belief that *life* and *fertility* are governed by both divine will and the influence of ancestors (Mazama 2002:219). This is based on the notion that infertility is a spiritual imbalance or a break in the ancestral line, which is only healed through spiritual rites and blessings (Gasa 2004:14). Having said this, 1 Samuel 1:19, which suggests that 'And they rose up early in the morning and worshipped before the Lord' is an act of worship that is crucial in understanding the interaction between the spiritual and physical kingdoms. Similarly, in the amaXhosa culture, offerings or rituals are performed to maintain harmony with the spirits. Accordingly, I argue that this connection between fertility and spirituality is thus a profoundly ingrained belief, both in the Bible and in the amaXhosa culture. As an amaXhosa metaphorical expression implies *umntwana akalahlwa, umoya wakhe uyakhunjulwa*, meaning 'a child is not abandoned, their spirit is remembered' underlines the belief that spiritual intervention is necessary to restore balance and fertility. This amaXhosa narrative reflects the spiritual belief that a child, even if not physically present or alive, is never truly forgotten by the family or community. This metaphorical expression emphasises the idea that the spirit of the child continues to be honoured and remembered through ancestral rites, prayers and rituals.

In the context of fertility and spiritual balance, infertility denotes that any challenges related to fertility or childbearing are viewed as a spiritual concern that could be addressed by honouring ancestors and seeking their blessings, rather than simply as a biological or physical concern. Of note, this amaXhosa perspective is impactfully African in its holistic understanding of life, where the spiritual and physical arenas are inseparably intertwined. Unlike Western reductionist philosophies that isolate fertility as a purely medical concern, amaXhosa sees infertility as a disruption of spiritual harmony – requiring ancestral rites, prayers and rituals to restore balance. The metaphorical expression *umntwana akalahlwa, umoya wakhe uyakhunjulwa* exemplifies the African philosophy, where even the unseen spirit of a child holds a

holy presence, demanding communal and ancestral remembrance. This demonstrates how fertility is never a matter of mere biology, but a profound cultural and spiritual concern established in ancestral wisdom and collective identity. Against this reality, is it not pitifully narrow-minded that Western reductionist philosophies – so proudly paraded as the pinnacle of intellectual sophistication – miss the essential truth that life cannot be dissected into isolated biological fragments? African philosophies, like those of amaXhosa, stand as a towering testament to intellectual richness, embracing a holistic view where even the unseen spirit of a child commands spiritual reverence, communal remembrance and spiritual balance. Perhaps it is time for those who downplay Africa as lacking depth to confront the embarrassing inadequacy of their fragmented philosophies.

In fact, Hannah's vow in 1 Samuel 1:9–20 reflects the idea of a child as a spiritual gift, not just a biological one. Within the context of amaXhosa, children are considered heavenly blessings from both God and the ancestors, a key dimension of maintaining the family legacy (Susanta 2021:4). In the very same context, a lack of children is the failure to honour or connect with the ancestral spirits, hence Hannah's prayer is not only a cry for biological intervention but also a plea for spiritual balance, coordinating with the amaXhosa understanding of fertility as both a personal and ancestral concern. For those who are outside the religious and cultural context of amaXhosa, it is significant to observe that for this ethnic group, fertility is highly valued given that it is viewed as a central connection between *iminyanya* [the dead] and the spiritual kingdom, guaranteeing the continuity of life and cultural heritage (Mtumane 2016:20). This is the reason it was underlined earlier that children are recognised as both a heavenly blessing and a means of preserving the ancestral legacy, which is fundamental to maintaining spiritual symmetry and social stability.

Building on these scholarly perspectives, it is important to observe that in 1 Samuel 1:20, the challenge of infertility is addressed in a spiritual context. For instance, when the Lord grants Hannah's request, 'so in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son', spiritual intervention is depicted as the ultimate resolution of infertility. In African spirituality, similar belief systems about spiritual intervention abound. As Bogopa (2010:10) and Masenya (2019:7) argue, the African people, including amaXhosa, believe that God's desire and the ancestors' blessings are crucial for overcoming obstacles, including infertility. Inevitably, in the cultural framework of amaXhosa, it is purported that a child is a blessing granted through spiritual privilege, aligning with the biblical discourse where Hannah's prayer is answered after a period of spiritual preparation and devotion. While this is notable, I must submit that the process of waiting and trusting in spiritual timing, as observable in Hannah's instance, resonates with the amaXhosa belief in *ukulinda* [waiting for the right time or season]. This is based on the idea that African spirituality does not promise immediate results but emphasises patience and understanding that spiritual

intervention requires time and faith. Accordingly, I argue that Hannah's biblical experience is an allegory of the amaXhosa belief in the importance of patience and persistence in seeking spiritual and ancestral intervention in times of adversity (Masuku 2021; Nweke 2022). For these reasons, I put forward that a common misconception is that infertility and similar life challenges are purely biological or medical concerns, which may be immediately resolved through scientific or clinical interventions. This perspective is fundamentally flawed as it overlooks the profound cultural and spiritual dimensions found in traditions such as those of amaXhosa and the biblical narrative of Hannah. Both contexts underline that spiritual intervention operates on supernatural or ancestral timing, requiring patience, devotion and faith rather than the instantaneous results expected in modern, reductionist thinking.

Above all, in the amaXhosa philosophy, infertility is sometimes linked to ancestral displeasure or forgotten rites (Jonas 1986:63; Mtumane 2016:19). As a direct result of this ideology, infertility for amaXhosa is an issue that requires appeasing or reconnecting with the ancestors through spiritual rituals or sacrifices (Jonas 1986:63). In view of this fact, the intercession of ancestors is considered vital in many cases of this ethnic group. In contrast to the biblical ideology, where divine intervention solely comes from God, some of the amaXhosa people view God as working in tandem with ancestral spirits. The ancestral spirits, as mediators between the living, the unborn and the dead, play a crucial role in the healing of infertility. By means of illustration and based on direct experiences, when a couple faces infertility, one common cultural practice for appeasing the ancestors is the *umqombothi* ritual.¹ This amaXhosa practice involves brewing a traditional beer made from maize and offering it to the ancestors, typically during a family gathering. Ordinarily, this beer is presented at an ancestral shrine or a designated holy ground, where the family prays for the blessing of fertility and asks for the ancestors' guidance and favour.

This ritual is greatly symbolic, acknowledging that the power to conceive is not solely in the hands of the couple or humanity, but is also governed by the spiritual and ancestral kingdom. Accordingly, by offering the *umqombothi* beer and calling upon the ancestors, the family seeks to restore balance and synergy in their lives, allowing them to receive the blessing of children. Although the *umqombothi* ritual remains impactful, it is similarly crucial to observe that, in some cases, an individual may be required to undergo a cleansing ritual, known as *ukuhlamba* [purification], which is intended to remove any spiritual blockages or curses that are affecting their fertility. This indigenous amaXhosa practice involves a series of ceremonial acts such as bathing in herbs, fasting and participating in specific prayers that call for the removal of destructive energies. In the same vein, one ought to note that this ritual may also be performed by *igqirha* [traditional healer] or an elder who specialises in spiritual and ancestral

1. *Umqombothi* is a traditional beer made from maize, commonly brewed and offered in amaXhosa culture during rituals to honour ancestors and seek their blessings, particularly in times of need such as infertility.

healing (Hlela 2019:1). Therefore, by undergoing this purification process, the individual is believed to be spiritually cleansed, allowing for the restoration of fertility and the renewal of connections to both the ancestors and the natural world. In other words, the cleansing ritual is a key component of the process of resolving infertility in the amaXhosa community. In the modern world, the cleansing ritual as a remedy for infertility among amaXhosa highlights a tension between traditional spiritual practices and contemporary medical approaches, raising critical questions about the integration of cultural belief systems with modern healthcare in addressing infertility.

Bearing these scholarly observations in mind, I contend that it is intellectually myopic and culturally arrogant to downplay these amaXhosa ancestral and spiritual practices as 'paganistic' or 'demonic' without understanding their philosophical profundity and communal significance. Such reductive ideologies are emblematic of colonial thinking that seeks to discredit traditional knowledge systems by framing them as primitive or backward. By contrast, these amaXhosa rituals embody a delicate chemistry between spirituality, health and communal welfare, offering a holistic approach to fertility that modern science recurrently fails to fully comprehend.

In so far as these scholarly debates are noted, it is equally critical to accept that Hannah's act of prayer and promise to dedicate her child to the Lord reflects an act of appeasement, similar to the amaXhosa practice of offering sacrifices to appease the ancestors. As evident in 1 Samuel 1:28, after Samuel's birth, Hannah fulfils her vow by bringing him to the temple and dedicating him to the Lord. This is evident in the expression: 'therefore I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is lent to the Lord'. This particular dedication is a form of spiritual offering, akin to the amaXhosa practice of offering a child or part of one's life in service to both the Creator and the ancestors, thus guaranteeing a continued spiritual legacy. For example, the most common indigenous amaXhosa practice of dedicating the child to the ancestors is *imbeleko* [an introduction of the newborn to the ancestors]. By definition, *imbeleko* is a traditional amaXhosa ritual performed to introduce a newborn child to the ancestors, assuring their protection and blessing as the child grows (Kaschula 1997:13). It entails the slaughtering of a goat or other livestock as a sacrificial offering to the ancestors, symbolising the family's gratitude and request for ancestral guidance over the child's life. This ceremony underscores the amaXhosa belief in the spiritual connection between the living, the unborn and the ancestors, blending the child into the family lineage and community through ancestral acknowledgement and acceptance.

This amaXhosa ceremony therefore is a testament to the arrogance and ignorance of oppressive systems that ancestral offerings, such as *imbeleko*, are demonised, despite their impactful spiritual and communal significance. These systems not only undermine ancestral wisdom but also fail to grasp that such practices, like Hannah's biblical dedication of

Samuel, embody timeless acts of spiritual continuity and sacred responsibility. At the same time, this is unsettling because it exposes the persistent double standard where biblical practices like Hannah's dedication of Samuel are revered, while similar indigenous African rituals like *imbeleko* are ridiculed or dismissed as demonic. It highlights the frustrating hypocrisy of oppressive systems that selectively venerate spiritual traditions based on Eurocentric or religious biases, undermining the legitimacy of equally profound African ancestral practices.

In contemporary amaXhosa society, infertility continues to be a highly stigmatised subject. From where I am, how curious is it that in contemporary amaXhosa society, a culture significantly rooted in communal support and spiritual interconnectedness, infertility is still subject to such harsh stigmatisation, despite being traditionally understood as a collective spiritual concern rather than an individual failing? Specifically, there remains a cultural expectation for women to bear children; and infertility is regarded as a personal and spiritual crisis (Zungu & Siwela 2017). Nevertheless, the spiritual understanding of infertility as a challenge that could be overcome with divine and ancestral intervention continues to offer positive anticipation (Agbor 2016; Sewpaul 1999:743). In view of these observations, I argue that the lessons from 1 Samuel 1:9–20 are applicable to the contemporary amaXhosa context. Like Hannah, women in this community are encouraged to seek spiritual guidance through prayer, ritual and ancestral support, understanding that divine intervention may take time but is ultimately possible. By the same token, the concept of fertility as a gift from God and the ancestors continues to inform the amaXhosa philosophy. In the contemporary context, infertility may be addressed through modern medical solutions, but the spiritual significance of fertility remains solid. The lessons from Hannah's experience resonate with the amaXhosa belief in the demand for spiritual healing and patience, as well as the importance of community support in overcoming personal setbacks.

Luke 1:5–25

To scholarly explore the challenges of infertility in Luke 1:5–25 using ancestralism and African spirituality as theoretical frameworks offers solid perspectives for discerning the significance of genealogy, spiritual intercession and cultural continuity. This biblical passage recounts the experience of Zechariah and Elizabeth, an elderly, childless couple, whose eventual conception of John the Baptist is epitomised by spiritual intervention. In amaXhosa culture, as in other African cultures, infertility is a significant challenge, not just for the couple but for the broader family and genealogy. Considering this indication, ancestors are invoked in matters of fertility, providing a point of comparison between the role of spiritual agents in the biblical text and ancestral figures in amaXhosa spirituality. In this biblical event, Elizabeth's infertility is recounted as follows: 'Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years'. This biblical text mirrors a social stigma, much like the way infertility is perceived in the amaXhosa culture. This implies that just as

Elizabeth's condition carried implications of humiliation and societal intolerance in her context, infertility among amaXhosa is similarly viewed as a spiritual imbalance or ancestral displeasure, which adversely affects the individual's social standing and family honour (Ober 1984:303). Given this indication, I argue that in both contexts, infertility is more than a physical concern; it is extensively entwined with cultural belief systems about continuity, ancestral privilege and social identity (Abasili 2015:590). In support of these scholarly assertions, Edwards (2015) is of the view that:

In African societies, infertility is not just a biological issue but one that threatens the social fabric by disrupting lineage and community cohesion. Ancestral spirits are deeply involved in ensuring continuity and any disruption, like infertility, may be perceived as a spiritual imbalance requiring intervention. (p. 272)

In advancing this claim, Olusola and Ojo (2012) suggest:

Ancestors are not only guardians of the family lineage but are also mediators in spiritual matters, especially those affecting the continuity of life, such as fertility and childbirth. (p. 78)

With these two pronouncements in mind, I put forward that infertility continually triggers cultural anxiety regarding genealogy and inheritance. This is because it threatens the continuation of family lines and the transfer of ancestral legacy (Hlela 2019:9). As a matter of reality, in cultures that value lineage and family legacy, like amaXhosa, the inability to produce offspring could lead to concerns over who will carry on the family name, inherit property, or assume roles within the community and family structures. Having said this, I cannot help but argue that it is frustratingly oversimplistic to reduce infertility within amaXhosa culture solely to concerns over lineage, inheritance and the continuation of family legacy as if these are the *only* dimensions at play. This narrow ideology completely ignores the rich spiritual, communal and emotional intricacies that greatly influence how infertility is experienced and addressed within amaXhosa, reducing it to nothing more than a matter of biological reproduction.

According to Sewpaul (1999:741), the cultural anxiety that becomes observable in this context stems from a perceived risk of disconnecting the ancestral line and dismissing the spiritual and cultural continuity that descendants represent. No wonder, therefore, Malesa (2023:124) contends that in many South African cultures, including amaXhosa, a couple's failure to conceive is conceptualised as a rupture in the family's connection to its ancestors, evoking rituals and offerings to seek ancestral favour and restore fertility. At the same time, ancient Hebrew culture, as illustrated in the biblical figures like Sarah, Rachel and Elizabeth faced cultural pressures to bear children, particularly sons, to preserve the family legacy and honour societal expectations (Bogopa 2010; Ramantswana 2016). It is clear, therefore, that in both instances, the inability to conceive is more than a personal hardship; it is a matter of cultural importance that influences family identity, inheritance and the perception of spiritual privilege across generations.

With these notable challenges of infertility in both cultural contexts, for the amaXhosa people, ancestors – imbued with the authority to intercede and grant blessings – are invoked to aid the continuity of the family legacy. To the same extent, in this biblical account, an angel is sent by God to deliver the news of impending conception to Zechariah, exemplifying spiritual intervention. Given this spiritual reality, the intervention by a supernatural figure aligns with the amaXhosa ancestral practices where *igqirha* [traditional healer] may receive guidance from ancestors on behalf of the couple. With a particular focus on Luke 1:5–25, Gabriel's appearance, an angel to Zechariah in the Temple parallels a ritual act in which amaXhosa ancestors may be invoked through ceremonies, offerings and prayers at holy sites such as mountains or specific family shrines, as previously stated. In African spirituality, spiritual intermediaries bridge the physical and spiritual domains, serving as vessels through which ancestors communicate with the living. Thus, Gabriel's role as a spiritual messenger or angel in this context is akin to an ancestor relaying messages, highlighting the interconnectedness of the holy and mundane in both traditions. Therefore, is it not rather prejudicial to overlook the existence of ancestors, ignoring the spiritual framework where the living and the unborn are guided by ancestral forces, much like the biblical depiction of angels serving as messengers? In fact, how can one plausibly ignore such an essential component of African spirituality while simultaneously accepting similar roles for divine intermediaries in other traditions?

Additionally, I need to underline that a critical difference between the two cultural contexts, however, is the monotheistic framework in Luke 1:5–25, which positions a singular, omnipotent God as the sole source of blessings.² In my view, it is rather naive to reduce the complex spiritual structures of African traditions to a mere monotheistic comparison, as if the interconnectedness of ancestral influence and divine intervention is less sophisticated than the singular deity model. This oversimplification not only downplays the multifaceted spiritual systems of indigenous cultures but also cements a narrow, hegemonic philosophy that fails to recognise the multiplicity of belief systems across humanity. African spirituality, in contrast, operates within a polytheistic or multidimensional framework, where ancestors – though respected and revered – are not venerated as deities but as part of an African cosmology that values interconnectedness among the living, the dead and the unborn. This distinction illustrates a fundamental divergence in how infertility is addressed spiritually in each culture, buttressing the inclusive nature of African spirituality, where the broader community participates in invoking potential solutions through ancestral channels. Therefore, it is imperative to submit that African spirituality should be celebrated in contemporary contexts because it preserves unique cultural knowledge, values and practices that contribute to a multifaceted, diverse philosophy,

2. A monotheistic framework is a belief system centred around the worship of a single, all-powerful deity who is responsible for the creation, governance and moral guidance of the universe. This framework emphasises exclusive devotion to this one God, who holds ultimate authority over life, spiritual matters and ethical principles.

underscoring community respect for ancestors and balance with nature. Within this framework, by celebrating these spiritual traditions, societies could additionally counter colonial narratives that have historically sidelined indigenous belief systems, driving a robust understanding of African identities and empowering cultural pride and self-determination.

Bearing these scholarly discourses in mind, it is crucial to observe that contemporary implications of infertility within the amaXhosa community echo both *historical practices* and *modern adaptations*. This means that while amaXhosa spiritual ceremonies remain central, Western medical techniques such as in vitro fertilisation (IVF), hormone therapy and surgical procedures are increasingly common. With this view in mind, the biblical experience of Zechariah and Elizabeth's answered prayer may drive resilience and faith within the amaXhosa community while illustrating the coexistence of ancestral practices and modern intervention strategies. Ultimately, I argue that Luke 1:5–25 holds cultural lessons for amaXhosa concerning patience, faith and the possibility of intervention far beyond human comprehension, emphasising the idea that spiritual responses to infertility, whether through prayer or ancestral invocation, are powerful complements to Western medical treatment.

Even more evident, Elizabeth's jubilant reaction upon conceiving – 'The Lord has done this for me ... He has shown His favour and taken away my disgrace among the people' – mirrors the amaXhosa philosophy that a successful conception is not only a personal delight but also a community-based blessing. This claim is based on the reality that in amaXhosa, a woman's infertility affects her social standing, much like Elizabeth's experience of 'disgrace'. Because of this factor, ancestral blessings, once realised, are celebrated communally, underscoring that reproductive success is as much about familial continuity as personal obligation. The philosophy of Ubuntu (humanity to others) aligns itself with these sentiments, suggesting that *umntu ngumntu ngabantu*, which translates to 'a person is a person through other people'. This Ubuntu philosophy proves the interconnectedness of individual joy and communal welfare, aligning with Elizabeth's experience of conception as both a personal and communal success. Once more, in the amaXhosa context, as in Elizabeth's, fertility and family continuity are not just individual achievements but are shared milestones that intensify the collective identity and resilience of the community.

In essence, the message of delayed fulfilment in Elizabeth's biblical account – where conception occurs despite advanced age – offers optimism to those facing infertility within the amaXhosa community and beyond, implying that determination in both spiritual and ancestral appeals leads to fulfilment, albeit not always immediately. In this regard, ancestralism permits a flexible concept of time, where the living, the unborn and the ancestral spirits negotiate outcomes far beyond the present generation, implying that resolution to infertility may arrive in ways that are mysterious

but greatly meaningful. By the same token, this biblical text, unmasked through the perspective of ancestralism, provides a coated understanding of how infertility could be addressed by amaXhosa spiritual practices. As previously argued, *iminyanya* and *izinyanya* offer support, not through instant solutions, but through sustained connection, patience and determination. On the grounds of these views, I contend that by integrating African ancestralism and spirituality with cultural lessons from Luke 1:5–25, the amaXhosa community could find valuable philosophies for resolutely dealing with infertility – both from biblical teachings and indigenous practices – underscoring the importance of faith, patience and community support in the face of this challenge. Bearing these scholarly debates in mind, it is prudent to observe some of the common misconceptions and miscontextualisations about infertility in the context of amaXhosa.

Some misconceptions and miscontextualisations about infertility in the context of amaXhosa

Infertility within the amaXhosa community is recurrently misconceptualised and miscontextualised through a combination of cultural, spiritual and societal lenses. Within this context, one of the most prevalent misconceptions is that infertility is solely the woman's problem. This assumption is flawed. It oversimplifies a complex problem by disregarding the communal and spiritual dimensions that define infertility in the context of amaXhosa. Reducing infertility to a woman's problem not only propagates destructive gender stereotypes but also neglects the vital role of ancestral belief systems, spiritual rituals and concerted responsibility within the community. In the amaXhosa culture, reproduction is viewed as a communal concern that is established in family continuity and ancestral lineage. Both the man and woman are viewed as contributing factors in the process of conception. Nevertheless, traditional bias and prejudice frequently place the blame on the woman, with less attention paid to male infertility. This misconception stems from male-centric or patriarchal structures that assign the responsibility of fertility to women, dismissing the fact that men, too, could face fertility challenges. Having said this, in recent years, there has been a shift towards acknowledging male infertility in some amaXhosa communities, but the destructive stigma around it still lingers in many parts of society. Accordingly, I argue that this misconception contributes to the oppression of women by unfairly placing the burden of infertility solely on them, overlooking the role of men in the reproductive process. As a matter of fact, this societal stigma concerning female infertility propagates gender disparity, as women are unfairly blamed for a challenge that may not solely be their responsibility, intensifying male-centric norms and limiting their agency in reproductive matters.

Another notable misconception is that infertility is primarily a consequence of spiritual failure or ancestral disfavour (Mabasa 2002:67). In many amaXhosa communities, there is a

vaster belief in the spiritual causes of infertility, which continually leads to accusations of neglecting ancestral obligations or displeasing spirits (Gasa 2004:15). As a direct consequence of this misconception, couples may be blamed for failing to honour their ancestors through rituals or offerings, and in this context, infertility is a symbol of spiritual penalty. Given this pronouncement, I contend that this misunderstanding places undue emotional and psychological pressure on the couple, as they may believe that their infertility is a direct result of personal immorality, neglecting the complex biological, environmental and medical factors that could also be at play. For this reason, I underline that the expectation that ancestral intervention easily resolves infertility challenges could overshadow the importance of modern medical intervention and cause couples to delay seeking medical assistance. Accordingly, it is important to observe some of the recommendations that could be considered in addressing these misconceptions, while drawing some concluding remarks.

Recommendations and conclusion

Given the scholarly debates herein, it is evident that there is an urgent demand for the amaXhosa community to work towards demystifying the misconception that infertility is solely the woman's problem by advancing an inclusive philosophy that recognises both male and female roles in sex and reproduction. This should be achieved through community education, awareness campaigns and open dialogue that challenge male-centric norms and advance gender fairness in fertility matters. Similarly, the amaXhosa community should consider robustly integrating ancestral spiritual practices with contemporary medical intervention strategies for infertility. This direction should respect and honour the community's cultural and spiritual belief systems while providing access to modern reproductive technologies, ensuring a balanced and respectful technique to fertility concerns. Collectively, these two recommendations could liberate the amaXhosa women by silencing the stigma surrounding infertility, accelerating gender justice in reproductive health and offering them a more holistic support system. In other words, by acknowledging both male and female roles in fertility and integrating cultural spirituality with modern medicine, these recommendations could positively construct an environment where women feel less isolated and more supported in their fertility journeys, ultimately solidifying their social standing and mental security.

In conclusion, the challenges of infertility, as depicted in the Bible and within the context of amaXhosa, unearth notable cultural and spiritual lessons that emphasise the significance of family continuity, ancestral blessings and communal support. This implies that by unmasking these challenges and offering holistic and reasonable solutions, the amaXhosa community creates a more egalitarian and supportive environment for individuals and couples facing infertility, guaranteeing that cultural and spiritual values are harmonised with contemporary scientific knowledge. Finally, this article is dedicated to all women who experience

infertility, recognising their strength, resilience and the unique challenges they face in both personal and cultural contexts.

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