



COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN RELATION TO CHRISTIANS' INTERPRETATION OF END-TIME SIGNS IN MATTHEW 24:7

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Abstract

The impact of the recent COVID-19 pandemic on the global scene has changed the course of history. COVID-19 has brought a lot of challenges to the developed and the developing countries of the world including to Nigeria. Not only has it affected all aspects of socio-economic life, but also, religious life and the various belief systems of the religions of the world. The concept of the end-time and the Second Coming of Christ among the Christian teachings that permeate the New Testament seem to be becoming more prominent in this period. A lot of Christians are assuming that the coming of the Anti-Christ is very close, hence, they tag COVID-19 as one of the signs Jesus referred to in his eschatological teachings in Matthew 24:7. Thus, this study examines Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24:7 in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Employing historical-critical and contextual methods of interpretation, the study concludes that a sound exegetical interpretation of scripture will help a Christian's better understand the signs of the end times.

Introduction

Any pandemic disrupts the life of society at large and this applies also to the social activities of religious life. Moreover, despite progressing secularization, religions, including churches and other denominational associations have an impact on individual ethical choices as well as business decisions. Consequently, religion is entwined with and exerts influence on other sectors. This is also true in the case of Nigeria.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an extremely significant impact on the functioning of societies across the planet. It is still very difficult to forecast the directions and depth of this impact and the nature of the long-term changes the pandemic will bring. This is due in part to the fact that there are different developments in different countries. The COVID-19 pandemic is spreading very rapidly, taking lives, restricting lives, and recon-

figuring lives. Religious practices, which have by their very nature, a community dimension, certainly in Christian denominations, are also changing under the influence of the pandemic. The purpose of this paper is to examine some Christian perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic about Jesus' teaching on end-time signs in the Gospel of Matthew. In order to do justice to the topic, there arises a need for conceptual clarification of major terms in the study.

Pandemic

The word “pandemic” originates from Greek *pan*, meaning “all” and *demos*, meaning “people”. The word is commonly taken to refer to a widespread epidemic of contagious disease throughout a country or one or more continents at the same time (Honigsbaum 2009). Nevertheless, over the past two decades, the term failed to be defined by many modern medical texts. Even authoritative texts concerning pandemics do not list it in their indexes, including such resources as comprehensive histories of medicine, classic epidemiology textbooks, and the Institute of Medicine's influential 1992 report on emerging infections (Qiu, Rutherford, Mao, and Chu 2017).

The word “pandemic” is defined by the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English* (2000:843) as a disease that spreads over a country or the whole world. On the other hand, *Merriam Webster Dictionary* (Online) defines “pandemic” as an outbreak of disease that occurs over a wide geographical area and affects an exceptionally high proportion of the population. Pandemics are for the most part outbreaks of disease that become widespread as a result of the spread of human-to-human infection. There have been many significant disease outbreaks and pandemics recorded in history, including Spanish Flu, Hong Kong Flu, SARS, H7N9, Ebola, and Zika (WHO, 2011 cited in Maurice 2016).

The term “pandemic” has not been defined by many medical texts, but there are some key features of a pandemic, including wide geographic extension, extensive disease movement, novelty, severity, high attack rates and explosiveness, minimal population immunity, infectiousness and contagiousness, which help us to understand the concept better and to ascertain similarities and differences. The pandemic crises have been associated with enormous negative impacts on health systems, economies, social life and the security of national, and global communities. As well,

they have caused significant political and social disruption, including for religious communities (Lukasz and Grzegorz 2020:1-15).

Virus

The word “virus” comes from a Latin word meaning “venom” and describes a tiny agent that causes infectious disease. Coronavirus is a family of viruses that gets its name from its appearance. The word “corona” means “crown”. The scientist, who in 1968 came up with the term coronavirus, thought that under a microscope, the virus resembled a solar-corona: that is, the bright crown-like gases surrounding the sun that are visible during a solar eclipse. The COVID-19 disease currently spreading across the globe is part of the coronavirus family. It is caused by one type of coronavirus: SARS-CoV2. Calling this particular one “novel coronavirus” is simply a way of making it clear which coronavirus is at issue: namely, the new one. There are now multiple variants of the novel coronavirus, which are labelled by letters of the Greek alphabet, in order of their emergence and identification.

History and Origin of Coronavirus

The first case of a coronavirus was seen in 1960. According to a Canadian study in 2001, approximately 500 patients were identified with flu-like symptoms. Seventeen or eighteen cases of these were confirmed as a coronavirus strain (Kamur, Mavliya and Sharma 2020). Coronavirus was treated as a simple, non-fatal virus until 2002. In 2003, various reports published proof of the spread of coronavirus to some countries, including the United States of America, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and Taiwan. Also in 2003, cases of a severe acute respiratory syndrome caused by a corona were reported. Further examinations to analyse the pathogenesis of the disease saw more than 8096 patients confirmed as infected. In 2004, the World Health Organization and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention declared a “state of emergency”. Another report from Hong Kong confirmed fifty patients with the severe acute respiratory syndrome, thirty of them confirmed as coronavirus infected.

The Federal Ministry of Health confirmed the first case of COVID-19 in Lagos State, Nigeria. The case, which was confirmed on the 27th of February 2020, involved an Italian citizen who worked in Nigeria, and who had returned from Milan, in Italy to Lagos, on the 25th of February 2020.

He was confirmed to be with the virus by the virology laboratory of the Lagos University Teaching Hospital, which is part of the Laboratory Network of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, online).

Having given some explanation of COVID-19 and its emergence in Nigeria, let me next turn to the Bible, with a view to explaining how the virus and its pandemic dimensions are interfacing with interpretation of the Bible.

The Contextual Setting of Matthew 24:7

Matthew 23-25 records Jesus' eschatological discourse. It is called the Olivet Discourse. It was Christ's purpose to give the disciples a clear picture of what will happen to the world and to prepare his disciples to face and understand future events. In Matthew 23, Jesus had just denounced the scribes and Pharisees and had lamented over Jerusalem. Later, he foretold the destruction of the Temple and gave the signs of the end to His disciples in Matthew 24. Then, He closed his discourse in Matthew 25 by talking about the coming of the Son of Man. It was in the midst of this discourse that the disciples were understandably confused and wanted to know: (1) when shall these things be? and (2) what is the sign of His coming and of the end of the world? (Mt 24:3).

One of Jesus' responses to the questions raised by the disciples was that the gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the world for a witness unto all nations, and then shall the end come. This verse falls in the immediate proximity of the section that starts from verses 4 to 14, where Jesus gives signs of events to come. These signs are false messiahs, wars, famines, pestilence, earthquakes, persecutions, false prophets, lawlessness, the lack of and the enduring of faith, and the preaching of the gospel to the world (Ogouma & Oppong 2017:153-158).

Common Interpretations of Matthew 24

Before we examine this text, we will briefly consider a variety of perspectives on Jesus' discourse. According to Jackson Wayne (2020)

in this era of change, from one millennium to another, there may be no text that has become the focus of more controversy than the twenty-fourth

chapter of Matthew's Gospel. This marvelous depository of prophetic literature has been victimized by considerable theological speculation. Several theories spawned by a misunderstanding of this chapter have generated confusion in the religious community.

First, it is very common today to argue that Matthew 24 (and Mark 13) has nothing to say about the destruction of the Jewish Temple in A.D. 70, but rather speaks solely of signs that portend the Second Advent. This view is popular among old-style dispensationalists who argue that the Olivet Discourse is directed to Jewish disciples who are representatives of the converted Israel of the last days. In other words, the passage is targeted at Jewish converts who will live in the far distant future (our present). Such interpreters argue that only the Luke 21 discourse (written to a Gentile audience) applies to the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in A.D. 70. As we consider this passage, we will see that such an interpretation is arbitrary, imposed on the text, and violates the perspicuity of Scripture.

As Jesus left the environs of the sacred area, his disciples directed attention to the temple. The Lord declared that this edifice would be "thrown down" so that not one stone would be left upon another (24:2). There is no doubt that Jesus was uttering an oracle concerning the destruction of the city by the Romans (cf. Matthew 22:7; Luke 21:20). Later, on the Mount of Olives, the disciples ask: "When shall these things [i.e. the demolition of the Temple] be?" They also want to know what would be the "sign" of his "coming, and of the end of the world" (24:3). The disciples asked concerning the times, when these things should come to pass. Christ gives them no answer to that; but they also asked, what shall be the sign? This question he answers fully. The prophecy first respects events near at hand, the destruction of Jerusalem, the end of the Jewish congregation and state, calling of the Gentiles, and the setting up of Christ's kingdom in the world; but it looks to the general judgment, and points more particularly to the latter. What Christ here says to his disciples, tends more to promoting caution than to satisfying their curiosity, to preparing them for the events that should happen, than to giving a distinct idea of these events (Matthew Henry's Bible Commentary Online).

Wayne (2020), citing R.C. Foster (1971), also rightly observes that:

Much of the confusion in interpreting the predictions of Jesus recorded in Matthew 24 and the parallel passages [that] arise from the failure to see

that the disciples asked and Jesus answered two questions: one, concerning the fall of Jerusalem; the other, concerning his second coming ... The disciples likely assumed that the destruction of the temple, and the end of the world, would occur at the same time. The Master sought to correct that impression, first, by discussing the Roman invasion (vv. 4-34), and then by commenting regarding his final coming to render universal judgment (vv. 35-51).

Matthew 24:7-8

“For nation shall arise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famine, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in diverse places, all these are the beginning of sorrows.”

But the end is not yet: According to David Guzik (2015), the kind of thing Jesus mentions in these sections is not the things that mark the signs of the end. Things like false messiahs, wars, famines, pestilences and earthquakes have certainly marked human history since the time of Jesus’ Ascension – but were not specific signs of the end. In effect, Jesus said, “Catastrophes will happen, but these will not signal the end” (Spurgeon’s Bible Commentary Online). In the midst of any great war, or any great famine, or any great earthquake, it is natural to believe that the world is coming to an end. But Jesus said that there is a far more specific sign that would indicate his return. Guzik (2015) submits that, “One clear aim of this chapter is to prevent premature excitement about the Parousia.”

One would think that there is sorrow enough in “famines, and pestilences and earthquakes, in diverse places”, but Jesus said that “all these” were only “the beginning of sorrows”, the first birth-pangs of the travail that must precede his coming, either to Jerusalem or to the world. If famines, pestilences, and earthquakes are only “the beginning of sorrows”, what may we not expect the world to be? This prophecy ought to warn the disciples of Christ of what they may expect, and wean them from the world where all these and greater sorrows are to be experienced (Spurgeon’s Bible Commentary Online).

Christians’ Interpretation of COVID-19 in Nigeria

With the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has been plunged into a state of uncertainty and fear. Christians in the world and Nigeria in

particular have come to interpret the COVID-19 pandemic in various ways as cited below.

1. COVID-19 Pandemic as God's Judgment on the Nations

There has been much speculation that the COVID-19 plague is God's judgment on the nations as a result of the sins of humans. Sheryl Haw (2020) opines that COVID-19 should not be seen as God's judgment on sin. According to Haw, the disciples of Jesus had similar concerns in Luke 13:1-5, where the people of Galilee had been killed by Pilate and also, those who were killed when the tower in Siloam fell on them: were they worse sinners than others? Was this judgment? She affirms further that Jesus clearly says no. In her view when Jesus recounts the tragedy at the pool of Siloam, where the tower fell on eighteen persons, Jesus asks "do you think the people who were massacred, or the people who the tower fell on were sinners above all other sinners who perished?" He was simply saying that not all tragedy is punishment, or results from one group being more badly behaved than others. That is, we should not necessarily ascribe pandemics to God's Judgment. Haw states further that COVID-19 should not be viewed as God's judgment, but Jesus does underline that the tragedy should be taken seriously as a warning for us all. She goes on to assert that Jesus calls us to turn away from wrongdoing, choose good, choose life, and follow him. COVID-19 should be viewed as a call to repent and turn to God (Haw 2020).

2. COVID-19 is a Sign of the End Time

The description of the "end times" as outlined in the scripture of Matthew 24, refers not only to a far-off end time in the future, but refers to the time since the first coming of Christ until he returns. In other words, we all live constantly in the time period known as "end times". In every generation, there seems to be a group of people who try to predict the date and time of Jesus' return. Jesus clearly warned his disciples that the date and hour is not known until it occurs (Mark 13:32). Our role is to live in readiness at all times so that we will be found doing what we have been called to do (Haw 2020).

According to Samuel Gbenga (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has nothing to do with the end-time sayings of Jesus. Instead, there has been the development over the ages in the interpretation of this pericope where Jesus talked about what will happen in the future at the time and his sayings are mainly directed to the Jewish community and not to the Gentiles

of his time or of the future. This would mean that the current pandemic, or recent wars and an act of terrorism, or any other violent acts or cosmic catastrophes of our time have nothing to do with the New Testament sayings of Jesus about the end time.

Olusola Igbari (2020) submits that most pandemics are human-made, especially the one that is ravaging the world now. According to him, some have already foreseen worse pestilences that are still to come, either through the effects of climate change, or through scientific discoveries. Even though Jesus gave an indication that there would be wars and rumours of wars, nations rising against nations, families rising against their own, and a long list of strange things that people will witness (Matthew 24; Mark 13), it cannot be taken literally. What will characterize the end of the age of which the elect should be watchful and get prepared is only known by God. Igbari concludes by saying that there is an element of conspiracy theory linked with COVID-19, which suggests that corona-virus is not a natural phenomenon (Igbari 2020, online source).

3. COVID-19 Vaccine as the Mark of the Beast

Some Pentecostal and Evangelical Christians have come to associate the COVID-19 vaccine and any puncture mark or scar it leaves with the Mark of the Beast spoken of in the Book of Revelation (13:16-18). Matthew Halsted (2020) argues, however, that in Revelation 13, the Mark of the Beast is by no means a medical procedure. Most likely, it is not even a physical or visible mark. According to Halsted (2020), the Mark of the Beast is a mark that is closely tied to the worship of the Beast. Thus, the Mark of the Beast is a mark of loyalty and devotion to the Beast. He states further that the mark is most likely a spiritual, non-visible stigma. It is a mark of loyalty and worship and is not, therefore, something you could accidentally accept (Lukasz & Grzegorz 2020).

Conclusion

If there is one thing that one can say for certain, no one knows the day or times of the end. Jesus himself said only God knows when the end times would be (Matthew 24:36). Who are we to try to determine it? It is important for us to keep a wider perspective throughout all of this. Christians have been trying (and failing) to predict the end of the world since the early days of the church. Although the word “unprecedented” keeps being

brought up about the COVID-19 pandemic, this is not, indeed, the first crisis of its kind; there have been far, far darker times in human history. War, diseases, and natural disasters – these are sadly nothing new. Jesus said his return would be sudden and unexpected and he said we were to ignore anyone who thought they knew about specific dates and times (Matthew 24:3-31). The truth is that there is no one who has the answer, and we should ignore those who think they have one.

In times of distress and confusion like this, it is natural that human beings ask about the origin and purpose of the calamity. Theologians also give possible interpretations and explanations, most of the time using biblical texts as guidance and proof. In the time of COVID-19, there are many teachers, preachers and ministers giving different theological explanations on the origin and even the purpose and meaning of the pandemic. In the media and social network outlets, COVID-19 has been interpreted theologically in different ways: such as a sign of the end times, or as God's judgment of the world for all kinds of sins. But the biblical evidence shows that every attempt to give such an explanation remains speculation, even when backed by biblical quotations or "proof texts". COVID-19 should not be viewed as God's judgment but this tragedy should be taken seriously as a warning for us all.

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