

COVID-19 STIGMATIZATION: A BIBLICAL REMEDY

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***Abstract:** In Ghana, several people who suffer from COVID-19 are inhumanely ostracized by their families and communities. In a country where 70% of the population is Christian, the situation raises a pastoral challenge for the Christian Communities: how to overcome stigmatization to reintegrate COVID-19 victims? The article searches for an answer in the Bible, through a reading of selected passages from Lev. 13—14; the book of Job and the gospel narratives. The aim is to engage the biblical text with the contemporary reality to educate the Christian communities and to give hope to Ghanaians who after suffering for COVID-19 are now stigmatized by family, friends, and society. The article ends with some recommendations to create an environment where correct information, trust in medical care and pastoral support can not only prevent the spreading of the virus but curb its social effects.*

Key Words: The book of Job; COVID-19; Lev. 13—14; Social alienation; Stigmatization.

Introduction

The emergence of COVID-19 and its subsequent stigmatization has outgrown a vicious alienation that is ‘suicidal.’ This obnoxious stigmatization is sometimes inflicted by Ghanaian society on those who suffer mysterious misfortunes.¹ Those who suffer unimaginable misfortunes are regarded by society as the cause of their suffering and as a result, they are often abandoned by society to suffer their fate.

Stigma is a preconceived social characteristic that makes people discriminate against a person who is seen as different from the members of society.² In the case of COVID-19, it came with the fear of the virus and the lack of trust in the government agencies’ ability to contain the virus: does the Ghana Health Service have sufficient and efficient

¹ Cf. Ted Nelson-Adjakpey, *The Faith of our Fathers: From Tradition to Christ* (Rome: Olimpia, 2008), 107-108.

² David B. Guralnik, ed., *Webster’s New World Dictionary* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1988), 1316-1317.

facility, trained personnel, and the ability to test, trace and treat infected persons?

What aggravated the situation is the ‘spiritualization’ of the virus, through prophetic messages that demonized COVID-19 as the manifestation of the punishment of God for the sin of humanity.³ It follows that in the common perception, those who are infected must have sinned or shared in the sin of others. Thus, with the fear of being infected by the virus, there is also the terror of the curse associated with it.

To sum up, in the contemporary Ghanaian context, those who suffer from COVID-19 are ostracised for two reasons: the uncertainty of the country’s medical capability to contain the disease since it has no cure; and the false prophecy of ‘men and women of God’ who demonized the disease and provided doubtful remedies often justified with an improper interpretation of biblical texts.

Against this backdrop, the article explores how the process of reintegration described in Leviticus 13—14; Job’s fight against the doctrine of ‘Deeds and Consequences;’ and the attitude of Jesus towards lepers can challenge the attitude of Ghanaian Christians towards COVID-19 victims.

The aim is double: to *reveal* how the pandemic has strained relationships and substituted the Christian values of love for the neighbour in need with traditional fear and misconception, and to *transform* the Christian communities into what they are called to be: the family of God, a place of hope and solidarity for all excluded and marginalized, comprised the victims of COVID-19.

The work is divided into four parts: part one deals with COVID-19 and stigmatization, part two treats the emergence of COVID-19 in Ghana, part three deals with biblical examples of stigmatization and reintegration, and finally part four offers some recommendations to curb the menace.

³ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu "Dealing with a Spiritual Virus: Whither the Prophetic?" *Religious Matters in an Entangled World*, April 13, 2020; www.religiousmatters.nl/dea [Accessed on August 8, 2020].

COVID-19 and its Stigmatization: The Cause of Social Alienation

COVID-19 is the new acronym derived for the Coronavirus Disease 2019, an illness caused by a novel coronavirus now called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2; formerly called 2019-nCoV). The name was chosen to avoid stigmatizing the virus's origin in terms of population, geography or animal associations.⁴ It was first identified during an outbreak of respiratory illness in a wet market in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. It was reported to World Health Organization (WHO) on December 31, 2019. On January 30, 2020, COVID-19 was declared a global health emergency and on March 11, 2020, a global pandemic. Comparable to COVID-19 was the Spanish Flu of 1918.⁵ Epidemics like polio, HIV, Ebola, MERSA, SARS, and Swine Flu, though in some cases more virulent, were much smaller in scale, shorter and less disruptive to society.⁶

Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that can cause mild to moderate upper-respiratory tract illnesses such as the common cold, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). Every continent in the world has been affected by this highly contagious disease. According to Elflein, as of 10 November 2020, there were 525,204 new cases of COVID-19 worldwide. The total number of cases has reached almost 51 million, with over 1.2 million deaths.⁷

Researchers believe COVID-19 probably mutated from a Coronavirus common in animals, which was transmitted to humans in the Wuhan market. When an infected person coughs or sneezes, COVID-19 is transmitted through expelled pellets like droplets. These droplets

⁴ WHO and UNICEF, "Social Stigma associated with COVID-19. A guide to preventing and addressing social stigma," February 24, 2020; <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronavirus/covid19-stigma-guide.pdf>, 2-3.

⁵ The Spanish flu pandemic was the deadliest in history, infected an estimated 500 million people, one-third of the world's population and killed between 20-50 million people. It was first observed in Europe, United States and parts of Asia before swiftly spreading to other parts of the world. "Spanish Flu," *History*; www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/1918-flu-pandemic [Accessed November 11, 2020].

⁶ B. Person, *et al.*, "Fear and Stigma: The Epidemic within the SARS Outbreak," *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 10, no. 2 (2004): 358-363.

⁷ John Elflein, "New Cases of COVID-19 Worldwide from January 23 to November 10, 2020, by day;" <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1103046/new-coronavirus-covid19-cases-number-worldwide-by-day> [Accessed November 11, 2020].

enter a person's system through 'contact routes,' such as the mouth, the eyes, or the nose and then inhaled into the lungs. Contact with surfaces that have been infected is another means for contracting the virus.

The disease was first reported in Ghana on March 12, 2020. The Ghanaian public was gripped with fear and questioned how efficiently the health system could contain the disease in case people get infected.⁸ While the health sector promoted, testing, tracing, and treating to contain the virus, what stood out was stigmatization.

Stigmatization

Stigmatization is a distinguishing mark that confers and detracts from the character or reputation of a person, group, etc. in a form of disgrace or reproach that indicates an abnormality in a particular thing.⁹ Stigma is a "mark of shame"¹⁰ or "an attribute that is deeply discrediting within a particular social interaction,"¹¹ and is a global phenomenon.¹² Societies stigmatize some conditions and some behaviours because it provides for group solidarity as it helps to delineate 'outsiders' from 'insiders'.¹³

Link and Phelan sum up the process and influence of stigma from the perspective of inter-group relation of five mechanisms: status loss, social isolation, construction of negative stereotypes, labelling persons into distinct groups, and discrimination.¹⁴ Stigmatization is to label or to place a social tag that made the labelled vulnerable to psychological issues and may lead to mental distress just because society considers

⁸ Edward Amporful, "Covid-19 and Mental Health," *Ghanaian Times*, May 14, 2020. Amporful airs his thoughts on Liebermann, *et al.*, "Meeting the Mental Health Challenge of COVID-19 Pandemic" *Psychiatric Times*, April 24, 2020; <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/meeting-mental-health-challenge-covid-19-pandemic> [Accessed November 15, 2020].

⁹ Guralnik, ed., *Webster's New World Dictionary*, 1316-1317.

¹⁰ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, NT: Prentice Hall, 1963), 3.

¹¹ Goffman, *Stigma*, 3.

¹² G. T. Keusch, *et al.*, "Stigma and Global Health: Developing a Research Agenda," *Lancet* 367, no. 9509 (2006): 525-526.

¹³ Gerhard Falk, *STIGMA: How We Treat Outsiders*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 2001).

¹⁴ Bruce Link and Jo. Phelan, "Conceptualizing Stigma," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27 (2001): 363-385; www.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.363; WHO and UNICEF, "Social Stigma associated with COVID-19," 1.

them as such.¹⁵ According to Peck, stigma diminishes self-esteem and robs people of social opportunities, such as education, health and medical treatment, employment, and accommodation. It strains social relationships because one is socially excluded from the norms of society.¹⁶

Earnshaw notes stigmatization has been the result of any major pandemic or epidemic in the world.¹⁷ For instance, cholera and typhus outbreaks in 1892, were traced to Russian Jewish immigrants.¹⁸ In 1993, the outbreak of Hantavirus (Navajo disease) in the United States, led to the discrimination and stigmatization of the Native Americans in the region. Similarly, there were isolations and stigmatization in the Spanish Flu of 1918.¹⁹ Epidemics like polio, HIV, Ebola, MERSA, SARS, and Swine Flu, though in some cases more virulent, were much smaller in scale, shorter and less disruptive to society; yet still, their victims had their share of stigmatization.²⁰ To curtail the effect of the virus, WHO warns against panic stigmatization.²¹

The Emergence of COVID-19 in Ghana

After the first case of COVID-19 was announced in Ghana, the government imposed a lockdown in some parts of the country, closed schools, universities and places of worship, imposed the wearing of face masks, the hand-washing and the use of sanitisers. Unfortunately, the wearing of a mask was contrasted by some religious leaders as a

¹⁵ E. Dapaa, "COVID-19: Stop Stigmatizing Suspected Patients," *Eastern Regional Directorate of the Ghana Health Service*, (4/11/2020). Retrieved from <https://www.modern-ghana.com/news/994931/covid-19> [Accessed November 11, 2020].

¹⁶ Emily Peck, "Company Denied Woman Coronavirus Sick Leave, then Fired Her: Lawsuit," *Huffpost* June 3, 2020; <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/company-denied>; [Accessed November 11, 2020].

¹⁷ Valerie Earnshaw, "Don't let fear of Covid-19 Turn into Stigma" (June 4, 2020): <https://hbr.org/2020/04/dont-let-fear-of-covid-19-turn-into-stigma> [Accessed November 11, 2020].

¹⁸ "Typhus among Russian Jews; Outbreak of the Disease on the German Border." *New York Times*, April 21, 1892; <https://newrepublic.com/article/116867/sherwin> [Accessed November 11, 2020].

¹⁹ "The Spanish flu pandemic of 1918. "Spanish Flu - Symptoms, How It Began & Ended - HISTORY;" www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/1918-flu-pandemic [Accessed November 11, 2020].

²⁰ B. Person et al, "Fear and Stigma: The Epidemic within the SARS Outbreak," *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 10, no. 2 (2004): 358-363.

²¹ "Coronavirus," *GhanaianTimes* 21 April, 2020; <https://www.ghanaiantimes.com.gh>; WHO and UNICEF, "Social Stigma associated with COVID-19," 2-3.

sign of faithlessness, declaring that only God can protect the Nation. This false security was reinforced by prophecies that considering Ghana a religious Nation, assure the population of special protection of God: “COVID-19 will disappear on March 27, 2020;”²² “... no Ghanaian home and abroad would die from Coronavirus and that no one in government will be a victim to this virus;”²³ “The disease will not last another month and will disappear before Easter.”²⁴

Another attitude was the spiritualization of the virus. When the virus first appeared in China, Ghanaian prophets attributed it to the Chinese disobedience of one of their supreme gods.²⁵ When COVID-19 was detected in Ghana, it came to be attributed to the vices and sins of Ghanaians, a curse from the spirits for ingratitude to God (Luke 17:17),²⁶ or the work of evil spirits.²⁷

The coronavirus is a name, a person without body and in the name of Jesus, as we bow our knee and we pray, this plague, pestilence and virus will bow the knee and stand down and go back to where it came from.²⁸

Quickly, there were preventive and curative ‘medicines’ prepared by ‘several self-acclaimed prophets’ of God.²⁹ Some received recipes in a vision and claimed the virus burned the virus in their body;³⁰ others declared that their touch immunises believers from COVID-19; finally, some expressed the conviction that healing will follow the confession of sin(s) or exorcism of ‘COVID-19 devil.’ Fasting and

²² T. B. Joshua “Coronavirus will disappear on March 27, 2020;” <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/entertainment/Coronavirus-will-disappear-on-March-27-Prophet-T-B-Joshua-896788>; [Accessed July 26, 2020].

²³ “Prophetic Declarations on Coronavirus that Never Came to Pass,” July 22, 2020; <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Prophetic-declarations-on-coronavirus-that-never-came-to-pass-1013584> [Accessed July 26, 2020].

²⁴ See, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Coronavirus>. [Accessed at 10.15 am on July 25, 2020].

²⁵ <https://www.ghbase.com/eagle-prophet-reveals-the-real-cause-of-the-deadly-coronavirus-video/> March 13, 2020 [Accessed July 26, 2020].

²⁶ Joseph Fosu-Ankrah, “Pandemic, Prophets, and Policies: Religio-satirical Framing of Fear in the midst of ‘Corona’ in Ghana,” *Religious Matters in an Entangled World*, May 25, 2020; <https://religiousmatters.nl/pandemic-prophets-and-policies-religio-satirical-framing-of-fear-in-the-midst-of-corona-in-ghana/> [Accessed July 26, 2020].

²⁷ Nasiba Yakubu, “Duncan-Williams Declares 30-days Fasting, Prayers against Coronavirus,” March 16, 2020; <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national> [Accessed July 26, 2020].

²⁸ Yakubu, “Duncan-Williams.”

²⁹ These are the acclaimed men and women of God who prophesy in his name

³⁰ Cf. April 4, 2020; <https://m.peacefmonline.com/pages/showbiz/news/202004/404704.php>.

prayers were organized to prevent the disease from passing through airwaves, the borders, the high seas, and rivers of the country.³¹ An acronym, ‘Christ Overcomes Viruses and Diseases,’ claimed COVID-19 as a test of faith of Ghanaians and the world. In obedience to the voice of these prophets, ‘some smear their doors in the name of the blood of Jesus to protect their families.’³²

As a consequence, many Ghanaians live in fear of the alleged ‘curse of God’ and are ready to do anything and to pay any price to avoid this affliction. This fear opens them to manipulation and oppression in the name of God.

The Effects of COVID-19 Stigmatization

A rumour of the presence of a COVID-19 patient in a particular household is enough to cause stigmatisation.³³ Accordingly, Thomas observes that the stigma has become a challenge and is more devastating than the pandemic itself.³⁴

Unfortunately, the idea of isolation centres increased the stigmatisation of the affected persons. To avoid being stigmatised, people tend to conceal symptoms of COVID-19 from health authorities.³⁵ More regrettably, it has been reported that some health workers abandoned people who showed symptoms of the disease.³⁶ Stigmatisation affected frontline workers and their families as well.³⁷

³¹ Getrude Ankrah Nyavi, “No Government Official Will Die of Coronavirus – Duncan-Williams’ Prayer,” March 19, 2020; <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/no-government-official-will-die-of-coronavirus-duncan-williams-s-prayer.html> [Accessed on July 25 2020].

³² Asamoah-Gyadu, “Dealing with a Spiritual Virus.”

³³ Amporful, “Covid-19 and Mental Health;” D. Adom and J. Adu Mensah, “The Psychological Distress and Mental Health Disorders from COVID-19 Stigmatization in Ghana,” *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2020), 1–22; <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3599756>.

³⁴ Nardos Bekele Thomas, “Stigma and Misinformation from COVID-19 is Taking a Human Toll;” <https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/stigma-and-misinformation>; [Accessed November 11, 2020].

³⁵ D. Bruns et al, “COVID-19: Facts, Cultural Considerations, and Risk of Stigmatization.” *Journal of Transcultural Nursing* 31, no. 4 (2020): 326–332.

³⁶ E. Brown et al, “Anticipating and Mitigating the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Alzheimer’s Disease and Related Dementias,” *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 7 (2020), 1–10; <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jagp.2020.04.010>.

³⁷ L. Santarelli et al, “Relation Between Psychosomatic Disturbances and Job Stress in Video Display Unit Operators,” *Work* 64 (2019), 303–310; T. Ramaci et al, “Straining at Work and its Relationship with Personality Profiles and Individual Consequences in Healthcare Workers (HCWs),” *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* 17 (2020): 610.

Focusing on the Ghanaian context, a study revealed that the house of a recovered patient and his family were branded as a COVID-19 infected house and the local shops refuse to sell supplies to the family.³⁸ Kelenzi interviews a victim who described his situation as follows: “No one wants to do business with me and my family, as it stands my business is closed.”³⁹ His sister, who operates a restaurant was not immuned. She states, “I have lost customers, and people call me corona.”⁴⁰ Family and friends abandoned a loved one and those associated with her because she was affected.⁴¹ Such actions by the public have a dire effect on the mental health of the infected person and the family and lead to an emotional breakdown.⁴²

The level of stigmatization has lowered the bar of solidarity among people in society. At Kwame Nkrumah SHS, a final year student became ill, and the symptomatology suggested the possibility of COVID-19 infection. The teachers did not act, waiting for the needed COVID-19 medical personnel; they delayed, and the pupil died. It was later discovered that the illness was not COVID-19.⁴³ In another incident, a pregnant woman went to the hospital to deliver. In course of her delivery, she coughed, and the midwife and those around abandoned her for fear that she had COVID-19. Both the woman and the baby died.⁴⁴

³⁸ Amporful, “Covid-19 and Mental Health;” D. Adom and J. Adu Mensah, “The Psychological Distress and Mental Health Disorders from COVID-19 Stigmatization in Ghana.” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, (2020), 1–22; <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3599756>.

³⁹ Isaac Kelenzi, “Reports on Simon Teye Nortey,” May 12, 2020. <http://www.google.com/amp/s/amp.dw.com/en/ghana-covid-19-survivors-stigmatized/av-53418720>.

⁴⁰ <http://www.yourcommonwealth.org/social-development/health-safety-wellbeing/stigma-and-scars-of-coronavirus>; [Accessed November 22, 2020].

⁴¹ <https://www.facebook.com/planghana/videos/2724756017797171/?vh=e> [Accessed November 22, 2020].

⁴² A study among the youth in China showed a significant number of them suffered from issues of mental health due to the occurrence of COVID-19; see L. Liang et al, “The Effect of COVID-19 on Youth Mental Health.” *Psychiatric Quarterly* 1163 (2020); <https://doi.org/10.1007/s1126-020-09744-3>; Amporful, “Covid-19 and Mental Health;” C. H. Ko et al, “Psychosocial Impact Among the Public of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Epidemic in Taiwan,” *Psychiat Clin Neuros*, 60 (2006), 397–403; N. Yeung et al, “Population Responses During the Pandemic Phase of the Influenza a (H1N1) pdm09 Epidemic,” *Emerg Infect Dis*. 23 (2017): 813–815.

⁴³ “KNUST SHS Student Left to Die over Coronavirus Fears,” August 7, 2020; www.Ghana-web.com; [Accessed November 11, 2020].

⁴⁴ <https://www.modernghana.com/news/1010194/video-the-nation-is-very-sick-hot-fm-pre-senter.html> [Accessed November 14, 2020].

The effect of stigmatization of survivors has strained social relationships that the president, Akufo-Addo, addressed the issue in one of his discourses to the Nation:

...as has been aptly stated by the Ghana Medical Association, being infected by the coronavirus is not necessarily a death sentence. I have noticed, with great concern, the stories of some persons, who have recovered from the virus, now being confronted with another problem, i.e. stigmatization. The stigmatization of recovered persons must stop because if the virus did not end their lives and livelihood, the stigma from the members of their communities should not. This is not right, as it will rather drive people away from getting screened, tested and treated.⁴⁵

On May 1, 2020, in his address to workers, the president again reiterated his plea against stigmatizing victims.⁴⁶ The two messages indicate the abnormality of stigmatization and the danger it poses. Most people look adamant to the call against stigmatization. The message is communicated but looks unheeded to; there is the need for them to understand, embrace and practice it.

According to the 2010 Housing Census, 70% of Ghanaians defined themselves as Christians and recognize the authority of the Bible.⁴⁷ Therefore, examples from the biblical narratives about the negative effect of stigmatization and the process to reintegrate recovered patients into society should enable Christian communities to exercise the love of neighbours and accept the infected and healed COVID-19 victims as fellow human beings.

⁴⁵ <https://thevaultmag.com/index.php/vaultz-daily-brief/stop-stigmatizing-persons-recovered-from-covid-19-president-urges-ghanaians>; [Accessed November 14, 2020].

⁴⁶ <https://www.gbcbghanaonline.com/speeches>; [Accessed November 14, 2020].

⁴⁷ Ghana Statistical Service, "2010 Population and Housing Census. Summary of the Final Report," May 10, 2012; https://statsghana.gov.gh/gssmain/storage/img/marqueeupdater/Census2010_Summary_report_of_final_results.pdf; cf. George Ossom-Batsa, "Engaging Religion in a Holistic Development," in *Religion and Sustainable Development: Ghanaian Perspectives*, eds. G. Ossom-Batsa, N. Gatti and R.D. Ammah (Grandi opere, Città del Vaticano: Urbaniana University Press, 2018), 14-17.

Stigmatization in the Bible

The idea of sickness emerging from the biblical texts presents similarity to the traditional Ghanaian perception.⁴⁸ As reiterated by Leon-Dufour, diseases are generally stigmatized in the Bible for their association with sin.⁴⁹ For example, Miriam became leprous due to her critique of Moses caused by jealousy (Num 12:10-16). Naaman was cleansed from leprosy through the intervention of the prophet Elisha, but his servant Gehazi was infected by the same disease out of dishonesty and greed (2 Kgs 5:1-27). In 2 Chron 26:19-23 (cf. 2 Kgs 15:5), Uzziah the king was punished by God for his arrogance: “But once he was strong, his arrogance was such that it led to his downfall; he was unfaithful to Yahweh his God by entering the Temple of Yahweh to burn incense on the altar of incense” (2Chr 26:16). He became unclean due to leprosy and was relieved of his royal duties. Even when he died, he was not buried in the royal tomb.

The common understanding of the biblical texts is that only God can heal: the leprosy of Moses and his sudden restoration to health was a sign of the power of God (Exod 4:6-9); Miriam was healed for the prayer of Moses (Num 12:11), and Naaman’s reaction to his healing was a confession of faith: “Now I know that there is no God anywhere on earth except in Israel” (2 King 5:15).

Against this background, it becomes evident why the book of Leviticus located the instruction about leprosy and other skin diseases in the section concerning purity and impurity (Lev. 11—15). Sickness is perceived as an unclean ‘status’ that prevents people from the presence of God and excludes them from the worship community. This understanding of sickness brought isolation and stigmatization.⁵⁰

The biblical text that offers an in-depth reflection on the reason behind the stigmatization of sickness is the book of Job. Job, a righteous and wealthy man suffered undeservedly not only from poverty, death of

⁴⁸ Cf. N. Gatti and A. Salakpi, “The Word of God and the Covid-19: Intercultural Reading of Job’s Questions to God,” In *Christianity and COVID-19. Pathways for Faith*, eds. Chammah J. Kaunda, Atola Longkumer, Kenneth R. Ross & Esther Mombo (Routledge New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies; London – New York: Routledge, 2022), 46-56.

⁴⁹ Xavier Leon-Dufour, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (transl. P. Joseph Cahill; London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1997), 308.

⁵⁰ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 195-197; Giovanni Deiana, *Levitico* (I libri biblici. Primo testamento, 3; Milano: S. Paolo, 2005), 153-159.

the children and virulent disease but from stigmatization. He was isolated and defamed on the account of the doctrine of ‘Deeds and Consequences,’ the very common conviction that ‘good produces good and evil produces evil.’ This doctrine, based on a rigid interpretation of God’s justice, became very prominent in the Old Testament, especially during and after the exile and it was systematized by the Deuteronomist. It teaches that every human action has its reciprocal reaction; what a person enjoys or suffers is the direct consequence of his or her previous actions. Thus, the life of the individual is linked with the past, the present, and the future.⁵¹

The Book of Job was probably written to context this theological vision unable to embrace suffering and real-life experience.⁵² As Gutiérrez correctly states: “Job’s determination to seek and find leads him through a battlefield in which the shots come at him from every side... His personal courage and his trust in God impel him to follow paths that are *a challenge to the theology of his day*”⁵³.

The theological reflection is sandwiched in an ancient narrative in which God and Satan bargained over Job’s life (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6); as consequence, he lost everything, properties, and children, except his wife and his life (Job 2:6). Friends coming from afar to sympathize with Him, attributed such a calamity to an evil cause, his sin or his children’s sin, on the framework of the commonly held theology, the theology of retribution.

Job became, therefore, the victim of a wrong interpretation of the justice of God. If everyone is responsible for his/her good or bad life,⁵⁴ suffering is caused by sin and the guilt of sin must be expiated through a ritual (confession, sacrifices, offerings, etc.) for the sufferers to regain their peace.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Alexander Salakpi, *Social Alienation as a Consequence of Human Suffering in the Book of Job. A Study of Job 19:13-22* (New York, Bloomington: Universe, 2010), 25.

⁵² Tiffany Houck-Loomis, “Reimagining in Order to Reimage God: A Depth Psychological Look at the Book of Job in Relation to the Deuteronomistic History and its Application for Today,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 65, no. 3-4 (2016): 23-41.

⁵³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job. God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 93.

⁵⁴ Peter. L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: The Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 65.

⁵⁵ Salakpi, *Social Alienation*, 25.

This ideology was pursued by Job's friends who in three cycles of dialogues reprimanded him (Job 4:7-21; 33:8-33) and requested him to confess his sins or his children's sins (8:2-4). Job rejected their logic on the ground of his innocence and his knowledge of God. He did not sin (4:7-9) and even if he or the children sinned, the punishment of God was not proportional, it was unbearably undeserved torture (7:20-21). He proclaimed his innocence, but he was tagged as a sinner; that traumatized him and made him question his relationship with God.⁵⁶

Out of his despair, he proclaims his firm decision to stop discussing God with his (former) friends, to speak *with* God.⁵⁷ In his journey towards the encounter with God, he opened his eyes to the suffering of others, the poor, the oppressed, the outcast, and he understood that suffering is not reserved to evil people; also the innocent, the good, the God-fearing people are suffering.⁵⁸

Job pursued his vindication although he knew it was rebellious (23:2), and finally, although reprimanded for his utterances, he contemplates the mysterious freedom of God who did not stigmatize him; but enter in dialogue with him and guide him on the threshold of mystery.⁵⁹

God's goodness towards the creation is always active; it determines life and can be experienced daily by the people of Israel.⁶⁰ Good and evil create social conditions that can either be productive or destructive for society. Some of the evil present in any human society can be ascribed to human action and social injustice. But many times, suffering, sickness and death are a sign of the presence of an ontological evil, a darkness that only God can defeat.

The reflection about suffering continues in the New Testament writing. It is not surprising, therefore, that sickness and leprosy are present

⁵⁶ David J. Clines, "Quarter Days Gone: Job 24 and the Absence of God," in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, ed. T. Linafelt (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), Kindle ed., loc. 3078.

⁵⁷ Houck-Loomis, "Reimagining in Order to Reimage God," 25.

⁵⁸ Nicoletta Gatti and George Ossom-Batsa, "The Prosperity Gospel and the Poor: Intercultural Reading of Job 24:1-17," *Interkulturelle Theologie: Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 46, no. 1 (2020): 135-157.

⁵⁹ John Hartley, *The Book of Job* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 53; Gatti and Salakpi, "The Word of God and the Covid-19," 52-56.

⁶⁰ Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (trans. James D. Martin; 7th ed., Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 1993), 77-79.

in the gospel's narrative which describes the encounters between Jesus and lepers (Matt 8:1-4; Mark 1:40-45; Luke 5:12-16; 17:11-19). The proclamation of the coming of the kingdom of God becomes 'visible' in the proclamation of the dignity of the stigmatized and the healing of such a disease (Matt. 11:5; Luke 7:22). Jesus is not afraid to 'touch' the sick but for the Jewish law, he follows the proceeding indicated in Lev. 13—14, sending the healed to the priests for their full reintegration into the human and religious society.

The Reintegration of a Stigmatized

As in biblical times, so also in contemporary Ghana, the fear to associate with people suffering from infectious diseases is strong; hence stigmatisation. Even when infected persons are healed, they still suffer discrimination as the previous section demonstrated.

The next section will explore strategies offered in the biblical text for the reintegration of the stigmatized, as a stimulus for contemporary Ghanaian Christian communities to continue the mission of Jesus to overcome any form of exclusion and marginalization.

The first important strategy offered by Leviticus 13 and 14 is the importance to follow a 'protocol,' to protect the individual and the community from contagious diseases. Against the backdrop of ancient medical knowledge, Leviticus 13 lists some symptoms and the requirement to isolate the victim for seven days to follow the development of the sickness. The isolation time can be further prolonged: "On the seventh day he will examine the person, and if he observes that the disease persists though without spreading over the skin, he will isolate the person for a further seven days and examine him again on the seventh" (Lev 13:5-6).

When the priest reached the conviction that the person is healed, a complex ritual of purification was required before reintegrating the victim into the society (cf. 14: 3-32). The public ritual, the active involvement of the priests, the sacrifices, offerings to God in the place of His dwelling (the Tent) were important strategies to convince the community of effective healing. Because the culture believed in the spiritual nature of the sickness, the 'medical' observation was completed with religious rituals.

In it is interesting to note that the Leviticus rule was still followed at the time of Jesus; he demanded that former lepers perform the legal offering in fulfilment of the law and as testimony that they are clean and capable of relating with others (Matt 8:1-4; Luke 17:11-19). The gospels offer also an example of an integrated 'leper,' like Simon, a prominent member of the society who welcomed Jesus in his house in Bethany (Matt 26:6; Mark 14:3).

Thus, the Bible testifies that in ancient times the healed were reintegrated into the society and declared able to lead normal lives after the priests have certified that they are cured of their ailment.⁶¹

The biblical diagnosis and reintegration presented in Leviticus 13—14, the steadfastness of Job, and Jesus' attitude towards the sick should become a source of hope for the contemporary Ghanaian patients stigmatized and subjected to exclusion and psychological violence (cf. Job 24:1-12).

Job is a model for those who are undergoing gruesome attacks because of COVID-19 infection and for those that persecuted them based on 'religious' conviction. To question God requires courage but Job persists in his research because the quality of his faith enables him to protest, asks questions, and give voice to pain (9:17-20; 35). He did not surrender to what is untrue and wallow helplessly in injustice.⁶²

The narrative helps contemporary readers to realize the 'cage' in which the concept of 'Deeds and Consequences' placed God and place humanity.⁶³ The image of God should not impinge upon social processes.⁶⁴ God is just, fair and merciful and should not be considered a prisoner of vengeful retributive justice.⁶⁵

The Christian communities cannot tolerate that COVID-19 victims should be 'tortured' mentally and psychologically. COVID-19 is not demonic and is not a punishment from God, as many false prophets alleged. The true journey with God is a journey of liberty and

⁶¹ von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 129.

⁶² Leonard Mare, "The God of Job," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 33, no. 1 (2012), 2-3.

⁶³ Walter Brueggemann, "A Shape for the Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1985): 406.

⁶⁴ Walter Brueggemann, "A Shape for the Old Testament Theology, I: Structure Legitimation". *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1985): 31.

⁶⁵ Norman C. Habel, "In Defense of God the Sage," in *The Voice from the Whirlwind: Interpreting the Book of Job*, eds. L. Perdue and W.C. Gilpin (Rev.; Nashville: Abington, 1994), 28.

freedom,⁶⁶ the attitude of these self-proclaimed ‘holy ones of God’ generates only exploitation and exacerbates the pain of God’s people.⁶⁷

A Possible Solution to Stigmatization

Threats to life are experiences of every age and reactions to them emerge in different ways, mediated by culture.⁶⁸ In the ancient writings of Israel, those with the infectious disease were isolated and when cured, they were reintegrated because they belonged to the community.

In our contemporary society, COVID-19 constitutes a threat, but the victims are human beings, brothers and sisters, that need medical attention, love and reintegration into the community. To curb stigmatization is necessary to offer correct information about the virus, to implement the protocol to prevent its spreading; to build trust in the medical personnel, and to show empathy with those affected. Just as in Leviticus, the cured victims met with the priest, perform their rituals and were reintegrated among family and friends, so that in contemporary society, churches can organize thanksgiving services to celebrate the healing of brothers and sisters. The ‘stigmatized’ can, therefore, be transformed in a sign of the merciful care of God, a sign of his healing presence in the community.

Any information about the virus must be accurate to avoid fake news, to challenge myths and stereotypes, to answer the false claim of those who demonize COVID-19 and to propose miraculous cures. As many research works demonstrate, the ‘infodemic’ of misinformation, misconceptions and rumours are responsible for the negative effect of stigmatization and discrimination and hence hamper efforts for treatment.⁶⁹

There is a need for collective solidarity and clear information to support communities and people affected by the virus. There is a need to

⁶⁶ Jeffrey Boss, *Human Consciousness of God in the Book of Job: A Theological and Psychological Commentary* (London: & T Clark International, 2010), 223-227.

⁶⁷ Gatti and Ossom-Batsa, “Prosperity Gospel and the Poor,” 144-146.

⁶⁸ Salakpi, *Social Alienation*, 35.

⁶⁹ Brenya, Department of Psychology, University of Ghana; www.BusinessGhana.com; <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/Coronavirus-Sick-rural-dwellers-scared-of-visiting-health-facilities-1028980>; [Accessed November 12, 2020].

correct misconceptions and at the same time to acknowledge that people's feelings and subsequent behaviour are very real, even if the underlying assumption is false. And to enforce the importance of prevention (wearing nose masks, using alcohol-based sanitisers, and washing hands frequently) and lifesaving actions such as early testing, tracing and treatment. There is a need to educate the public and to communicate support and encouragement for those who are on the frontline of this outbreak.

The disease is a global issue and demands collective solidarity and global cooperation. It is a major need to prevent further transmission and to alleviate the concerns of people. Facts, not fear will stop the spread of COVID-19. The evidence clearly shows that stigma and fear around communicable diseases hamper the response to cure. It is expedient to create an environment where the disease and its impact can be discussed and addressed openly, honestly and effectively to avoid fuelling fear and stigma. The painful outcome of stigmatization and negligence on the part of the authorities has led to the loss of life.⁷⁰ Words matter: everyone has to play his or her part through simple ideas to drive away from the stigma.⁷¹

According to Owusu, psychological education is needed for those affected to understand their situation and how they will endanger their lives and the lives of others if they do not observe the protocol.⁷² The public should also be made aware that interacting with a person who has been cured is not dangerous. Jesus visited the house of Simon the leper (Matt 26:6; Mark 14:3) and touched some lepers. Sharing of sympathetic narratives, or stories that humanize the experiences and struggles of individuals or groups affected by the virus are encouraged.

Conclusion

In conclusion, stigma is a potential dehumanizing phenomenon. Stigma is inevitable within a society; while individuals are immunized against specific diseases, but they cannot be immunized against stigma. The government tries to refrain people from stigmatizing

⁷⁰ "KNUST Senior High Student reported dead," July 7, 2020.

⁷¹ WHO and UNICEF, "Social Stigma associated with COVID-19," 2.

⁷² Michael Owusu (2002), "Runaway Covid-19 cases due to fear of Stigma," [www. myjoy online.com](http://www.myjoyonline.com); [Accessed November 12, 2020].

persons who tested and recovered from COVID-19. However, in a religious country like Ghana, where 70% of inhabitants define themselves as Christians, churches need to be on the frontline in the fight against stigmatization. The awareness of its implication should lead to advocating for increased health care access and help socially address the issue of stigma in the prevention and the control of the disease.

It is important to note that through targeted social media campaigns, with accurate dissemination of information, Ebola was contained;⁷³ and ‘Angelina Jolie effect’ led to the consciousness of breast cancer disease.⁷⁴ Media is an essential tool to educate people against stigmatization and to fight collaboratively to eradicate the disease. It is, therefore, recommended that effective education should be put in place to sensitize the public, starting from the place of worship and the media houses associated with churches.

Finally, it is disastrous when stigmatised victims remain in denial. Job’s first reaction was total acceptance and unconditional trust in God (1:21) and that helped maintain his integrity even in the face of hopelessness. Churches should accompany COVID-19 not only during their isolation, using all the tools that contemporary technology has made available but also during their journey to reintegration in their family, Christian community and society.

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⁷³ See A. Fayoyin, “Engaging Social Media for Health Communication in Africa: Approaches, Results and Lessons,” *Journal of Mass Communication and Journalism* 6, no. 315 (2020); Engaging Social Media for Health Communication in Africa: Approaches, Results and Lessons | Abstract (hilarispublisher.com). [Accessed November 12, 2020]

⁷⁴ In 2013, the actress, Angelina Jolie underwent a much-reported prevented double mastectomy. The term “Angelina Jolie effect” was coined by public health communication researchers to draw the attention of Internet searches on breast cancer genetics and testing. Such celebrities could be used for COVID-19 stigmatization awareness.