

Contextualization of Matthew 8:17 as a Therapeutic Response to Covid-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

Egwuanikwu, Mary Ifechukwude & Okoh Blessing Uenoson

Abstract

COVID–19 pandemic overwhelmed the entire world, and consequently created panic in the social space. This disease which originated in Wuhan, China, stretched its tentacles across the globe, including Nigeria which is one of the most vulnerable African nations due to the low standard of her healthcare system. The havoc wreaked on humanity worldwide and the plausibility of its spread posed great insecurity to human existence and restricted relationships. At the moment, there is no known cure for this pandemic, caused by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Virus. It is a very contagious disease that is transmitted through contact with droplets from an infected person. Sadly, vaccination cannot completely eradicate the coronavirus. The study aims to assess the socio-religious implications of COVID–19 Pandemic and to apply Matthew 8:17 as a panacea for this disease. The research employed historical, descriptive, analytical, and exegetical methods. The paper concludes that the virus is still in existence, hence the possibility of a new stream of eruption. Thus, by connecting Jesus' healing authority to Isaiah's prophecy, Matthew shows that Jesus, the sovereign king, has the power of God to overcome all plagues, pains and struggles of man. Through his sacrificial death, he addressed the root problem, which is sin, so that man can be free from its consequences. The paper, therefore, recommends reliance on the spiritual cum faith remedy that Christianity offers, as buttressed in Matthew 8:17 to checkmate further outbreaks of the disease. In addition, Government should ensure that individuals comply with the vaccination exercise to curtail the spread of the virus.

Keywords: COVID-19, Contextualization, Social, Religion, Matthew 8:17 and Therapeutic

Introduction

The world faced an unparalleled global medical challenge during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Nigerian was no exception. The disease seemed to hold no bar but rather continued its relentless march across the globe. The virus nearly locked down the entire universe and it was reported to have claimed several lives worldwide. Huma et al, (2021) observed that the Coronavirus created huge security challenges in Nigeria during its outbreak in February 2020. The havoc wreaked on humanity worldwide and the plausibility of its spread posed great insecurity to human existence and restricted relationships. As of the moment, there is no known cure for the virus. Individuals are infected by direct contact with droplets from an infected person. Older people and those with chronic medical conditions such as diabetes and heart diseases are most vulnerable to this pandemic (Abulude & Abulude, 2020). The symptoms are fever, flu (influenza) cough and shortness of breath. In serious cases, it may cause pneumonia or difficulty in breathing. For an individual to be pronounced COVID-19 infected, a test is required. To halt the spread of this horrible monster, preventive actions

included: staying at home, covering mouth and nose with a mask when coughing or sneezing, immediate disposal of the used mask, washing hands with soap, use of sanitisers, constant cleaning of touched surfaces and objects, as well as social distancing.

Sadly, the principal strategy for curtailing the transmission of the COVID-19 pandemic which is social distancing is against human nature. The reason is that human beings naturally love interactions and a communal lifestyle. The fight against COVID-19 culminated in the development of over 170 vaccines ((Boahui, 2022). They are all geared towards immunity to the virus, and probable stoppage of transmission by stirring an immune response to an antigen, a molecule found on the virus (Boahui, 2022). Unfortunately, vaccination does not necessarily destroy the coronavirus, but only reduces its transmission. According to World Health Organization (WHO, 2022), the following vaccines against COVID-19 have met the necessary criteria for safety and efficacy: Astra Zeneca / Oxford Vaccine, Johnson & Johnson Moderna, Pfizer /Bion Tech, Sinopharm, Sinovac, Covaxin, Covovax, Nuvaxovid. Conversely, the World Health Organization observed that people could still be infected with COVID-19, and spread it to others after being vaccinated, hence the necessity to continue to the best of one's ability to keep oneself and others healthy by strictly adhering to the rules of keeping a safe distance from others and avoiding crowds, wearing of well-fitted masks and others. If you do get COVID-19 after vaccination, you are more likely to have mild or no symptoms, than if you had not been vaccinated.

From the above assertion, vaccination may not completely eradicate the coronavirus. The virus is still in existence and thus there exists the possibility of a new stream of eruption. Although, people have resumed a normal lifestyle due to a reduction in the spread of the disease, the need to tackle this menace in order to avoid further outbreaks has therefore become inevitable. It is in light of this that the Christian faith offers a positive and durable remedy for this ravaging pandemic. Essentially, this paper examines the effectiveness of the Christian religion with reference to Matthew 8:17 in providing healing and succour for mankind against this ravaging disease. Matthew 8:17 reveals a therapeutic mode for this life-threatening monster through salvation experience. Thus, the study employs historical, descriptive and exegetical methodology in the quest for a solution to this pandemic

Understanding the Corona Virus Disease

The novel coronavirus, popularly known as COVID-19 is a deadly disease. It is a type of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). This disease is global in nature; it cuts across

other nations and continents of the world, hence it is regarded as a pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) described COVID-19 as a viral infection that causes respiratory illness (WHO, 2020). COVID-19 was first discovered in Wuhan, China in December 2019 and consequently spread to almost all continents of the world due to its contagious nature. The first incident of COVID-19 in Nigeria occurred on 27th February 2020 through an Italian businessman who visited the country (Omaka - Amori et al 2020).

This health-ravaging pandemic forced so many people across the globe to their early graves. Older people with chronic medical histories are more susceptible to dying of COVID-19 than children (Abulude, 2020). The fastest mode to transmit this disease is through individuals' contact with droplets of an infected person. COVID-19 victims usually experience signs of fever, dry cough or shortness of breath (Omaka - Amori et al 2020). Some of the outlined measures to curtail the spread of the virus are the use of nose masks, regular washing of hands and social distancing (Amzat et al, 2020).

Social Implications of COVID - 19 Pandemic

COVID-19 caused social disruption in Nigeria and the world at large by inhibiting social relations. The idea of “social distancing” negates regular social interaction which is the bedrock of human society (Amzat et al, 2020). As an infectious disease of global health importance, COVID-19 disturbed the usual norms of close physical contact. The reason is that the pandemic is transmitted through contact with persons who are already infected. The disease negatively affected the world, with regard to human migration. There were shutdowns of airports as well as the temporary postponement of social events which included sports; festivals among others and the like were temporarily postponed. As a result of globalization, the health risk of contagious diseases could be a global pandemic. This is based on the fact that trade and travels usually facilitate the free movement of people who by chance could move with a health risk like the coronavirus. For instance, with one imported index case, the death of an Italian businessman on 27th February 2020, Nigeria and other countries faced tremendous health challenges which resulted in several deaths (Omaka -Amori et al 2020).

The lockdown enforced by the Federal and State governments created a drastic reduction in social gatherings. Marriages and burial ceremonies were seriously affected. Nightclubbing, seminars, workshops and conferences were also limited. Extravagant marriages and burials were either postponed or done in low-key celebrations. There was a sharp decrease in the quality of true and real human relationships because of the apprehension of being infected

by the disease (Abulude & Abulude, 2020). The home front was also not left out in this development. The presence of family members, which included the father, mother, children and others at home resulted in increased pressure, especially on the father who is the breadwinner and always busy at work or elsewhere. Generally, the home became noisy, especially where there were young children. Besides, there was the development of physical and mental fatigue because of fewer activities and if not properly handled, it would have led to ill-health.

During the period, the prices of various items escalated which led to an incremental rise in inflation. Stadia were turned into isolation centres rather than sporting activities, thereby affecting the social life of the people. The economic effect of the coronavirus could be a fertile ground for disgruntlement and social unrest. Economic losses often result in visible cracks where incidences of once socially unacceptable norms become more frequent. Evidence abound that isolation, social distancing and quarantine implemented were key policy challenges because social connectedness is the currency that nurtures the much-needed resilience for communities to persevere in the face of crisis. Social networks which provide support and regulate well-being are often weakened through restrictions. Isolation measures without the consideration of local context can lead to stress, dysfunctional mental health and in some cases, prolonged protest ((Abulude & Abulude, 2020).

Religious Implications of COVID-19 Pandemic

The influence of religion on the social life of societies is indisputable. This is due to its inherent function of giving meaning to the surrounding world, legitimizing the existing social reality and integrating society. Religion is an integral part of human civilization. It is critical to the survival of human behaviour and society. Religion acts as a double-edged sword as it unites or divides people (Huma, et al, 2021). The spread of the Coronavirus adversely affected the lives of people worldwide. During this period, people experienced anxiety, depression and panic. They, therefore, adopted various measures to cope with their mental health challenges (Boguszewski, 2020). Quadri (2020) asserts that being a vital means of dealing with unexpected stressful and depressive circumstances like the COVID-19 pandemic, people resorted to religiosity.

The Federal and State Governments enforced a lockdown on two different occasions as a measure to curb the transmission of the deadly virus. To ensure compliance with COVID-19 formalities of social distancing, the use of nose masks, washing of hands with soap and water, and use of sanitisers were introduced, while large gatherings were prohibited. As a matter of

fact, the Government specifically directed that religious gatherings above twenty members were forbidden. These regulations on religious gatherings immensely affected religious activities throughout the nation. Consequently, some people resolved to remain in their houses to avoid incurring the wrath of the law. The restrictions placed on worship centres adversely affected people's religiosity. However, most denominations resorted to online live Church Services which was very beneficial to both Christians and non-Christians. Unfortunately, some Churches and Mosques that defaulted on the COVID-19 regulations were sanctioned. Notable among this group were five pastors in Lagos State who were arrested for non-compliance with Government directives (Alabi, 2020). Abulude and Abulude (2020) recounted another incident where an Imam in Bornu State was arrested and sanctioned for encouraging worshippers to congregate at the mosque for the weekly Friday services.

Greek Text of Matthew 8:17

17a ὅπως πληρωθῆ τό ρήθεν δια Ησαίου τοῦ Προφήτου λεγοντος

17b Αὐτος τας ἀσθενείας ἡμῶν ἔλαβεν καί τας νοσοῦς ἐβάστασεν

Exegetical Analysis of Matthew 8:17

From the above, in verse 17^a, ‘ὅπως πληρωθῆ’ is a phrase with a conjunction and could be translated as “*in order that... might be fulfilled*”. The object of the verb is ‘τό ρήθεν δια Ησαίου τοῦ Προφήτου’. The ‘τό ρήθεν’ could therefore be translated either as ‘*was*’ or ‘*had been*’, while ‘δια’ is translated either as “*through*” or ‘*by*’. In this case, ‘in order’ or ‘through’ are more appropriate. Therefore, the object is translated as “*what had been spoken through Isaiah the prophet*”. Also, ‘λεγοντος’ could be translated as “saying”.... 17a is thus translated as “*In order that what had been spoken through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled saying*”...In verse 17b, ‘Αὐτος τας ἀσθενείας ἡμῶν ἔλαβεν’, which is the subject of the first clause, is affixed with another pronoun ‘Αὐτος’. It can therefore be properly translated as ‘*himself*’. The verb is better translated as *took*; hence it should be understood as ‘*took upon himself*’. Also, the object may be translated as ‘*our infirmities, illnesses or sicknesses*. Inadvertently, the first clause is translated as “*He himself took our infirmities, illnesses or sicknesses*. ‘Also, ‘καί τας νοσοῦς ἐβάστασεν’ could be translated as ‘*took away,*’ ‘*carried*’ or ‘*bore*’. This verb appears three times in Matthew (3:11, 8:17 & 20:12). But Matthew (20:12) reflects its exact meaning as ‘*bear, or carry*’ (Robertson & Davis, 1977). In his comment on Matthew 8:17, Menken (2003) remarks that the verb explicitly denotes the removal of sicknesses or diseases, but Beaton (2005) contends that the linguistic evidence and other facts embedded in the context as well as Mathew's theology are complicated.

Woosong (2016) avows that carry/bear, rather than 'remove' are the best possible translations. If Matthew implied 'remove', he would have used "ἀπαίρω"(19:15) or "ἀίρω" (13:12) which clearly portrays the term 'remove'. Besides, carry/bear overlaps with סבל in Isaiah (53:4a) in this context. In order to retain the authority of the quoted Old Testament prophecy, Matthew obviously applied the Greek words that have common overlapping meanings with the Hebrew words. The Greek "ἐβάστασεν" was, therefore, used to align with the original Old Testament text. Certainly, the translation of the Greek word as carrying/bear implies that the 'νοσοι' is removed or taken away from the suffering people. Since bore and carried are similar, they could be used interchangeably; hence any of them is a suitable meaning for the Greek word. But in the absence of bore or carried, 'took away' could also be considered.

17a "In order that what had been spoken through Isaiah the Prophet might be fulfilled, saying",

17b "He himself took out (infirmities, illnesses, sicknesses) and carried/took away the diseases/sicknesses/sorrows. Matthew quoted a passage in the Old Testament (Isaiah 53:4a) to emphasise that Jesus' healing is a fulfilment of the scripture. His allusion to the Old Testament scripture that foretells the emergence of the saviour depicts the fact that Jesus' mission to the earth far outweighs healing of diseases; hence he refers to the coming Messiah as a suffering servant who was to bear the pains, sufferings and sins of mankind. Romig (2020) posits that prophet Isaiah did not just make reference to physical wounds but also spiritual ones. This explains the fact that Jesus' love and care for mankind is proof of his ability to forgive human sins and heal their hearts. Such love compelled him to bear our plagues on the cross. His death on the cross dealt a great blow to all plagues, including COVID-19 pandemic. The healing in Isaiah (53:4a) is an indicator to identify the servant. In addition, the text in its original context prophetically portrays the servant of such healing as one to solve the problems of diseases. This servant is Jesus whose death guarantees security and eternal life for humanity. In this COVID-19 era, therefore, Christians' understanding of their security in Christ should propel them to sacrificially express love to their neighbours who are terrified of the ravaging pandemic.

Contextualizing Mathew 8:17 as a Therapeutic Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 pandemic is a plague that claimed several lives across the globe. Obviously, the fear of the coronavirus is the beginning of wisdom for every sane individual. This monster is a threat to humanity, Christians and non-Christians alike. This section, therefore, is set to contextualize Matthew 8:17 in the light of this disease. Interestingly, Matthew 8:17 capture the reality of Jesus' healing all manner of sicknesses which includes COVID – 19. In-depth knowledge and understanding of the biblical position over diseases will be beneficial to

Christians, especially sufferers of the Covid-19 pandemic. Ultimately, it will serve as a therapy for those who would by faith identify with Jesus Christ.

Contextualization of Matthew 8:17 as a therapeutic mode entails a holistic understanding of healing, not just curing the diseases, but restoring the sick, COVID-19 victims inclusive to a state of perfect well-being. This wholeness involves the restoration of peoples' emotional, spiritual and physical health which results in their social integration into their families and communities (Culpepper, 2016). The author of Matthew's gospel buttresses the significance of Jesus's healing ministry by outlining a structure of materials in Matthew 8-9 which provides a clue to such emphasis. These chapters comprise three units of miracle stories with two, three or four healings in each one, with teachings on discipleship interspersed between the three triads (Woosong, 2016). However, the thrust of this paper is the first unit which was succinctly summarized in 8:17. Thus, unit one contains three healing miracles as follows: Mathew 8:1-4: Jesus cleanses a Leper; 8:5-13: Jesus heals the Centurion's Servants, and 8: 14-17: Jesus heals Peter's Mother-in-law and others.

The above information exposes the healing miracles of Jesus which involves three different social groups with diverse ailments such as Leprosy, paralysis, fever, demons, haemorrhage, blindness and madness. Jesus healed people with ordinary sicknesses like a fever as well as estranged individuals such as leprosy patients, like COVID-19 victims without discrimination: In the Bible, lepers are considered unclean or defiled, hence they are isolated from the community. Such isolation is usually devastating, which is equivalent to a death sentence (Carson et al, 1995). This could be likened to Corona Virus victims who are separated from their loved ones and the entire society and quarantined in order to avoid infecting others with the disease (Leviticus, 13:45-46). Since Jesus has authority over all diseases he healed people with socially alienated illnesses and automatically reintegrated them into society.

Mathew quotes a passage in the Old Testament– “Surely he has borne our grief and carried our sorrows” (Isaiah, 53:4a, Revised Standard Version). That alludes to the coming Saviour. He refers to this Saviour as the suffering servant who came to bear the pains, sufferings and sins of humanity (Romig, 2020). Thus, Matthew 8:17 "This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases” vividly highlights Jesus' power over illnesses as reflected through his action in “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases (Matthew 8:17b). Thus, it expresses the fact that Jesus reigns supreme over every pandemic, virus and other plagues. It is an assurance of divine security for every Christian. Romig (2020) remarks that Jesus willingly bore the sins of mankind, which could be regarded

as outright disobedience to God; and a form of the virus in the world that disrupts his creation. Invariably, the mission of Jesus on earth is to heal our plagues.

Implications of Jesus' Healing for Christians in the face of COVID – 19 Pandemic

So far, the study reveals that Jesus has authority over diseases. He willingly and compassionately reintegrated the socially estranged individuals into society through his healing ministry. According to Adeyemo (2006), Matthew chapter eight demonstrates Jesus' Lordship over different aspects of diseases. Human beings from various societies have bodily defects that make them suffer exclusion, isolation and the even worse situation at times. In some African cultures, Nigeria in particular, disability is viewed as punishment for evil deeds. This assertion lends credence to Matthew (1:21) which underlines that Jesus' mission on earth is to save sinners. Ralph (2002) concurs that sickness originates from sin which is a violation of divine principles. Thus, Jesus addressed sin through his death on the Cross of Calvary which culminated in the spiritual and physical liberation of humanity. Several people in Nigeria who suffer from Coronavirus are often treated as outcasts when they are quarantined. Apparently, Jesus has the power to deal with incurable diseases and the compassion to restore desperate individuals struggling with social stigma, isolation and loneliness. It is therefore expedient for Nigerian Christians to do likewise.

Christians are admonished in the Bible to be their brothers' keepers. This is in accordance with Jesus' statement "I was sick and you did not visit me..." (Matthew 25:41-46). This explains the fact that human beings are bound to each other in such a way that no one should be forsaken in times of distress, but is obliged to render assistance to those in need. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in significant mortality and morbidity worldwide. The devastating experience affected the general well-being of the Nigerian populace. During this crisis situation, people were faced with the challenges of coping with anxiety, depression, fear, stress and losses (Huma et al, 2021). Obviously, religion enables people to deal with various challenges ranging from positive interpretation of suffering, accepting injustice and overcoming daily difficulties. In a society such as ours, bedevilled with bad governance, and a lack of health facilities to cater for the well-being of the sick, it is normal for the masses to be afraid or worried over the horrible COVID-19 pandemic.

However, knowledge of Jesus' capability and the realization that nothing can happen outside his will certainly dispel such an illusion. The assurance that Jesus is Lord over sicknesses and plagues should give us peace and rest of mind. Undoubtedly, Jesus is Lord over all diseases, including the Coronavirus. His sacrificial death on the cross established

redemption and eternal life for those who repose their confidence in him. Christians are eternally secure in Christ. The fact that Jesus touched a leper was a powerful demonstration of his willingness to put loving concern above social taboo. He asked the leper to show himself to the priest. This served as a testimony to both Jesus' respect for the law and his healing power as Messiah (Carson, et al, 1995).

Jesus took away both physical and spiritual infirmities by physical and spiritual healing. By word of command, he healed the physically sick. At the cross, he healed the spiritually sick (Diskson, 2001). Therefore, it is the responsibility of Christians to engage in a ministry of love and comfort toward Coronavirus victims and their families. Jesus is reigning and having dominion over all plagues, diseases and viruses, including the coronavirus. The early Church knew this and certainly, nothing falls short of the power and authority of Jesus Christ. Whether dead or alive, they were saved in him. We have a modern medical system with sterile environments and face masks today. We have all manner of ways to stay safe. The early Christians did not have these, but they had Jesus. This is the key reason they did not entertain any Christians need not fear. Nothing is going to happen outside his will for them.

Conclusion

The study has illustrated that COVID-19 was real in Nigeria based on the daily records of increased cases and deaths. Consequently, the Federal and State Governments adopted measures to curtail the spread of diseases ranging from the washing of hands, and use of sanitisers, to social distancing. At the moment, there is no known cure for this pandemic, caused by severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Virus. The virus is still in existence, hence the possibility of a new surge in the outbreak. However, the exploration of the healing narratives in Matthew 8:17, quoted from Isaiah (53:4a) reveals that Jesus has power over diseases, including COVID -19 pandemic. By connecting Jesus' healing authority to Isaiah's prophecy, Matthew shows that Jesus, the sovereign king, has the power of God to overcome all the pains and struggles of man. As sin entered the world, pains and struggles also entered. Therefore, man lives in a world marked by evil, and suffering from diseases. Through his sacrificial death, Jesus addressed the root problem, which is sin. He paid with his life to overcome sin so that man can be free from the consequences of sin. Certainly, the essence of Jesus' healing is not just to cure but to restore individuals to spiritual wholeness and social reintegration with their families and communities. Therefore Christians could depend on God for protection and healing from this hydra-headed monster.

Recommendations

This recommends the following

1. Christians and non-Christians should rely on the spiritual cum faith remedy that Christianity offers, as buttressed in Matthew 8:17 to checkmate further outbreaks of the coronavirus.
2. All diseases including the coronavirus were borne by Jesus as reflected in Matthew 8:17, hence the need for all to identify with him.
3. Since Jesus has power over diseases including COVID-19, Christians could depend on God for protection and healing from this dreadful disease.
4. Government should ensure that individuals comply with the vaccination exercise to curtail the spread of the virus.
5. Government should intensify their campaign on the consequences of COVID-19 to checkmate further outbreaks of the disease.

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