

Hermeneutical Interpretation of Exodus 15:26 in Relation to COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

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Abstract

The recently emerged novel SARS-Cov.2 first emerged in Wuhan City in China in December 2019, which in less than three months spread across the globe and was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on the 11th of March, 2020. So far, the ongoing pandemic has severely damaged the world's most developed countries and is becoming a major threat to developing and underdeveloped countries. Africa (Nigeria) with the most vulnerable populations is significantly affected by the Covid-19 outbreak, resulting in damage to the already crippled economy. This paper attempt to address the scourge of Covid-19 from the lenses of Exodus 15:26. Analytical, exegetical and historical methodologies were applied. The findings reveal that the pandemic is the result of man's sinfulness and his misuse of freewill. It is recommended that if Nigerians would abide by the principles and ethics of God and live according to His instructions, pandemic will be a thing of the past.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, plague, hermeneutics, Exodus 15:26

Introduction

Plagues have been a major threat to human existence from time immemorial. Some are caused by natural factors such as earthquake, volcanoes, flood and so on. While others are the result of man's misuse of free will such as pollutions emerging from rapid increase in industrialization, and the use of nuclear weapons (De Gruyter, 2010). The most recent plague that bedeviled human existence is the so called Covid-19 pandemic. The virus was first discovered in Wuhan City of China in December, 2019 and within a short period of time, it spread globally and was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020). As at April, 2020, WHO reported more than 2.1 million confirmed cases of Covid-19, including 142,229 deaths in 213 countries (Shabir and Ahmah, 2020). The most affected countries with more than 30,000 confirmed cases of Covid-19 were the United States of America, Spain, Italy, Germany, France, United Kingdom, China, Iran, Turkey, Belgium (WHO, 2020).

However, the number of Covid-19 cases continues to rise throughout the globe. As at February 2021 there are more than 110 million confirmed cases and 2.4 million deaths across nearly 200 countries (BBC News, February, 2021). Though, vaccines against the virus have been approved for use by individual countries or groups of countries such as the European Union and the WHO. The vaccines have not really spread across the globe. Nigeria is not left out in the global scourge; as at 20th of February, 2021 about 151,553 cases have been confirmed, 128,005 cases discharge and 1,831 deaths have been recorded in 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (NCDC, 2021). Despite the laid down guidelines for the prevention of Covid-19, there are still confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Nigeria. Couple with this, there are not enough isolation centres to care for the victims. Also, the available vaccines against the virus are yet to spread across the country. In the light of the above, the paper intends to address the problem of Covid-19 pandemic from the point of view of Exodus 15: 26.

Origin and spread of Covid-19 Pandemic

There are hundreds of viruses that belong to the Corona virus family. Among them are Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (SARS Cov) reported in November, 2002 and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Corona virus (MERS. Cov) reported in September, 2012, which emerged in human population from animal reservoirs and caused severe respiratory illness with high mortality rates (Shabir and Ahmar, 2020). The Covid-19 can be seen as one of the corona virus family.

However, there are various theories on the emergence of Covid-19. Many scientists believe in the theory of viral mutation with the possibility of further mutations. It is said that all Covid-19 strains are similar to other strains of the Corona virus family and Covid-19 emerged from several mutations of Corona viruses related to the same infection (Akande, 2020).

Social media and mainstream media have reported 'conspiracy theories' regarding the emergence of Covid-19. One of the concepts implies that there was (accidental) leak of the virus from the Wuhan institute of Virology close to South China Sea food market (BBC News, 2020). This theory cannot be corroborated with evidences. Many health experts believe that the new strain of corona virus likely originated in bats or pangolins and was eventually transmitted to humans in Wuhan, China. Since then, the virus has spread through human to human contact (Kandela, 2020).

Although, the Chinese government delayed in admitting the outbreak of Covid-19 to international authorities, the Chinese officials claimed that there was no human to human transmission of the virus. On 22nd January, 2020, the WHO mission to china made a turn around by issuing a statement confirming

human to human transmission of the virus in Wuhan (WHO, 2020). About a month after, the disease was reported to WHO country office in China, and the WHO confirmed it a public health emergency of international concern. On the 11th of March, 2020, the Covid-19 outbreak was declared a global pandemic because of the rapid spread and severity of the disease (WHO, 2021). This however marked with 6th time the WHO has declared a public health risk since 2005 when the International Health Regulations (IHR) came into implementation (Akande and Akande, 2020).

Mode of Transmission

Though, there are no evidence of documented cases of the bat to human transmission of the virus. It is being suggested that the virus might have been transmitted to humans via a yet to be identified intermediate host (SRI, 2020). It is also believed that the outbreak would likely to have started in a seafood market in Wuhan, China that traded live wild animals, which led to zoonotic transmission. A study conducted among confirmed cases between 1st and 20th of January, 2020 showed that 47% of them had a positive history of exposure to the Huanan sea food market (Chen, et.al, 2020). This suggests the fact that human to human transmission is evident.

Reports established that the disease can be transmitted during unprotected contact through droplets and fomites (Akande, 2020). Droplet transmission occurs when a person is in close contact with someone who has respiratory symptoms e.g. coughing or sneezing and is therefore at a risk of having his or her mouth, nose or eyes expose to potentially infective respiratory droplets. Fomites transmission occur through fomites in the immediate environment around the infected person. Therefore, transmission of Covid-19 virus can occur by direct contact with infected people and indirect contact with the surfaces in the immediate environment or with objects used by the infected person (WHO, 2021).

Analysis of confirmed cases of Corona virus shows that the symptoms appear after 14 days of quarantine or active monitoring. It is also a fact that the virus is highly transmissible within a relatively short period. However, the likely symptoms are fever, cough, sore throat, headache, breathlessness, muscle pain, loss of taste or smell (Kandola, 2020)

The Nigerian Experience

The first case of Covid-19 was confirmed on the 27th February, 2020 at the Infectious Disease Centre, Yaba, Lagos when a man arrived from Italy at the Murtala Muhammad International Airport, Lagos on the 24th February, 2020. He visited his company's site in Ogun State the following day where he

presented himself at his company's staff clinic. The physician on duty had a strong suspicion of the presence of the virus and he was referred to Infectious Disease Hospital (IDH) where his Covid-19 status was confirmed (NCDC, 2020).

The Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) started the contact tracing of the persons of interest which include all the persons that had contact with him. After a period of two weeks, a cluster of cases were detected in Lagos and Abuja. This was the emergence of the nationwide spread of the virus. The Federal Government through the Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority (NCAA) restricted International Commercial flights into the country effective from 23rd March, 2020 (Onyeji, 2020). On the same day, Nigeria registered her first fatality; a 67 year old male returnee from the United Kingdom who already had underlying medical issues.

The Federal Government responded with the authorization of the closure of all non-essential services (businesses and industries) and the restriction of movement of people in Lagos State, Ogun State and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja on 29th March, 2020. Most state governments restricted public gatherings and there were restrictions on inter-state movement. The Federal Government later authorized the gradual easing of the lockdown with previously restricted states on the 4th of March, 2020.

It is pertinent to mention that the Federal Government set up a formidable response in the fight against Covid-19 in Nigeria with the aid of different ministries and government agencies, one of which is the NCDC. Isolation centres were established in some states and health workers were stationed in the centres. A twelve member task force was set up to champion the battle against Covid-19 led by the Secretary to the Federal Government, Mr. Boss Mustapha. The task force mandate is to create a workable national response plan that would be revised on a daily basis as requirements change (Onyeji (2020). The outbreak of the Covid-19 in Nigeria had tremendous effect on the social, economic and religious lives of the citizens.

Biblical Allusion to Pandemic/Plague

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for pestilence or plague is *dever* which is used over 100 times in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is meant to connote all sorts of distempers and calamities. The word is also extended to all epidemical and contagious diseases (Dwyer, 2020). In the biblical usage, it generally indicates that pestilences are divine visitation upon sinful mankind (Leviticus 26: 25). The term is also used frequently in prophetic literatures and it is mostly associated with sword and famine.

The first account of plague in the Old Testament was the ten plagues that devastated the land of Egypt in Exodus (Chapters 1 – 12). The plagues are;

- a. Nile turns to blood (7: 14 – 25)
- b. The plague of frogs (8: 1 -15)
- c. The plague of gnats (8: 16 – 19)
- d. The plagues of flies (8: 20 – 32)
- e. Death of livestock (9: 1-7)
- f. Plague of Boils (9: 8 – 12)
- g. Plague of Hail (9: 13 – 25)
- h. Plague of locust (10: 1 – 12)
- i. Plague of darkness (10: 21 – 29)
- j. Death of first born (11:5,12:1-51)

The biblical narratives assert that in all of this, Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he refused to let the Israelites go (Exodus 7:3,14:4,8). However, some scientists like Trevisanato (De Gruyter, 2010) argue that the plagues were the outcome of some natural phenomena that happened in this geographical area. One of the theories propounded is the volcanic eruption theory. This theory states that the plagues were fallout of volcanic eruption on the Island Santorini in the South Greece (around 1620 – 1600 BC). This eruption would have caused the winds to carry volcanic ash to Egypt at some point over the summer and the toxic acids in the volcanic ash would have included the mineral cinnabar, which could have been capable of turning a river to a blood like red colour. The accumulated acidity in the water would have caused frogs to leap out and search for a clean water and so on (Waxman, 2019). Despite the position of scientists on the plagues, the biblical account says that God brought the plagues on Egypt in order to set His people free from the bondage of the Egyptians.

Plagues are also mentioned in the prophetic books of the Old Testament. In the books of Jeremiah 14:2, God rebuked the Israelites for their transgressions and promise not to listen to their cry and not to accept their offerings. Rather, He will make an end of them by sword, famine and pestilence. In the same vein, Ezekiel prophesy the destruction of Israel by sword, famine and plague because of the evil abominations of the house of Judah (Ezekiel 6: 11-12). A parallel passage can also be found in Amos when he says “I sent plagues among you as I did to Egypt. I killed your young men with the sword, along with your captured horses. I filled your nostrils with the stench of your camps, yet, you have not returned to me declares the Lord” (Amos 4: 10). From the prophetic statements, one can deduce that plagues are consequences of divine wrath vested on man as punishment for his sin.

In the New Testament, the Greek word for plagues is *Loimos*, translated Pestilence. Luke 2: 11 talks about the signs of end time, which will be characterized by earthquake, plagues, famine and fearful signs from heaven. All these are happenings in the contemporary world. Jesus admonished his disciples to watch out that they are not deceived. “For many will come in my name, claiming to be the messiah and will deceive many.” “You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed... Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains.”

In the apocalyptic writing of John, there are so many references to plagues. The book of Revelation talks about the seven angels with the seven last plagues ‘which are symbols of God’s wrath (Rev. 15:1). These angels were said to possess the power to shut the sky, that no rain will fall, they have power over the waters to turn to blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire (Rev. 11:6). Apostle John was also given the revelation of ‘a pale horse’ whose rider’s name was ‘Death’ and ‘Hades’ his followers. They were given authority over one fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and pestilence ... (Rev. 6:8). From the passage above, it suffices to concede that plagues and pandemic in the New Testament are symbols of the close of age (end time).

Hermeneutical Analysis of Exodus 15:26 in Relation to Covid 19

The Book of Exodus is the second book of the Old Testament scriptures. It is an epic dominated by the central figure of Moses. The book derives its name from the exodus or departure of the Israelites from the bondage of the Egyptian. Exodus 15:26 states;

If you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to His commands and keep all His decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases, I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, who heals you (NIV).

The above statement was made by God to the Israelites in the desert. After travelling for three days without water, the people finally find a water source, only to be bitterly disappointed when they discover that the water is undrinkable. Hence, the water was named “Marah” meaning “bitter.” The people grumble and ask Moses what they would drink. Moses seeks help from God and God instructed him to throw a piece of wood or a tree into the water, which will then miraculously become drinkable.

At the same time as providing a solution to their water shortage, God reminds the Israelites of the importance of keeping the commitment they have

made if they are to experience his healings. *“If you listen (harken) to the voice of the Lord your God.”* God promised the Israelites not to bring the diseases of the Egyptian upon them. *“I will not bring the disease of the Egyptians upon you.”* God is reminding the people that he had not only brought plagues on the Egyptians but he had also kept His people from being affected.

The bone of contention lies in the fact that Covid-19 pandemic is one of the results of man’s disobedience to the commandment of God. This assertion is buttressed by the Psalmist:

The precepts of the Lord are right giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure enduring forever. The ordinances of the Lord are sure..... they are more precious than gold . . . they are sweeter than honey . . . by them is your servant warned: in keeping them there is great reward (Psalm 19: 18-11 NIV).

There is reward in keeping the commandment of God and calamity follows disobedience to His ordinance. There is a general principle that when man obeys God’s laws, his days will be lengthened and when he disobeys His laws by living a careless and self-led lives, then his days may be shortened (Deut. 32: 46 – 47). In addition, man is given the privilege to enjoy peace even in the world of troubles and fear when he keeps the laws of God (Isaiash 26:3, Phillippians 4: 6-7).

Looking at the above biblical passage in relation to Covid-19 pandemic in the world and in Nigeria in particular, one can deduce that the pandemic is not unconnected with man’s misuse of freewill, which according to this paper is characterized by injustice, nepotism, corruption, marginalization, misappropriation of the common wealth by political leaders, kidnapping and incessant killings and so on. In the name of modern civilization, man has perverted the course of nature by getting involved in sodonic activities such as lesbianism, homosexuality, gay marriages, bestiality to mention a few.

Coupled with the above, moral institutions such as the family, school and church no longer hold the society in firm grasp as it once did. Family values had been undermined and slaughtered at the temple of wealth. Ethics and moral instructions had been relegated to the background in the school curriculum and in the name of science and technology. Churches no longer preach the fear of God, instead, emphasis is placed on the doctrine of “prosperity.”

The Biblical text clearly states that if the Israelites will listen to the voice of God and do that which is right in His eyes, and if they pay attention to His commandments, He will not bring any of the diseases he brought on the Egyptian on them. This text is also applicable to Nigeria and the world at large.

If Nigerians could heed to the voice of God and do what is right before Him, the Covid-19 pandemic will be a thing of the past. Doing what is right according to the researcher is to uphold justice, equity and fairness; loving our neighbours as ourselves irrespective of tribe and ethnic differences; having concern for the under privileged and the down trodden in the society; putting an end to indiscriminate killing of innocent souls and tribal clashes among others. On the part of our political leaders, they should rule with the fear of God and love for humanity. It is an astute truth that today, we live in a world where many things seem to have changed and are still changing from the ideals, cherished culture, spiritual truths, moral values and systems that were God-derived and which sustained past generations who lived better life styles and ran better governments and societies than ours (Asaju, 2020). One of the consequences of this tragic shift in cultures and values is the Covid-19 pandemic that afflicted the world.

Conclusion

This paper examines the origin and spread of Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on human society especially Nigeria. It also examines the relationship between Covid-19 pandemic and plagues in the Bible. In Exodus 15: 26, God promised the Israelites to keep them from the diseases of the Egyptian if only they obey His rules and commandments. It is therefore concluded that the promise of God to the Israelites is still relevant to the contemporary Nigerian society. If only we can revisit our moral values and ideal cultural heritage and toe the path of righteousness, only then we can be beneficiaries of God's protection from any form of diseases.

Recommendations

In light of the above, the following recommendations are made;

- Nigerians should re-orientate themselves by changing from materialistic values and pursue the values of truthfulness, honesty and fairness
- Religious leaders should preach the message of godliness and de-emphasize on the message of prosperity.
- Nigerians should imitate the life of Jesus by showing love for one's neighbor and helping the needy in their immediate environment.
- Political leaders are enjoined to be truthful, transparent and serviceable. They should consider the welfare of the masses that voted them into power.
- Moral education should be prioritized and made compulsory in the school curriculum.

- The church should continue to emphasize on the ethics of Christianity and the fear of God.

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