

THE SANITARY LAW OF LEVITICUS AS A NOSTRUM FOR PREVENTING AND CURTAILING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Historically, the human race is bedeviled with endless striving against infectious diseases. Perilous time is here because ancient plague once thought to have been defeated are reappearing, and dangerous new diseases including COVID-19 has emerged. This has put serious strain and burden on many of the most sophisticated health care around the world. God, had before now revealed the fundamental principles that could sustain and safeguard our health. Some of these principles are well outlined in the book of Leviticus. Contagious diseases like the plague of leprosy and others were handled with the utmost seriousness required in ancient Israel by the priest. Laid-down rules were strenuously followed and obeyed. Following God's fundamental principles was the only way to curtail this dangerous disease because leprosy had no cure at that time in ancient Israel. Why is the world so ravaged by COVID-19? Could it be these principles were ignored as a result of scientific development? Or could it be that these principles were ignored because of our different belief systems, ignorance and cultural differences? The paper is of the view that COVID-19 can be prevented and curtailed in Nigeria if these fundamental principles outlined in the book of Leviticus are concertedly enshrined in our way of life in various communities in the country and beyond, irrespective of our belief system, ethnicity, race and diverse opinions. The paper is historical and exegetical in its approach. Having identified the challenges that COVID-19 post to Nigeria's fragile health care system, and the economic prospect of the citizens, and have realized that medicine and legislation cannot just win the battle against this infectious disease, the paper recommends that concerted effort must be made by leaders and the lead to inculcate these ancient biblical principles into the cultural identity of the citizens. The task of defeating COVID-19 could only be achieved if there is attitudinal change and total obliteration of the scourge of ignorance.

Key Words: Leprosy, Coronavirus, Corruption, disease, curtailment

Word count: 318

Introduction

It is globally acknowledged that coronavirus (Covid-19) emanated from Wuhan, China and later became a global pandemic with its devastating effect on the global economy and the total disruption of the normal way of life of the people. Though the origin of this highly contagious disease is still contentions, various theories are acclaiming its origin to some animals and birds such as penguins, etc. Unlike coronavirus, the ancient biblical leprosy which is highly contagious was said to have started first in Egypt, where it spread to Syria. The Jews retained the idolatrous customs they had learnt in Egypt, and it is believed that God justly caused this with some others of the diseases of Egypt to follow them.¹ It was very well known to Moses when he put his hand into his bosom and took it out leprous.

Moreover, the ancient contagious disease leprosy, was a plague inflicted immediately by the hand of God and came not from natural causes as other diseases and therefore must be managed according to a divine law. Miriam, Gehazi and King Uzziah were all examples of divine punishment. In Ancient Israel this contagious disease was managed according to divine specification which enable the community to prevent and curtail its spread.

Covid-19 on the other hand is being driven by scientific specification to curtail its spread, yet things had gotten more precarious that world is hoping that a vaccine should be

¹ M. Henry, 1960 Commentary on the whole Bible Genesis to Revelation Michigan: Zondervan Publishing

developed soon that a vaccine should be develop soon could there be any nexus between Ancient Israel's contagious disease and the coronavirus? Why is the origin of sorcery? Is there not much hypocrisy and ignorance on the part of world leaders in acknowledging the divine nature of Covid-19 as observed in Ancient Israel when they had the contagious disease? The aforementioned statements and many others will form the nucleus of this work.

An Exegesis of Leviticus 13 Verses 1-3.

Hebrew Text

1 וַיֹּדֶבֶר יְהוָה אֶל־ מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־ אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר
בְּשָׂרוֹ לִנְגַע צָרַעַת וְהוּרָא אֶל־ אַהֲרֹן
וְרָאָה הַכֹּהֵן אֶת־ הַנִּגַּע בְּעוֹר 2 הַכֹּהֵן אוֹ אֶל־ אֶחָד מִבְּנָיו הַכֹּהֲנִים
הַבָּשָׂר וְשָׁעַר בִּנְגַע הַפֶּךָ לָבֵן וּמִרְאָה הַנִּגַּע עֲמֹק מֵעַר בְּשָׂרוֹ נִגַּע צָרַעַת
הוּא 3
וְרָאָהוּ הַכֹּהֵן וְטָמֵא אֹתוֹ

RSV Translation of Leviticus 13:1-3 and 59

1. The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "When a man has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of his body, he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or one of his sons the priest, and the priest shall examine the disease spots on the skin of his body; and if the hair in the diseased spot has turned white and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a leprous disease when the priest has examined him he shall pronounce him unclean.

NASB Translation of Leviticus 13:1-3

1. Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying 2 “When a man has on the skin of his body a swelling or a scab or a bright spot, and it becomes an infection of leprous on the skin of his body, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest, or two of his sons the priests. 3 And the priest shall look at the mark on the skin of the body, and if the hair in the infection has turned white and the infection appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is an infection of leprous; when the priest has looked at him, he shall pronounce him unclean.

The text of Leviticus chapter 13 dwells on infectious diseases in Ancient Israel and how they could be handled from a religious perspective. This was because the priests in Ancient Israel were not doctors and those afflicted were not the patients. The focus was on religious systems of impurity and to some extent, a very contagious disease when mirrored in the parlance of modern medicine. There are diverse opinions by scholars as to the meaning of (tsarist) because the symptoms do not correspond to any known skin diseases.² From Leviticus Chapter 13:2-46, we understand from the description that skin diseases affect both humans and manmade objects such as clothing and the walls of houses. This clearly shows that it is not the same as leprosy as postulated by scholars. However, the set of tests for diagnosis and the treatment of this infectious disease, and how its procedures, if followed, can bring succour

² T. Adeyemo, 2006. Africa Bible Commentary. Nairobi World Alive Publishers, p.149.

to various countries being ravaged by Covid-19. This is the focal point of this article.

Since infection made a person ceremonially unclean God appointed the priests to act as His examiners to determine whether the victim was “unclean and therefore had to be separated from the rest of the camp. The person being examined could be isolated for as long as two weeks to give the disease a chance to change for better or for worse. Leviticus 13:54. A leper had to live outside the camp and make his condition known whenever he went out in public. If the diagnosis was uncertain, the person was quarantined for seven days for a closer examination. It was generally noticed that during the present coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic that ravaged the world, and it is still ravaging some countries of the world, several covid-19 protocols were listed to be observed in an attempt to contain the spread. Among those measures was “quarantine”. These became a slogan in many communities of the world while the pandemic lasted or is yet to be abated.

Many people including members of the family of a covid-19 victim were not allowed to come close to their loved ones even at death. This was done to prevent contact with anybody that had tested positive for the virus. In many countries, the government took the responsibility of burying those who died of the virus infection. The challenge now is, what have our leaders in all spheres of our socio-political and religious life done or need to do to prevent any possibility of future occurrence of this deadly pandemic?

The terminology used for the word leprosy known as Sara'at צָרַעַת in Hebrew is of uncertain origin and can be said to lacking in meaning, though it might have been related variously from the above translations to the root for “swelling of the skin”, “eruption”, scab”, white” spot,” “spot” “bright spot”. The inability to certain the term’s derivation is challenging since the ailment is very common in the scripture.³ However, Sara'at צָרַעַת no could be said to have been using evidently in a technical sense explaining a class of pathological conditions which can be said to be closely related root can be used to describe any form of the cutaneous eruptive lesion, including clinical leprosy.⁴ The LXX (Septuagint) renders sara'at צָרַעַת by a comprehensive term lepra which to the Greeks signified a disease that resulted in a scaly condition of the skin. The Vulgate uses the word “lepra”⁵ as an interpretation of the Hebrew Sara'at צָרַעַת thus, the word “leprosy” occurs in later English versions causes, cure and some anteceded might have exaggerated the belief that leprosy as an ailment is a curse from God as a result of sin in ancient Israel. Num. 12:1, 4, 9-10; 2 Kings 5:27.

Moreover, since leprosy as an ailment is strange and incurable, only the priests are medically certified to determine if a person in ancient Israel is clean or unclean from the cutaneous disease. Once an individual is deemed unclean by the priest, he must be

³ G.W. Bromiley (ed) International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company

⁴ G.W. Bromiley (ed) International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company

⁵ G.W. Bromiley (ed) International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company

taken out of the camp for isolation. This is practically effected to protect the entire community from an imminent outbreak of the cutaneous ailment. R.P. Gordon⁶ is of the view that a recent investigation of Biblical leprosy in most cases could not be likened to be the same as modern leprosy. This is because the term 'leprosy' is also used to describe conditional ailment in clothing and houses as seen in Leviticus 13:47-59, 14:33-53. The word translated as 'leprosy' covers a wide variety of skin disorders and some of them are quite minor. It is believed by some scholars that the use of the word 'leprosy' in English Bible tradition stems from a mistranslation by the Septuagint and Vulgate.⁷ However, the disease of leprosy certainly exists in the Near East in the New Testament periods and it is the responsibility of the priests to declare a person clean or unclean. For this is their sole medical function and Leviticus 13:14 are essentially a diagnostic manual to aid them in their pronouncements. Scholars think that it is not possible to be certain about the clinical identification of the variety of diseases referred to in Leviticus 13 by their symptoms. It is suggested that these form of diseases might include psoriasis Lev, 13:2-17; Favus (This is like ringworm) Lev. 13:29-37, leucoderma Lev. 13:32-40, and lesions in the scars which is caused by boil. Lev. 13:13-23. It may also include eczema, herpes and some form of leprosy

⁶ R.P. Gordon, 1979. The International Bible Commentary. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House. 201.

⁷ D.A. Corson, R.t. France, J.A. Molyer, G.T. Wenham eds. 1994. New Bible Commentary. England: Intervarsity Press. 140

In ancient Israel, once a priest pronounced a person unclean because of serious skin disease, he was required to do many things which could be compared to mourning rites. The unfortunate person and sufferer will have to live outside the camp (quarantined or isolated) away from the homes of the community which was later referred to as outside the walls or gates of the cities or villages.⁸ The reason, when viewed from Leviticus' idea, was to remove the unclean from possible contact with holy things. Religion was the determining factor here though it also had a beneficial hygienic contribution to the general health of the public. To safeguard the holiness of the camp and the total health of the people was the main priority of the priests in ancient Israel. They were not to pity any pain and consequence of social ostracism. The situation was worse for the sufferer because, in the thinking from Old Testament, diseases are punishment for sin.

In ancient Israel, a sufferer from the ailment of leprosy is quarantined for seven days in the first instance. If within the seven days of quarantine or Isolation, the skin infection fades away, he will be further quarantined for another seven days to reexamine if the symptoms are absent and the sufferer may now be declared spiritually clean with other ritual ceremonies to be followed. These quarantine regulations were socially and religiously disastrous. However, its health benefits to the general well-being of the public cannot be disputed if we want to curtail covid-19 and other contagious diseases ravaging our

⁸ R.P. Gordan, 1979. *The International Bible Commentary*. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House. 201.

society. However, what is very obvious is that scholars are in disagreement as to whether sara'at צָרַעַת was contagious in a hygienic sense of it. The reason is the failure of some to make the necessary difference between bacterial infection, unknown as such in the Bible, and the cultic idea of uncleanness.⁹

Pandemics in human history

In human history, some pandemic outbreaks threatened the existence of mankind. According to Horgan,¹⁰ in 165-180AD a pandemic known as the Antonine Plague or the Plague of Galen ravaged the known world with a death toll estimated to be around 60-70 million people. It was an ancient pandemic brought to the Roman Empire by troops who were returning from campaigns in the Near East. Scholars have suspected it to have been either *smallpox or measles*. The plague may have claimed the lives of two Roman emperors as well - Lucius Verus, who died in 169 and his co-regent, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus who died 11 years later from the same sickness. Another pandemic was the Plague of Justinian. This was said to have happened in 542-542 AD and it was caused by *Bacterium Yersinia Pestis*.

⁹Encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts and-maps/ leprosy –bible Retrieved on 20 June, 2021.

¹⁰ J. Horgan. 2020 “Antonine Plague: Definition.” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*. Accessed on 20 September 2021 from https://www.ancient.eu/Antonine_Plague/

According to LePan,¹¹ the pandemic was the most devastating in history and it claimed the lives of about 30-50 million persons. The Bubonic Plague which was also known as The Black Death was another pandemic which occurred in 1347-1351. This pandemic was estimated to have killed 200 million persons.¹² In human history includes the New World Smallpox outbreak which occurred around 1520AD caused by *Variola Virus*. The death toll is around 56 million. The third plague was caused by *Yersinia Pestis bacteria/Rats, and fleas*. The death toll is around 12 million. Spanish Flu was caused by the *H1N1 virus/Pigs*. The death toll is around 40-50 million. The most recent ones are HIV AIDS which is yet to have a cure till this moment, SARS, EBOLA and so on.

Origin of Covid-19 and its spread in Nigeria

COVID-19 is a disease caused by a new strain of coronavirus.¹³ World Health Organization (WHO) defines it as a large family of viruses which may cause illness in animals and humans. Before now, there are several coronaviruses which cause severe respiratory infections and common colds in humans. These diseases include Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). COVID-19 is an abbreviation which connotes and

¹¹ N. LePan, "The History of Pandemics" *Visualizing the History of Pandemics*. . Accessed 14th November 2021 from <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/history-of-pandemics-deadliest/>

¹² N. LePan, "The History of Pandemics" *Visualizing the History of Pandemics*. . Accessed 14th November 2021 from <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/history-of-pandemics-deadliest/>

¹³ "Key Messages and Action for Covid-19 Prevention and Control in Schools." *UNICEF. Education and Emergencies*.

stands for: ‘CO’ stands for corona, ‘VI’ for virus, ‘D’ for disease and ‘19’ for 2019. Towards the end of 2019, the Government of the People’s Republic of China informed World Health Organization about several cases of pneumonia with unfamiliar aetiology. The outbreak was initiated at the Hunan seafood market in the Wuhan City of China and rapidly infected more than 50 people.¹⁴

The live animals are frequently sold at the Hunan seafood market such as bats, frogs, snakes, birds, marmots and rabbits. By 12 January 2020, the National Health Commission of China released further details about the epidemic, suggesting viral pneumonia. From the sequence-based analysis of isolates from the patients, the virus was identified as a novel coronavirus. Moreover, the genetic sequence was also provided for the diagnosis of viral infection.¹⁵ Initially, it was suggested that the patients infected with Wuhan coronavirus-induced pneumonia in China may have visited the seafood market where live animals were sold or may have used infected animals or birds as a source of food. However, further investigations revealed that some individuals contracted the infection even with no record of visiting the seafood market. These observations indicated a human-to-human spreading capability of this virus, which was subsequently reported in more than 100 countries in the world. The human-to-human spreading of the virus occurs due to close contact with an infected person exposed to

¹⁴ “Key Messages and Action for Covid-19 Prevention and Control in Schools.” *UNICEF. Education and Emergencies*

¹⁵ Key Messages and Action for Covid-19 Prevention and Control in Schools.” *UNICEF. Education and Emergencies*

coughing, sneezing, respiratory droplets or aerosols. These aerosols can penetrate the human body (lungs) via inhalation through the nose or mouth.

Nigeria as a country is not immune from any outbreak of infectious and contagious disease including Covid-19 which is generally believed to have originated from China. The first case of Covid-19 was confirmed by the Federal Ministry of Health in Lagos State on the 27th of February 2020. Coronavirus disease was imported into Nigeria by an Italian Citizen from Milan, who works in Nigeria. He was confirmed by the virology Laboratory of the Lagos University Teaching Hospital, which is one of the Laboratory Network of Nigeria Centre for Disease Control.¹⁶ (NCDC). Within the first month when the first case was reported, ten states in Nigeria clinically confirmed 81 patients infected with Covid 19.¹⁷ The disease spread considerably in Nigeria. There was total confusion and disruption of social life in various communities in Nigeria. As of 14 July 2020, the number of Coronavirus cases is estimated to be around 13,344,937 worldwide. Total deaths were placed at 577,989. The number of those who recovered from the infection stood at 7,788,795.¹⁸ It is believed that the aforementioned figure is subject to change every day.

¹⁶ Osagie Ehanire. relifweb.net/report/Nigeria/First-case-coronavirus. Retrieved on 16 September 2021.

¹⁷ J. Amzat, K. Aminu, V.I., Kolo, A.A. Akinyele I. Ogundara, M.C. Danjibo et al 2020. Coronavirus Outbreak in Nigeria: Burden and Socio-Medical response during the First 100 days.

¹⁸ "Covid-19 Coronavirus Pandemic." *Worldometer*. Accessed on August 14. 2020 from <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>

The sanitary law of Leviticus as a nostrum for preventing and curtailing the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria

In Nigeria, the number of infected persons is estimated to be around 33,616, Deaths; 754. Recovery; 13,792. Again, this figure is subject to daily change. The response to the coronavirus was not properly coordinated. At the height of this was an allegation of corrupt practice against government officials who were using the situation and predicament of the people for personal gain. The stigmatization of those who recovered from the disease was another challenge. The guideline and isolation procedure was a sham. There were reports of some who were taken to isolation Centres without a proper diagnosis of coronavirus. Some Chinese expatriates were allowed to enter the country under the guise of medical collaboration but only to discover that they were not medical experts but workers of a Chinese construction company in Nigeria. Nigeria will always have one disease or the other that needs to be combated. The attitudinal behaviour of government officials and health experts charge with the responsibility of combating contagious diseases is very paramount. While leprosy was said to be dreadful in much of history though not a highly contagious disease, the mode of transmission requires sustained and close contact¹⁹

Quarantine and social distances

¹⁹ S.O.Olanisebe.2014. Laws of Tzara'at in Leviticus 13-14 and Medical Leprosy compared. Jewish bible quarterly. Vol. 42, No2. Retrieved from <http://www.jewishbible.org> on August 18, 2022.123

Quarantine is a word that can be traced to the time of The Black Death pandemic.²⁰ However, what does the word mean? From the Latin *quadragesima* and the Italian *quaranta*, both meaning “40”, the word originated at the time when the infamously Black Death known as the bubonic plague was ripping through the world. Starting in 1343, the disease wiped out an estimated one-third of Europe’s population during a particularly nasty period of three years between 1347-50.²¹ This sweep of the plague resulted in one of the biggest die-offs in human history. According to Sun, patients who were sick or dead during the Black Death were kept in the same rooms with their families; this resulted in families becoming sicker and victims keep dying. Then the doctors in Italy noticed that fewer epidemics occurred among the Jews who were carefully observing Moses’ isolation laws. This Biblical practice soon became a government law and was made obligatory for all Italians who had infectious diseases²². The method proves effective and soon, it becomes a practice throughout the continent of Europe.

Officials in the Venetian-controlled port city of Ragusa (Croatia) passed a law establishing Trentino or 30 days of isolation for ships arriving from plague-affected areas. No one

²⁰ J. Mayer, 2018 “The Origin of the Word ‘Quarantine.’” Science Friday. Accessed on August. 24, 2021 from <https://www.sciencefriday.com/articles/the-origin-of-the-word-quarantine/>

²¹ J.Mayer, 2018 “The Origin of the Word ‘Quarantine.’” Science Friday. Accessed on August. 24, 2021 from <https://www.sciencefriday.com/articles/the-origin-of-the-word-quarantine/>

²² J.F Sun.2013 “Medical implication in the Bible and its relevance to modern medicine.” J Integr Med.

The sanitary law of Leviticus as a nostrum for preventing and curtailing the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria

from Ragusa was permitted to visit those ships under the Trentino Law, and if someone broke the law, they too would be isolated for the mandatory 30 days. Over the next 80 years, Marseilles, Pisa, and various other cities adopted similar measures, and within a century, cities extended the isolation period from 30 to 40 days, forcing the term to change from Trentino to Quarantine, the root of the English word quarantine that is being used today. It is difficult to ascertain why the isolation period was extended to 40 days. Some scholars have argued that there may be some cultural meaning attached to the number 40. Some associate it with plenty of Biblical events that draw upon the number, such as Jesus' fast in the desert, Moses' time on Mount Sinai, and the Christian observation of Lent.

However, the response and control mechanism enforced by the priests in ancient Israel needs to be desired. Why I am not justifying the anti-social element and the neglect of the sufferer of the ailment by the general public, the emphasis of the priests which was geared towards the health safety of the general public in ancient Israel must be commendable. The priests in ancient were not after their enrichment and wealth but for the wellbeing of the people. This can be a yardstick in contemporary Nigeria whenever there is an outbreak of an epidemic disease, such as the recent coronavirus. It is not the period for personal enrichment and filthy lucre.

The coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria was a sham in the area of curtailment of the infectious disease. Though there was a general lockdown, many people were still moving from one

place to another because of the failure of the government to provide enough palliatives to cushion the effect of hunger as a result of the lockdown. Some of the palliatives that were provided were diverted for personal use. Some politicians and government officials seize the opportunity to enrich themselves. In some instances, the figures for infectious persons were inflated in some areas or states for reasons best known to them. It is on record that some persons confessed that they never had coronavirus rather they were convincingly taken to Isolation Centre for projected monetary reasons. This is absurd and terrible, to say the least. No country can survive an outbreak of an infectious disease with so much magnitude of corruption by its officials ravaging simultaneously.

Preventing and curtailing Covid-19 in Nigeria

The Leviticus Text provides a very good model in which every individual chooses to participate in the regulations for the good of the community over the comfort of the individual. A larger percentage of our current population may not be at imminent risk of death or very serious health consequences, but it is in everyone's interest to make decisions that will keep the basic health conditions of our society stable. We are in a crisis, and we have a wise biblical perspective to help guide us. Therefore, let's Self-quarantine, let's keep social and physical distances as the need arises, and let's wash and cleanse not because it benefits just the individual, but because it benefits the entire society. Infectious diseases can be curtailed if there are behavioural changes in the life of the people in all ramifications especially those saddles with the responsibility of combatting contagious diseases. Total isolation should be

enforced and the sufferers must not be neglected and empathy must be extended to them with utmost seriousness. To achieve this, corruption and every corrupted-related activity that post a threat to effectively combat infectious disease should be nip on board. There should be a programmatic approach in tackling any further outbreak of communicable diseases.

