

Biblical interpretation during the era of the COVID-19 pandemic: Perspectives from Africa



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Biblical interpretation and/or hermeneutics is largely influenced by context and prevailing events and/or issues. This is attested by many scholars in the field. Previous pandemics have influenced the way biblical hermeneutics is conducted during the period. The situation is not too different from the emergence of COVID-19. The pandemic has been scripturalised to argue that it is the fulfilment of scriptural signs for the second coming of Jesus. Others assert that it is the result of human sins and 5G technology. Amid these propositions, biblical narratives concerning miracles/healing, eschatology, and hope were handled uniquely. This study employs narrative research criticism to analyse various propositions concerning COVID-19 and how biblical texts were engaged to propound an epideictic rhetorical theory of biblical interpretation during the emergence of COVID-19. The main finding is that although there are many assigned eschatological interpretations to the pandemic, there is an epideictic interpretation of miracle narratives of Jesus to minister healing to persons affected and infected by COVID-19.

Contribution: This study emphasises the problem-solving approach to biblical interpretation in the African context. It proposes the application of this approach in response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Africa; biblical interpretation and/or hermeneutics; COVID-19; epideictic rhetoric; forgiveness; miracles; pandemic; sin.

Introduction

Biblical interpretation or hermeneutics is a critical resource engaged by many biblical scholars for the interpretation of scripture. Biblical interpretation and/or hermeneutics is generally defined as a scientific, and artistic enterprise and/or exercise (Klein, Blomberg & Hubbard 2004:5; Ramm 1979:1; Virkler 1981:16) and a spiritual exercise to unearth the meaning of a scriptural text(s). Biblical hermeneutics as a conjoined exercise involving science and art has been well assimilated by many scholars in the field. Its spiritual component lies in the fact that the term 'hermeneutics' is derived from the Greek word 'Hermes', which is the name of a deity who interprets and/or transmits the message of the gods to its adherents. General hermeneutics deals with the general principles for interpreting the Bible while special and/or specific hermeneutics relates to particular principles for interpreting a specific genre of the Bible (Virkler 1981:16).

Analysing the work of Ramm (1979), Virkler (1981), Klein et al. (2004) and Thiselton (2007) suggest a thin line between biblical hermeneutics and biblical interpretation. Biblical hermeneutics seeks to concentrate more attention on general principles to interpret a biblical passage. While biblical interpretation is concerned with epochal issues that give rise to some form of biblical interpretation to deal with specific issues without neglecting standard hermeneutical principles. This study focuses on biblical interpretation during the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) in Africa. It seeks to assess biblical interpretation through the preaching of pastors during COVID-19 and propound a kind of epideictic biblical interpretation during pandemics. The study does not consider eschatological interpretations and general responses of the church and/or pastors to the COVID-19 pandemic but how pastors engaged biblical texts in the attempt to assure Christians of the solution to the pandemic.

Various interpretations given to same scriptural texts during the peak of the pandemic draw attention to the issue of whether scripture passages have several meanings or one meaning. Authorial exegesis and/or interpretation of a text is likely to have one meaning, which may seek

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to determine why the author made such a statement and the expected outcome or impact on the recipients. In other words, the present condition of the initial recipients of the text is critical for the determination of the meaning of the text (Strauss 2011:1–3; Virkler 1981). Because the text was meant to address a current issue in the context of the recipients and/or audience. Hence, some scholars refer to biblical interpretation in the African context as largely contextualising the biblical document employed to solve Africa's problems. This philosophy serves as a presupposition for biblical interpretation during the COVID-19 period in Africa and this work. Scriptural text may have one authorial meaning but many varied assimilations by recipients and/or audiences, thereby making biblical interpretation a continuous pendulum that keeps swinging with the changing times. According to Cezula (2015:134), 'Reading the Bible in the African context is not a monolithic phenomenon but rather a polyolithic one'. In effect, I seek to argue that the COVID-19 pandemic largely served as one of the elements in the polyolithic cycle of biblical interpretation.

A review of some biblical interpretation

Biblical interpretation has often been influenced by contemporary issues of critical concern. In other words, it attempts to interpret a text and/or passage situationally. It reflects the assertion of Peter Nyende (2010) that Africans read and interpret the Bible circumstantially. This approach makes the Bible a living document that can be used in contemporary times to effectively respond to the needs of society. It does not leave the relevance of the Bible to history but affirms its inherent power to cause desirable changes in contemporary times. Strauss (2011) asserted that the interpretation of the Bible ought to take cognisance of changing times that do not contradict the heart of God towards humans and the needs of society. A concept he referred to as 'a heart of God hermeneutics' (Strauss 2011:69). It presupposes that any biblical interpretation that does not respond to the immediate needs of society lacks relevance.

Biblical interpretation since the emergence of the Christian faith was largely influenced by contemporary issues that the Church or interpreter intends to correct or introduce an innovative way of interpretation to effectively and efficiently solve societal needs. Arguably, it is generally accepted that formal interpretation of scripture began during the period of Ezra. The interpretation necessitated by Ezra is generally referred to as Jewish literalism and/or letterism (Klein et al. 2004; Ramm 1979). It was occasioned when the biblical Jews lost their native language, namely Hebrew and could only speak Aramaic, which they adopted during the Babylonian exile. As they could not read the scriptures in Hebrew, there was the need to translate the text that has some elements of interpretation by Ezra into Aramaic. Commenting on letterism, Ramm (1979) stated that:

[T]he spirit of literal interpretation is that we should be satisfied with the literal meaning of a text unless very substantial reasons

can be given for advancing beyond the literal meaning, and when *canons of control* are supplied. (p. 45)

Literal and/or letterism form of scripture interpretation is influenced or controlled by the need for the biblical Jews who returned from the Babylonian exile to be able to read and understand the biblical text in a language they best understand so they do not sin and be thrown into exile.

Origen (ca. 185–254?) was concerned with the issue of overemphasis on the literal form of scripture interpretation, which does not resonate and make sense of the spiritual needs of society (Ramm 1979:33). Therefore he sought to propound an interpretation of scripture based on 1 Corinthians 2:6–7 to argue that scripture has body and/or literal sense, the soul or moral sense, and the spiritual or allegorical sense. The last sense of scripture is much powerful and determinant of the first two; therefore, God speaks to the literal and moral sense through the spiritual sense. Consequently, spiritual and/or allegorical sense of scripture needs to be given critical attention because only spiritual and/or allegorism is the only means to true knowledge. The assertion by Origen received overwhelming attention and satisfaction by many ancient Christians who heeded to his form of scripture interpretation because the quest for spiritual satisfaction was rife and literal interpretation was becoming less popular and not effectively responding to the needs of many. The spiritual or allegorical interpretation reflects allegorism in the Greek tradition of Homer and Hesiod, which many Greek Christians at the time were disposed to (Berkhof 1950:20). Thus, the allegorical or spiritual mode of scripture interpretation propounded by Origen was largely influenced by Greek traditional ethos of how deities communicate and how to delineate and/or decode their message(s) to the benefit of adherents. Not only that, but Alexandrian Jews have accepted the Greek mode of allegorical interpretation as evident in the work of Aristobulus (160 BCE). It is an indication that allegorical or spiritual interpretation asserted by Origen would resonate with both Greeks and Jews.

Saint Augustine of Hippo perpetuated the allegorical or spiritual interpretation of scripture in his book on hermeneutics and homiletics – *De Doctrina Christiana* (Thiselton 2007). Augustine's version of allegorical or spiritual scripture interpretation was to develop the theory of signs. He argued that any element engaged in scripture is a sign that there is a substance that interpreters must critically ascertain for readers of that passage. Augustine based his argument on 2 Corinthians 3:6 to say that literal interpretation of scripture is not valid and kills. Allegorical interpretation gives life, the literal is an indication to search deeper. Therefore, smoke is a sign that fire is present; when the weather is cloudy it is a sign that it will rain. Although Augustine's assertions may be correct, chemical reactions may cause smoke without necessarily fire. Cloudy weather does not always lead to rain. Yet, Augustine was motivated by the needs and/or challenges of the time, where literal interpretation (letterism) was no longer valid as it used to be. It was considered as semantics and semiotics that does not

provide answers to societal needs. This gave rise to signs and symbols and what they may mean (Nicene Series VI), which Augustine attempted to engage for biblical interpretation (Ramm 1979:34).

The Syrian School of Antioch rejected the allegorical or spiritual interpretation of scripture to emphasise literal and/or letterism and historical interpretation of scripture. They argue that literal and/or letterism potentially maintains the primacy of scripture, which has to be interpreted in a historical context (Ramm 1979). The Syrian School of Antioch added historical interpretation to the literal and/or letterism means of scripture interpretation by Ezra. The move was motivated by the quest for the history behind each narrative in the Bible.

The Victorines further developed the literal interpretation of scripture. Their understanding of literalism is not letterism. Literalism in the context of the Victorine is the engagement of syntax, and grammar in the text to draw the meaning of scripture together with history and geography. In other words, the Victorines engaged literalism and the liberal arts to interpret scripture (Ramm 1979:51). This period considered the liberal arts as critical factors in many endeavours; hence, its inclusion in biblical interpretation would make the result accepted by many.

Scripture interpretation in ancient times was influenced by contemporary happenings or needs of a community and/or society. In other words, the *canons of control* that are supplied for effective interpretation of scripture included contemporary needs and/or situations of the users of the text. In fact, they are critical elements in scripture interpretation; without them the interpreted text is likely not to be used by the community or rejected and neglected in the canon of scripture in their subconscious. A patronised scriptural text is that which attempts to influence and/or respond to the critical issues of society. The truth of scripture is the interpretation process that features the urgent needs of the community of faith (Thiselton 2007). If the learned biblical scholar will neglect the situation and/or present need of the community to propound systems of biblical interpretations, the ordinary user (untrained) of the Bible will engage in unrefined modes that will compel the text to directly respond to current happenings. It can be argued that scripture interpretation in the ancient world, early church, and patristic periods was situational in order to respond to contemporary needs of the church and society like the Pauline epistles.

Some biblical interpretation approaches and/or methods in the African context

There have been scriptural interpretation models developed by African scholars as a response to particular situations in the African context. These include postcolonial biblical interpretation, mother tongue biblical interpretation and/or hermeneutics, and intercultural interpretation. They were

motivated by situations that Africans expect solutions through scripture. These situations became one of the elements of *canons of control* for scripture interpretation.

Postcolonial biblical interpretation is influenced by the political experiences and the quest for liberation. Punt (2003) defines it thus:

Postcolonial biblical criticism can best be described as a variety of hermeneutical approaches characterized by their political nature and ideological agenda, and whose textual politics ultimately concerns both hermeneutic of suspicion and hermeneutic of retrieval or restoration. It interacts with colonial history and its aftermath(s), which concerns both history of repression and of repudiation, but it also deals with exposé with restoration and transformation. (p. 59)

It takes political situations in texts and the contemporary political situation of South Africa seriously in the interpretative process intended for political emancipation and freedom.

According to Dube (1996), expansionists and imperialists have strategically interpreted some selected texts with the objective of taking other territories and taking the inhabitants under perpetual slavery. Using John 4:1–40 to illustrate her argument, Dube reasoned that the passage demonstrates a contention between the disciples of Jesus and the Pharisees, a contention that dates back to the Assyrian Empire over the Samaritan territory. She stated:

[I]mperial domination is central to the story of the Samaritan woman and John's Gospel as a whole. The local leaders who plan the death of Jesus, for instance, are characterized as fearing that his fame will bring a Roman attack on the nation (Dube 1996:46).

These texts are colonialist and imperialist weapons used to keep some people in subjection. They need to be re-interpreted in postcolonial tenets for liberation. Similarly, Humphry Waweru (n.d.) stated the reason for choosing a text in the book of revelation for interpretation:

The reason behind the use of Revelation which anticipates the destruction and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth is the fact that, in postcolonial studies, there is a common belief that African culture has been destroyed, requiring a renewal of it. A new reading and a new understanding of African traditions is paramount. (p. 24)

This is what necessitated the emergence of postcolonial biblical interpretation. It is not a monolithic approach to scripture interpretation; it can be approached in the context of the New Testament or a biblical text imposed on the contemporary situation in Africa (Punt 2003:61).

In the proposition by West (2008), he cautioned against some Africans both at home and in the diaspora who are attempting to change the initial perspective of postcolonial interpretation by neglecting the current political situation of Africa for liberation and concentrating more attention on political conditions in the chosen text. It demonstrates how critical is

contemporary situations in postcolonial interpretation. In other words, the selection of a text for interpretation is determined by contemporary happenings that the interpreter wanted to find the solution for in scripture.

Mother tongue biblical interpretation/hermeneutics is motivated by the need for Africans to easily relate to the metaphors, symbols, and ideological philosophies behind biblical texts. Quarshie (2002), Ekem (2010; 2011), Kuwornu-Adjaottor (2012) are largely considered proponents of mother tongue biblical interpretation/hermeneutics in the Ghanaian context. According to Ekem (2011), mother tongue biblical interpretation is to establish the biblical document in African culture and philosophy so as to avoid the Christian Faith from fading off when it is confronted with a stiff opposition like the Arab raid of the 7th century that wiped out the dominance of the Christian faith in North Africa. Hence, mother tongue biblical interpretation is 'reading the text of the Bible from an indigenous translation for ease of understanding and appropriation' (Aryeh 2014:284). Kuwornu-Adjaottor (2012) identified eight steps that a chosen text must undergo for mother tongue biblical interpretation, which emphasises the identification of a text that seems subjective against a particular people and re-interpret and translate it in the context of the recipients.

According to Loba-Mkole (2008), intercultural interpretation is the result of inculturation hermeneutics developed by Justin Ukpong. It is a kind of scripture interpretation where the African context is considered as a co-object of interpretation with the selected biblical text. Manus (2003) reasoned thus:

If we agree with Justin Ukpong and other African scholars that intercultural hermeneutics is an 'academic reading of the Bible that is informed by the perspectives and concerns of ordinary readers and ordinary readings, then the ordinary African peoples' sociocultural contexts where the HIV/AIDS pandemic unabatedly prevails as a killer-disease is apt to be made the subject of a sympathetic interpretation of the healing of the Leper in Mk 1:40-45. (p. 139)

At the time Manus was writing, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) was a prevalent issue that African societies are battling. Hence, it was a co-object with the interpretation of the healing of the leper in Mark 1:40-45. Although HIV/AIDS has not been eliminated from Africa, it is not an urgent issue as compared with COVID-19. The narrative of the healing of the leper in Mark 1:40-45 will be interpreted with COVID-19 as a co-object.

Obviously, perspectives on biblical interpretation methods and approaches in Africa engage contemporary needs and/or situations in the African context as an object of interpretation where the selected text for interpretation seeks to provide a solution(s) to the ills of society. Biblical interpretation in the African context has been an exercise not limited to seeking the meaning of a scriptural text and/or passage but to also ascertaining how the text can

be used to address challenging contemporary issues. Although some have interpreted biblical texts to enslave and dehumanise minority people, these same texts have now been re-interpreted by African scholars through various approaches for liberation, healing, enlightenment, and development in African societies (Aryeh 2016, 2017; Meenan 2014; West 2015).

Epidictic discourse

In ancient Greek, epideictic rhetoric is an art of convincing the audience to accept an issue concerning a person or system to either praise or blame a person's behaviour or a system. The word '*epideictic*' originated from the Greek word *epideixis*, which means [appropriate discourse within pedagogical or ritual texts] (Sheard 1996:765). McCormack (n.d.) stated that 'within classical rhetoric, the epideictic discourse was one of three valorized forms and/or occasions of public discourse, the other two being forensic discourse and deliberative discourse'. Epideictic rhetoric or discourse is also referred to as ceremonial discourse such as obituaries, funeral dirge, nomination speeches, query letters, recommendation notes, appraisal reports, and graduation reports that seek to either praise or blame. Praise or blame is a critical feature in ancient rhetoric, which is considered as a mode that will either give support for greater achievements or total failure in life. In other words, it is a key determinant of life fortunes (Kimball 1986:22).

The purpose of epideictic rhetoric is to intensify adherence to societal values. Persons who comply with societal norms are praised for others to emulate and those who fail to comply are blamed to desist. By this act, members of society are encouraged to pursue societal norms (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969). It has the potential of having a harmonious society with controlled levels of ills and a sense of community. Events of national heroes have been eulogised and written texts are re-echoed by a speaker for audiences to emulate while unsavoury examples are rebuked. It is an attempt to find solutions for contemporary issues in society. Identification and affinity are at the heart of epideictic rhetoric to repel the ills of society through persuasive discourse (Church 2010; Griffin 2017; Lorino 2009).

Scripture interpretation during COVID-19 in Africa

In this section, we analyse the preaching of some pastors in Africa during the hotspot of COVID-19 in Africa. We do not include the eschatological interpretation of the pandemic. These pastors are generally not trained interpreters of the Bible but users of the Bible to solve existential contemporary issues. The masses in Africa often listen to them more than any group of person(s) on the continent. Asamoah-Gyadu (2021) observed that many Africans were disappointed concerning pastors and/or prophets for not predicting and/or prophesying the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and either pray to prevent it or give guidance towards healing. Although some pastors claimed to have prophesied

the emergence of COVID-19 and sounded cautious, it was not widespread (Makandiwa 2020). This does not imply that pastors should be able to foresee everything that happens on the continent but the point is that religious leaders should be able to make inputs on critical and central societal issues in Africa.

A survey carried out in March 2020 among some Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians shows that 26% of Nigerians believe that the COVID-19 virus cannot infect Christians because the blood of Jesus in their veins, which was infused during the eucharist is capable of preventing the disease from Christians (A report, viewed 13 April 2022, from <https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/51959393>). This perception has the potential of encouraging people to live a reckless lifestyle and neglect the COVID-19 prevention protocols. Nevertheless, it expresses the faith and interpretation of the power in the blood of Jesus to prevent the COVID-19 virus. For them, the eucharist is not limited to remembering the death and resurrection of Jesus but being infused with the blood of Jesus to propel the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Ghana, Archbishop Dr Charles Agyinasare considered the COVID-19 pandemic as a demon that has to be bound. He engaged Matthew 16:19 that believers have the power to bind COVID-19 out of their lives. Unlike other scholars who interpret Matthew 16:19 as the pre-eminence of Peter and his position as the leader of the church, Agyinasare offered an existential and transformative interpretation of the text to tackle the challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, a present tense interpretation to depict that contemporary Christians in Africa have been given the power to deal with the pandemic through prayer. Agyinasare sees a demon as the source of the pandemic; this resonates with spiritual causality belief among many Africans that whatever happens physically has been caused by a spirit entity. And to effectively deal with the issue, one needs to first and foremost deal with the spiritual root cause. In support of Matthew 16:19 concerning the keys given to the believer to bind and loose, Agyinasare referred to 2 Timothy 1:7 to emphasise the need for believers to be assured that God has given them the Spirit of boldness to bind the power behind the pandemic. Hence, fear should not be entertained. 2 Timothy 1:7 have not been considered as an instruction to only Timothy and that its application is limited to his context but adopted for the COVID-19 pandemic situation in Ghana and/or Africa. Persons who were infected with the virus and believe to bind the power behind the virus testified of being healed through prayer (Agyinasare 2020).

Pastor Mensa Otabil, founder of the International Central Gospel Church (ICGC) interpreted Isaiah 13:9 in the pandemic context that just as Babylon (world superpower at the period) was overthrown by God, the inability of wealthy nations to find an adequate solution to the fast-spreading virus is a sign that God will overthrow the wealthy nations and draw others to the centre stage of world issues. He argued that these super nations have become pompous and self-conceited. The pandemic will showcase and draw to the

fold less popular nations into the discussion of world issues Affre (2022). The interpretation of Isaiah 13:9 by Otabil gives hope to African nations that are poor and ineffective to deal with the pandemic. He likened African nations to Tyre and Sidon in the book of Isaiah that later became influential in global matters in the ancient world. It reflects the notion that history will always repeat itself. However, it may repeat itself in favour of the poor and not the wealthy. Probably, Otabil comes from Africa; therefore, he spoke in favour of Africans. It will be insightful to know how wealthy nations will consider this proposition.

In order to encourage Christians in Ghana to embrace lockdown protocols and pray for healing of persons affected and infected by the COVID-19 pandemic, scripture passages that border on invitation of Jesus to homes were engaged by pastors:

For example, the invitation of Jesus by a Pharisee to dine with him (Lk 7:30–50), which led to a religious activity of forgiving a sinful woman; Jesus' visit to Mary and Martha in their home and teaching them (Lk 10:38–42); and Jesus' dining with Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1–10), which led to Zacchaeus' repentance from cheating in tax collection and the recompense to those he might have cheated earlier. (Aryeh 2021:203)

These Lukan texts basically reflect domestic religion in the homes of the patriarchs at the period where edifices for mass religious gatherings were not harnessed. When auditoria were built for mass religious activities, religious activities in homes were not banned but served as a mini substitute or back up for worship where itinerant religious intermediaries were invited to address the family (Aryeh 2021:209–210). This phenomenon and texts were adapted for 'home cell' meetings by members of the church in a particular area. In this adaptation and interpretation by the Perez Chapel International, the leader of the meeting in the homes is not the head (father) of the family but a leader of the church who lives in the community. This provided a meeting place for prayer against the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Tinashe (2022) captured a discussion between a pastor and a concerned member of his congregation about the cause of the pandemic and how it can be contained. The pastor engaged texts in the Old Testament thus:

Is coronavirus a curse from God because we failed to obey him? Let us look at these Bible verses-Leviticus 26:14–16; Deuteronomy 28:15, 22; and Isaiah 26:20–21. Let us be in an attitude of repentance for this is what will calm everything on earth. God is looking for a repenting heart. A heart that cries for His mercy, a heart that begs for his forgiveness, a heart that is ready to repent and leave its past life. Let us cry out for repentance. Let us put on ashes and wear sacks and cry before Him as we repent ourselves. God is looking for a repenting heart! Let us repent! (Internet 14 April 2022)

The anonymous pastor considered sin as the cause of the pandemic, not human activities (laboratory, environmental challenges, zoology etc.) as mentioned by many research institutions at the beginning of the pandemic from late 2019

to early 2020. Although a particular sin and who committed it was not mentioned it is generally understood as disobedience to God. Hence, the need for repentance, which would lead to the withdrawal of the pandemic by God. The disease and death are considered a punishment from God. However, disease and death have always been the predicament of humans prior to the pandemic. Chimbizikai (2022), and Gathogo (2022) sampled opinions in Kenya between March and April 2020 concerning the interpretation of the Bible for survival. Social media survey indicated that Jeremiah 7:3, 8–15 had become popular on the lips of many pastors to the congregants that sin is the cause of the pandemic. Repentance is needed for the virus to be abated by God.

Samuel Sunday Alamu undertook exegesis of Matthew 4:23–24 to ascertain the meaning of Jesus 'healing every disease and sickness among the people' in relation to its interpretation by pastors in Nigeria during the height of the pandemic in early 2020. Many who were affected and infected with the COVID-19 virus were made to believe in the healing power of God to heal everyone. Alamu's (2021) findings show that:

The phrase 'healing every sickness and every disease' does not mean that all that was sick at that time were all healed without a single one left, however, a number of them had their health restored. Therefore, it will be wrong to assume that everyone who is infected with COVID-19 or with any other health-related issues will be healed by the preachers today, who are not Jesus. (p. 161)

Even though some who are affected and infected with the pandemic may be healed by preachers, one cannot be sure that all will be healed. There is no record to show that all who were sick and diseased in Galilee during the time of Jesus' ministry were healed. Therefore, to assure victims of COVID-19 that they will all be healed based on Matthew 4:23–24 is an extremist expectation. However, this shows how ordinary interpreters (pastors) of the Bible engage healing narratives of Jesus to appropriate healing in Africa.

Epidictic biblical interpretation during COVID-19

During difficult moments in Africa, attention is given to biblical interpretation to indicate the approach of dealing with the issue. The opinions of pastors who are not trained interpreters are highly sought after as against trained interpreters of the Bible. This is so because it is perceived that the trained theologians do not often consider the existential situation of Africans. It creates tension between the ordinary interpreters (pastors) of the Bible and trained interpreters of the Bible (Anum 1999, 2021; Ukpong 2001; West 1993).

The COVID-19 pandemic gave a wider opportunity for ordinary interpreters (pastors) of the Bible to make sense of the pandemic through the interpretation/engagement of biblical passages. Passages that call for repentance and forgiveness of sins were praised for adoption by Africans to

avert the pandemic. Scripture passages concerning the miracles of Jesus were also engaged for African Christians to assimilate for the healing of persons affected by the pandemic. Although trained interpreters of scripture may have issues with how passages were engaged by ordinary (pastors) interpreters of the Bible, nevertheless these passages were engaged in epideictic mode to praise the miracles of Jesus and the faith of his audience for emulation by Africans in order to survive the pandemic. It also cast blame on some Africans to repent of sins and seek for forgiveness to survive the pandemic. These were presented in a *pathos* argumentative enterprise that appeals to the faith and/or emotions of Africans to accept the interpretation.

It calls for a renewed approach to some scripture passages that is intended to intensify the relationship between Africans and God. This epideictic (to rhetorically provide and/or show solution to existential issue) interpretation does not consider the pandemic as a prelude to the end of the world (eschatology) but one of the pandemics that Africans will survive if they hearken to the kind of interpretation offered. It is an appeal to society to behave in a fashion comparable to that in the ancient world to survive the pandemic. Persons who might be healed or who managed to survive the pandemic through the acceptance of interpretations offered by the ordinary interpreters (pastors) of the Bible are likely to harness these interpretations for a long time and can be handed to generation yet to be born. The greatest advantage of the epideictic interpretation by ordinary interpreters (pastors) of the Bible is the hope that is kindled in the life of hopeless people of Africa that they can survive the pandemic.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has called for a mode of scripture interpretation in Africa that is epideictic in nature. Even though eschatological passages gained much attention and interpretation during the peak of the pandemic, which is forensic, epideictic interpretation cannot be ignored. Ordinary interpreters (pastors) of the Bible played a critical role in the epideictic interpretation of scripture to give hope to Africans to survive the pandemic. For them, the pandemic is not the end of the world and humanity. It emphasises the need to take ordinary interpreters (pastors) of the Bible more seriously. Attention has been given to ordinary readers (Christians) of the Bible by Eric Anum, Justin Ukpong, Gerald West, Musah Dube, and Jeremy Punt to mention but few. This study contributes to the critical research into scripture interpretation by ordinary interpreters (pastors) of the Bible during pandemics/crises.

There is the need to find the interface between trained interpreters of the Bible and ordinary interpreters (formally untrained pastors) of the Bible for the benefit of all humanity in all seasons. The COVID-19 pandemic serves as the *canons of control* for epideictic discourse of scripture interpretation for Africans to survive the pandemic. It is obvious from the scriptural texts selected by ordinary interpreters (pastors) of

the Bible and how they were applied indicate a return to literal interpretation of scripture propounded for by Origen for the early church.

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