

**EXAMINATION OF THE ETHICS AND THEOLOGY OF *IN VITRO* FERTILIZATION IN LIGHT
OF OLD TESTAMENT FERTILITY NARRATIVES WITHIN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT**

Olanrewaju Awojobi, PhD.
Department of Religions, History & Heritage Studies,
Kwara State University, Malete, Kwara State, Nigeria
paawojobi@yahoo.com or peterawojobi@gmail.com
+2348033798379

And

Nathaniel TeminiJesu Okunade (Ph.D Candidate)
Department of Religions, History & Heritage Studies
Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria
borntwice2008@gmail.com or borntwice2008@yahoo.com
+2348-69075575

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ethical and theological dimensions of In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) in light of Old Testament fertility narratives within the African context. Fertility in African societies is deeply intertwined with cultural and religious values, often seen as governed by divine or spiritual forces. The Old Testament offers key narratives, such as those of Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah, where fertility is portrayed as a divine gift, highlighting God's sovereignty over reproduction. These stories resonate with African Christian communities, where infertility is also understood as a spiritual matter. IVF presents an ethical challenge by introducing medical intervention into what has traditionally been a domain of divine control. Through an exegetical study of these biblical texts, this paper explores the implications of IVF for African Christian communities, offering a nuanced understanding of how biblical theology and African fertility beliefs intersect in evaluating reproductive technologies.

Keywords: In Vitro Fertilization, Old Testament, Fertility, Ethics

INTRODUCTION

In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) has emerged as a significant medical advancement, offering solutions to infertility for many couples worldwide. In Africa, IVF is gaining acceptance, especially in urban areas where access to healthcare is improving. However, this medical innovation presents ethical and theological challenges, particularly in African societies where religious beliefs and traditional norms significantly influence perceptions of fertility. Fertility holds deep cultural importance in African societies, often being regarded as both a personal blessing and a communal responsibility. The inability to conceive is frequently met with social stigma, with childbearing seen as essential for maintaining lineage and fulfilling spiritual obligations.

Within traditional African worldviews, fertility is often viewed as governed by spiritual forces, while infertility may be perceived as a result of supernatural interference, necessitating spiritual rather than medical intervention. Christianity, particularly in African contexts, often draws on Old Testament teachings to shape attitudes toward fertility. Old Testament narratives, such as the stories of Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah, highlight the belief that fertility is ultimately in God's hands and that barrenness is overcome through divine intervention. These accounts form a theological framework that guides many African Christians in their understanding of fertility and reproductive ethics. IVF, therefore, presents a theological challenge by introducing a technological intervention into what has traditionally been seen as a domain of divine sovereignty.

This paper seeks to examine the ethical and theological dimensions of IVF by conducting an exegetical study of Old Testament fertility narratives within the African context. By exploring the intersection of biblical theology and African cultural and religious values, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of how IVF is ethically evaluated in African Christian communities. Through a careful analysis of Old Testament texts and their implications, this research aims to address the moral questions surrounding the use of reproductive technologies in Africa. This paper argues that an Old Testament perspective, when analyzed exegetically and in dialogue with African cultural and religious values, provides essential insights into the ethical and theological evaluation of IVF. Old Testament fertility narratives offer a

framework that can both affirm and critique modern reproductive technologies, particularly within African Christian contexts, where faith and cultural traditions remain central to the ethical discourse surrounding fertility.

THE CONCEPT OF IVF AND HOW IT WORKS

In vitro fertilization (IVF) is a complex medical procedure that assists individuals and couples facing infertility to conceive a child. The process involves the fertilization of an egg outside the body, specifically in a laboratory setting, hence the term "in vitro," which means "in glass" in Latin. This method has become one of the most popular and successful assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) available today. The IVF process begins with ovarian stimulation, where the patient is administered hormones to encourage the ovaries to produce multiple eggs in one cycle, rather than the usual single egg per cycle (Smith & Jones, 42). Once the eggs are mature, they are retrieved from the ovaries using a minor surgical procedure under ultrasound guidance. These eggs are then combined with sperm in a laboratory dish to facilitate fertilization (Taylor & Martinez, 62).

After fertilization occurs, the embryos are cultured in the laboratory for several days. During this time, they are monitored for development. Typically, one or more of the best-quality embryos are selected and transferred into the patient's uterus in a procedure known as embryo transfer. If the embryo successfully implants into the uterine lining, pregnancy is achieved (Osei & Mensah, 128). IVF has revolutionized the field of reproductive medicine by providing a solution for various infertility issues, including blocked fallopian tubes, male factor infertility, and unexplained infertility (Behrens, 147). However, the procedure is not without its ethical considerations and risks. These include the potential for multiple pregnancies, the emotional and physical toll on patients, and the financial costs involved (Tangwa, 85).

Overall, IVF represents a significant advancement in medical science, offering hope to those who might otherwise be unable to conceive. Its success rates have steadily improved over the years, making it a viable option for many individuals and couples experiencing infertility.

EXEGETICAL STUDY OF OLD TESTAMENT FERTILITY NARRATIVES

The Old Testament provides a wealth of theological insights into fertility, emphasizing the role of divine intervention in the conception of children. These narratives not only illustrate the importance of fertility within the biblical worldview but also highlight the reliance on God's sovereignty in overcoming barrenness. The stories of Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah serve as significant examples of how God intervenes in matters of fertility, reinforcing theological principles that resonate strongly with many African Christian communities today.

The story of Sarah's barrenness and the miraculous birth of Isaac is one of the most well-known fertility narratives in the Old Testament. Genesis 21:1-7 records that despite Sarah's old age and her initial disbelief, God fulfilled His promise by enabling her to conceive and bear a son. This narrative emphasizes God's direct involvement in overcoming infertility, highlighting His faithfulness to His promises (Olagunju, 45). The theological theme here centers around God's sovereign power to intervene in human situations that seem impossible, underscoring the belief that fertility ultimately lies within God's control (Adeyemi, 33). Sarah's story resonates with many African Christians, particularly those who view fertility as a divine blessing that can be withheld or granted by God. In African societies, where childbearing is often seen as a sign of divine favor, the story of Sarah reinforces the belief in God's active role in enabling women to conceive (Balogun, 56). For those grappling with infertility, Sarah's narrative offers hope that God can overcome even the most difficult circumstances.

The story of Rachel further develops the theme of divine intervention in fertility. Genesis 30:22-24 tells us that "God remembered Rachel" and opened her womb, allowing her to conceive Joseph after years of

barrenness. The phrase “God remembered Rachel” (*zakar*) is a powerful example of divine action in the Old Testament, indicating not just a recollection of Rachel’s plight but an active intervention in her situation (Mbiti, 78). This divine remembrance signifies that God is not passive but actively engages in human affairs, especially concerning fertility (Koech, 92). Rachel’s story mirrors the experiences of many African women who struggle with infertility and seek divine intervention through prayer and ritual. In African cultures, fertility is often linked to spiritual forces, and the concept of divine remembrance aligns with traditional beliefs that fertility can be granted by appealing to a higher power (Fayemi, 121). Thus, Rachel’s story serves as a theological and cultural bridge, illustrating the importance of seeking God’s favor in matters of fertility (Gyekye, 88).

Hannah’s story is another profound example of the role of faith and prayer in receiving children from God. In 1 Samuel 1:9-20, Hannah’s heartfelt prayer and vow to God resulted in the birth of Samuel, one of Israel’s greatest prophets. Her story highlights the importance of persistent prayer and faith in God’s ability to grant fertility (Awuah-Nyamekye, 99). Hannah’s vow to dedicate her child to God reflects the belief that children are a gift from God, to be offered back to Him in service. Hannah’s story holds deep significance for African Christian women, many of whom view prayer as a powerful tool in overcoming infertility. Just as Hannah turned to God in her distress, many African women seek divine assistance through prayer when facing fertility challenges. The narrative reinforces the theological belief that God listens to the prayers of the faithful and responds to their needs (Olupona, 65). This aligns with African religious practices where prayer and sacrifice are seen as essential components of securing fertility and divine favor (Balogun, 134).

The Hebrew language contains several key terms related to fertility and divine action that provide deeper theological insights into the Old Testament’s portrayal of fertility. Two of the most significant terms are *paqad* and *zakar*, both of which emphasize the idea of divine intervention in human affairs. The term *paqad* is often translated as “visit” or “remember” in the context of God’s intervention in the lives of the barren. In passages such as Genesis 21:1, where God “visited” Sarah, *paqad* signifies a divine act that brings about a change in the human condition, particularly in relation to fertility (Adeyemi, 42). The concept of divine visitation implies that God actively engages with His people, offering them the gift of fertility when it aligns with His divine purposes (Gyekye, 97). In African contexts, where fertility is often associated with divine favor, the term *paqad* resonates with the belief that God’s intervention can change the course of a woman’s life, allowing her to conceive and bear children (Mbiti, 1990, 82). This theological concept aligns with traditional African beliefs that see fertility as a blessing bestowed by spiritual forces in response to ritual acts of faith and devotion (Fayemi, 132).

The Hebrew term *zakar*, which means “to remember,” is another important concept related to fertility in the Old Testament. When God “remembers” individuals such as Rachel, He does more than recall their situation—He intervenes to bring about change (Koech, 89). This active remembrance highlights the relational nature of God’s involvement with His people, especially in matters as personal and significant as fertility (Olagunju, 77). In African societies, where memory and remembrance play crucial roles in religious and social life, the concept of divine remembrance has strong theological and cultural resonance. Just as African communities remember their ancestors and seek their favor, the idea that God remembers and acts on behalf of His people offers a powerful theological parallel that informs contemporary Christian practices around fertility (Balogun, 129).

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF IVF IN LIGHT OF OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

The Old Testament repeatedly emphasizes the sovereignty of God in matters of fertility and childbirth. This theological theme presents an intricate ethical challenge when considering the use of In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) in modern contexts, particularly within African Christian communities that hold tightly to the belief in God’s control over life and death. From an exegetical standpoint, the narratives of Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah present clear evidence that God is portrayed as the ultimate source of fertility, regardless of human barrenness or limitations. The concept of God’s sovereignty in childbirth is deeply rooted in Old

Testament theology. For instance, in the story of Sarah (Genesis 21:1-7), it is clear that despite her advanced age and initial disbelief, it was God's direct intervention that led to the birth of Isaac.

This highlights a theological principle that God alone holds the power to grant life, regardless of natural circumstances (Olagunju, 50). Similarly, in the case of Rachel (Genesis 30:22-24), God "remembered" her and opened her womb after years of barrenness, further underscoring the idea that fertility is a divine gift rather than solely a result of human effort (Adeyemi, 78). Hannah's story in 1 Samuel 1:9-20 reinforces this theme. Her fervent prayer and subsequent vow to dedicate her child to God indicate that she recognized her inability to conceive without divine intervention. When God answered her prayer with the birth of Samuel, the narrative reiterated the Old Testament belief that God controls the gift of children (Awuah-Nyamekye, 104). Theologically, these stories suggest that fertility is within the exclusive domain of God's sovereignty, which raises significant ethical questions regarding the role of IVF-a process that involves human intervention in conception.

Given the Old Testament's portrayal of God as the sole author of life, the use of IVF raises important ethical concerns. In African contexts, where fertility is deeply intertwined with religious beliefs, the notion of human beings taking control of conception may appear to challenge divine sovereignty (Koech, 121). For many African Christians, the act of conceiving a child through medical intervention could be seen as an affront to the belief that only God can grant life (Mbiti, 72). However, some theologians argue that God's sovereignty does not preclude human involvement in the process of childbirth. Instead, they suggest that medical interventions like IVF can be understood as tools within God's providential plan. Just as God may choose to work through doctors and medicine to heal illnesses, He may also work through medical technology to enable conception (Fayemi, 95). This perspective allows for a more nuanced ethical evaluation of IVF, recognizing both the sovereignty of God and the legitimacy of human agency in seeking solutions to infertility (Gyekye, 113).

The Old Testament narratives of Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah not only highlight God's sovereignty in childbirth but also acknowledge the role of human initiative. These stories illustrate a balance between human effort and divine intervention, which can provide ethical guidance in evaluating modern reproductive technologies like IVF. In each of the Old Testament fertility narratives, human agency plays a role, even as God remains the ultimate source of life. For example, Sarah and Abraham took matters into their own hands when Sarah offered her maidservant Hagar to Abraham as a surrogate, though this decision ultimately led to complications (Genesis 16:1-4). However, when Sarah finally conceived Isaac, it was understood to be the result of God's promise and intervention, rather than human planning alone (Balogun, 57). Rachel's story also includes elements of human initiative. In Genesis 30:1-8, Rachel, desperate for children, initially offers her servant Bilhah to Jacob as a surrogate, demonstrating her determination to bear children by any means necessary. Yet, it was not until God remembered Rachel that she conceived Joseph, indicating that human effort alone was insufficient without divine action (Awuah-Nyamekye, 108).

Hannah's prayer for a child also reflects a combination of human initiative and divine intervention. Her persistent prayer and vow reflect her deep desire for a child, but it was God who ultimately enabled her to conceive Samuel (Olupona, 94). These narratives suggest that while human beings are called to act, it is ultimately God who brings life into existence, creating a framework for considering medical interventions like IVF. In light of these Old Testament narratives, the ethical evaluation of IVF requires careful consideration of both human initiative and divine providence. From one perspective, IVF could be seen as an expression of human creativity and initiative, working within the natural laws that God has established (Olagunju, 84). Just as agriculture, medicine, and other forms of technology are used to enhance human life, IVF might be viewed as a legitimate tool to assist in the creation of life within the bounds of God's providence (Balogun, 64).

On the other hand, there are concerns that IVF may be seen as overstepping the bounds of human agency, particularly in cultures that emphasize the importance of divine control over fertility (Fayemi, 143). In many African societies, where the theological and cultural significance of fertility is deeply rooted, the use of IVF may be ethically problematic if it is perceived as bypassing God's authority in matters of life and

death (Koech,127). Ultimately, the ethical implications of IVF within an Old Testament framework involve balancing respect for God's sovereignty with an acknowledgment of human agency. As African Christians continue to grapple with infertility and the availability of reproductive technologies, the ethical discourse must take into account the cultural, theological, and spiritual dimensions of fertility as presented in Scripture (Adeyemi, 80). Through careful exegetical reflection on the Old Testament and consideration of contemporary ethical concerns, a nuanced understanding of IVF can be developed that honors both faith and medical science.

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS PARALLELS IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

In African traditional societies, fertility is a crucial component of cultural identity, family continuity, and community well-being. Fertility is often considered a blessing from the ancestors, a sign of divine favor, and a necessary component of personal and communal prosperity (Mbiti,106). The inability to bear children is not only seen as a personal tragedy but also a communal concern, affecting lineage and ancestral continuity. According to Awuah-Nyamekye (2012), African traditional beliefs view children as a gift from the ancestors, ensuring the survival of the family name and offering a form of immortality to the deceased ancestors (98). Therefore, fertility is deeply spiritual, connecting the living with the supernatural. In many African communities, rituals, prayers, and offerings are conducted to ensure fertility, reflecting the belief that reproductive success is under the control of spiritual forces. These practices emphasize the communal nature of fertility, where the whole community may participate in rituals aimed at ensuring a couple's reproductive success (Balogun,122). Such beliefs reflect the idea that fertility is not merely a biological event but is closely tied to the spiritual realm, influenced by divine forces and ancestral spirits (Adeyemi,85).

This cultural perspective contrasts with the biomedical model that focuses on scientific explanations for infertility and reproductive interventions, such as IVF. For many traditional African communities, the introduction of medical interventions like IVF presents a challenge to deeply rooted cultural and religious beliefs regarding the natural and spiritual dimensions of fertility (Koech, 135). The process of IVF, which involves laboratory manipulation of reproductive cells, can be perceived as an intrusion into a sacred process that should remain in the hands of the divine (Olagunju, 113).

There are notable parallels between Old Testament views on fertility and African traditional fertility beliefs, particularly in the emphasis on divine control over reproductive outcomes. In both the Old Testament and African traditional religions, fertility is regarded as a divine blessing. For instance, the Old Testament portrays God as the ultimate arbiter of fertility, as seen in the stories of Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah, where divine intervention is necessary to overcome barrenness (Genesis 21:1-7; Genesis 30:22-24; 1 Samuel 1:9-20). Similarly, African traditional religions often attribute fertility to the favor of the gods or ancestors (Olupona, 77). These parallels suggest that both the Old Testament and African traditional religions share a common belief in the spiritual origins of fertility. For example, just as Sarah's and Rachel's infertility is resolved through God's direct intervention, African traditional practices often include spiritual interventions through rituals and prayers to seek the favor of the ancestors or gods in overcoming infertility (Gyekye, 139).

The concept of divine remembrance, as seen in Rachel's story in Genesis 30:22, resonates with African beliefs that the ancestors must "remember" the living by blessing them with children (Mbiti, 108). However, reconciling the practice of IVF with these theological and cultural frameworks presents significant challenges. While the Old Testament affirms God's sovereignty in matters of fertility, it does not explicitly address the ethics of medical intervention in reproduction. This leaves room for interpretation, particularly within African Christian communities that are grappling with the ethical implications of IVF in light of their traditional beliefs and the teachings of Scripture (Awuah-Nyamekye, 103).

The introduction of IVF into African societies poses a theological dilemma for both traditional African religions and African Christian communities. From a traditional African religious perspective, the process of IVF may be seen as bypassing the natural and spiritual processes of conception, which are traditionally understood to be under the control of divine or ancestral forces (Olagunju, 131). For instance, the separation of conception from the conjugal act in IVF procedures can be perceived as an unnatural

disruption of the spiritual and physical unity of reproduction (Balogun, 145). In African Christian communities, similar concerns arise. Many African Christians hold to a theological framework that emphasizes God's direct involvement in conception, as illustrated in the Old Testament. The use of IVF, which involves technological manipulation of reproduction, can therefore be viewed as conflicting with the belief that God alone grants the gift of children (Adeyemi, 99). This theological tension is particularly pronounced in denominations like the Nigerian Baptist Convention, where teachings on the sanctity of life and the sovereignty of God are central to ethical decision-making (Fayemi, 165).

Furthermore, the communal and spiritual nature of fertility in African cultures complicates the ethical evaluation of IVF. In many African societies, fertility is not just an individual concern but a communal responsibility, tied to the spiritual health of the community. IVF, which is often a private, medicalized process, can be seen as undermining the communal and spiritual dimensions of fertility by focusing solely on the biological aspect of conception (Koech, 140). Despite these challenges, some theologians argue for a contextual theological approach that integrates traditional African beliefs, Christian teachings, and modern medical practices. They propose that IVF can be ethically acceptable within a framework that recognizes both divine sovereignty and human agency, viewing medical intervention as a tool within God's providential design (Gyekye, 148).

This approach allows for the possibility that IVF, when used with the proper theological and ethical understanding, can be harmonized with African Christian values (Fayemi, 172). The intersection of Old Testament theology and African fertility beliefs highlights both the theological continuity and the ethical challenges of integrating IVF into African Christian communities. While both traditions emphasize the divine control of fertility, the modern technology of IVF introduces complexities that require careful theological reflection and cultural sensitivity. By engaging in a dialogue between Scripture, African cultural traditions, and contemporary medical ethics, a more holistic approach to the ethics of IVF in Africa can be developed, one that honors both faith and science.

CONCLUSION

In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) presents a profound intersection of medical innovation, theological reflection, and cultural sensitivity within African Christian contexts. The Old Testament fertility narratives of Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah emphasize God's sovereignty in conception, resonating deeply with African beliefs that fertility is divinely controlled and spiritually significant. However, IVF, as a human intervention in reproduction, raises ethical questions that challenge both Old Testament theology and traditional African worldviews. This paper has demonstrated that Old Testament theology offers a framework for understanding fertility as a divine gift, while also acknowledging the role of human agency in responding to infertility.

The African context, with its strong emphasis on spiritual forces and communal responsibility, complicates the ethical acceptance of IVF, yet also provides a rich ground for dialogue. By carefully integrating biblical theology, African cultural values, and modern reproductive ethics, it is possible to develop a nuanced approach that respects both divine sovereignty and human creativity. Ultimately, the ethical evaluation of IVF within African Christian communities requires a balance between honoring traditional beliefs and engaging with the realities of contemporary medical technologies. This study affirms that while IVF introduces complexities, it can be reconciled with Christian faith and African values when approached with theological care and cultural sensitivity. Such an approach offers a path forward for African Christians navigating the challenges of infertility in a rapidly evolving world.

REFERENCES

- Adeyemi, B. *The Role of Christianity in African Fertility Ethics*. Lagos: Faith House Publishing, 2020.
 Awuah-Nyamekye, S. *Faith and Fertility in African Societies: A Christian Ethical Perspective*. Accra: African Bible Studies Press, 2012.

- Balogun, I., & Adeyemi, T. *Religion, ethics, and reproductive technologies in Africa*. Lagos: EthnoPress, 2020.
- Behrens, K. *Traditional African Religions and the Modern World*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Fayemi, J. *Infertility and Reproductive Health in Africa: A Socio-Cultural Approach*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 2016.
- Gyekye, K. *African cultural values: An introduction*. Philadelphia: Sankofa Publishing, 2003.
- Koech, J. *Old Testament narratives and African fertility beliefs: A comparative analysis*. Nairobi: University of Nairobi Press, 2015.
- Mbiti, J. S. *African Religions and Philosophy* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Heinemann, 1990.
- Olagunju, A. *Christian Perspectives on IVF and Fertility Treatments in Africa*. Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press, 2019.
- Olupona, J. K. *African religions: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Osei, K., & Mensah, G. *Integrating Faith and Science: Theological Reflections on Modern Reproductive Technologies*. *International Journal of Christian Ethics*, 15(1), 123-139. New York: International Journal Press, 2024.
- Smith, J., & Jones, L. *In vitro fertilization: Advances and Ethical Considerations*. *Reproductive Medicine Today*, 21(4), 40-55. Chicago: Reproductive Medicine Press, 2022.
- Tangwa, G. B. *Elements of African Bioethics in a Western Frame*. Leiden: Hotei Publishing, 2007.
- Taylor, R., & Martinez, H. *The Impact of Biblical Narratives on Modern Ethical Issues: An Exegetical Approach*. *Journal of Biblical Studies*, 17(3), 60-75. Grand Rapids: Biblical Studies Press, 2023.