

# Eschatological events in Matthew 24:1–15 and COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria

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Jesus in Matthew 24 presaged to his disciples about the eschatological happenings that would prepare the world for his *Parousia* and the end of this age. Using the redaction exegetical approach of doing biblical research, this article focuses on interpreting the context of Matthew 24:1–15 to unveil the nexus that exist between the eschatological events Jesus prophesied in the Olivet Prophecy and the COVID-19 pandemic that ravaged the world with special reference to Nigeria. This study found out that the convulsive impacts of COVID-19 pandemic have similarities with the characteristics of the eschatological birth-pang events Jesus prophesied in Matthew 24:1–15. The study unveils the nexuses that exist between the eschatological events in Matthew 24 and COVID-19 and highlights the theological exhortations, warnings and commands that pre-equip Christians on how they are to respond to eschatological birth-pang events.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This study explored the nexuses that exist between COVID-19 pandemic and the eschatological events Jesus presaged in Matthew 24. The study highlights how Christians are to be responding to eschatological events.

**Keywords:** Matthew 24:1–15; eschatology; *Parousia*; COVID-19 pandemic; church; Nigeria.

## Introduction

The convulsive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic that started in Wuhan in 2019 and how it spread to many other parts of the world (Li & Meng 2020), the rate at which it killed many and its negative impacts on the world's economy (Jones, Paulmbo & Brown 2021) spurred many Christians to be curious to know whether it is an eschatological event (Ossai 2021), a natural or man-made occurrence (Carbonaro 2020; Gertz 2020; Sellin 2020). Using the redaction method of doing biblical exegesis, this study explores Matthew 24:1–15 to uncover the nexuses that exist between the eschatological events Jesus presaged in Matthew and the COVID-19 pandemic that drastically impacted the world. The study argues that Jesus' didache encapsulated in the Olivet discourse underlines the characteristics of eschatological birth-pang events as they are only theologically predestined to be heralding the nearness of the Parousia and not to pinpoint the exact day or hour when the world would end and when the Parousia would materialise. This study unveils the theological characteristics that relate COVID-19 to be an eschatological event and highlights theological insights on how Christians are to be responding to eschatological events.

## Exegesis of Matthew 24:1–15

The gospel of Matthew as a teaching gospel employs the context of Matthew 24 as an exhortation (Morris 1972:88), which has the preceding chapters (Mt 16:21–23:39) serving as its immediate background (Kroll 2021) to reveal Christ's teaching concerning his second coming and Israel (Mt 24:4–44). The then Jerusalem temple had a close proximity with the Mount of Olives (Gundry 1982:413). The buildings of the then Jerusalem temple (τὰς οἰκοδομὰς τοῦ ἱεροῦ) (Mt 24:1) were revered by the Jews in Jerusalem and the Jews in diasporas. Because of the temple's spiritual, religious and political value to the Jews, there was then a Jewry's unanimous love for the temple. This Jewish temple was known throughout the Roman Empire, perhaps because of its beauty and its Judaism's cult, which was centralised (Sanders 1992:50). Jesus as a Jew visited this temple on many occasions (Mt 21:12, 23; 24:1) (Foster 1980:34). In the context of Matthew 24, Jesus visited this temple and was going out, when his μαθηταί (disciples) came to show him the temple buildings. Though, the reason for which the disciples (οἱ μαθηταί) called Jesus' attention to the magnificent buildings of the temple he was going out from, is not literally stated; however, it might underline the theme of Judgment (Kapolyo 2006:1187).

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In verse 2, Jesus used a rhetorical question 'Οὐ βλέπετε ταῦτα πάντα' ['do you not see all these things?'] to make reference to the temple buildings that the disciples had shown to him. Jesus' prophetic response implies that he wants his disciples to understand that the temple would be destroyed. This second temple which was then regarded as the most holy temple was a revered symbol of Judaism did not impress Jesus; hence, he spoke against it (Mt 23:38). In this context, καταλυθήσεται means the destruction of the temple in the nearest future, which by the implication of ἀμὴν would surely happen (Baum 1961:54). By using the futuristic Greek word καταλυθήσεται (Mt 24:2), Jesus authoritatively prophesies doom for the magnificent building the Jews treasured so much.

In verse 3, Matthew categorically states that Jesus was seated on the Mount of Olives when his disciples came to him privately to ask questions. This implies that Matthew narrates what he witnessed. Matthew uses the picture of Jesus sitting down to set rolling his teaching elements (Mt 13:1–2; 15:29). The disciples seeing that Jesus was not impressed with the splendid buildings in the temple, that he has judged, coupled with other eschatological presages Jesus has been categorically fore-telling them in the past, being inquisitive, they came to Jesus privately and demanded Jesus tells them, when shall these things be?, what shall be the sign of his coming and of the end of the world? Matthew 24:3 provides summaries of the contents of the entire chapter as it highlights the important questions seeking theological responses (Kroll 2021). These questions set rolling the eschatological prophecies, commands and exhortatory teaching in Matthew 24; they are to theologially serve to instruct and to guide his disciples as they would actively live in the interim preparing for his promised Parousia (Mt 24:3).

In verse 4, to answer the disciples' questions, Jesus began to intimate them about the recurrent prodigies that would be happening as eschatological events and how being preoccupied to know about the signs could expose them to be deceived. In this verse, *πλανήσῃ* is a verb used in its subjunctive aorist active third person singular form from *πλανάω*; it indicates the deceptive tendencies of some people to delude and lead the disciples astray. In this discourse, *πλανάω* is a strong emphasis in Matthew's redaction (Broer 1993:209). The first reaction of Jesus to his disciples' question was to warn the disciples not to be deceived (Mt 24:4).

Jesus being conscious of the possibility of 'the many' being vulnerable to deceptive prophets used the Greek word *βλέπετε* (Mt 24:4), which is a verb used in its imperative present active second person plural form from *βλέπω* to command his disciples 'to keep on seeing' or 'be on guard' so that they will not be deceived. The warning is clearly part of Jesus' hortatory tradition in this context (Keener 1999:639). The 'advanced warnings' Jesus gives to his disciples predispose them to be divinely equipped to be distinguishing truth from heresies. Consistently arising from eschatological events,

Jesus knew that there are some who will be subtle to deceive his disciples; they may be Jews or even those who claim to have believed in him. Hence, he fore-warns and commands them to be watching and discerning so that they will not be deceived.

In verse 5, in relation to the last days, Jesus categorically prophesies that many will come in his ὄνομα [name], and each of them will be claiming to be 'the Christ'. Many will claim to be sent by Jesus to do his cause, in his authority, but they would eventually mislead many followers of Jesus who may be desperately seeking for signs. In this pericope, ὀνόματι is in a dative neuter singular noun from ὄνομα. As some will be using the name of Jesus, claiming to be working for his cause and by his authority, they shall deceive many. *πλανήσουσιν* is an indicative verb that is in its future active third person plural form from *πλανάω*; it denotes that the deception will be done by 'the many' acclaimed 'anointed-Ones' in the future when Jesus would have departed from this world. By declaring to be the 'Εγώ εἰμι ('I am'), they will keep designating themselves to be 'bodily present' to be functioning as 'the anointed Ones'; thereby, they would deceive many.

In verses 6 to 9, Jesus enlists hearing of wars and rumours of wars, nations rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom, famines, pestilences, earthquakes in diverse places and disciples being delivered up for tribulation, being hated and killed because of the disciples' identification to the name of Jesus, as eschatological events (Mt 24:9). The verb *μέλλω* used in its indicative future active second person plural form-*μελλήσετε* qualifies the eschatological events to be theologially destined to be taking place in the future in the interim of Jesus' departure and his return. By the inference of 'δεῖ γὰρ γενέσθαι', Jesus says categorically that these disasters 'must occur' (Mt 24:6). This 'must occur' re-echoes the biblical and Jewish tradition of God's sovereignty over history and the events of the end time (Keener 1999:639). Although these enlisted eschatological events have been occurring, but after the death and resurrection of Jesus, they will be taking up eschatological functions. One of these eschatological events is designated the destruction of the Jewish temple (Mt 24:15) (Kapolyo 2006:1189). Eschatological events have been ordained to be happening in the last days; they will be causing commotions, social disruptions, mental upset and confusion in the world; the church in the interim waiting for the Parousia would also be witnessing and could be victims of its convulsive impacts. Many people's hearts will fail them because of fear, worry, anxiety, depression, hardship and deaths which eschatological birth-pang events would be consolidating. People will be scared about what the world's future holds; however, by the implication of ἄλλ' οὐπω ἐστὶν τὸ τέλος, eschatological convulsive events will not determine when the end will materialise (Mt 24:6). Jesus foretells his disciples that the enlisted eschatological events have been predestined to keep happening, yet they would not indicate when the end would materialise and that his disciples should not be troubled. These eschatological events were

further described by Jesus to be merely the 'beginning of birth pangs' (Mt 24:8). Jesus declares that these are not exclusively end-time events; rather they are 'events that would happen throughout history for which disciples must be prepared' (Frost 1924:18). The disciples were informed in advance, so that they should be well acquainted that those events must be happening, but they would not pinpoint the exact time when the world would end and when Jesus would come, they are to be focused on how they were to be responding to end-time realities (Hill 1979:63).

Consequent to the convulsive implications of the eschatological events, in verse 10, with the use of the Greek verb 'σκανδαλισθήσονται' (stumble or cause to sin), Jesus implies that after his departure, many Christians will be offended because of the hardship they may disapprove of and this would hinder them from acknowledging his authority anymore (Mt 13:21). In the last days, Jesus enlists that many followers of Jesus being offended shall *παραδώσουσιν* (betray) and *μισήσουσιν ἀλλήλους* (hate one another) (Mt 24:10). Keener (1999:641) notes that then 'the greatest expression of apostasy was betraying others who intended to remain faithful (Mt 10:21)'. This implies that many acclaimed disciples will hand-over, deliver or give up their fellow disciples to those opposing Jesus and his kingdom to deal with them as they wish. Similar to many occasions in which the Jews were offended in Jesus (Mt 13:57; 15:12) (Merkle 2004:1212), many disciples will also have causes to be offended in Jesus (Mt 13:21; Mt 26:31), but those who shall not be offended in Jesus will be blessed (Mt 11:6).

In verse 11, Jesus intimates to his disciples again that in the last days many pseudo-prophets will arise – *πολλοὶ ψευδοπροφήται ἐγερθήσονται* (Mt 24:11). 'Many false prophets' in this context suggest 'those located within the community of faith who are pushing a totally different agenda' (Keener 1999:639). In verse 12, Jesus prophetically states that during the last days, there will be an increased rate of lawlessness- *πληθυνθήναι τὴν ἀνομίαν*. The noun *ἀνομίαν* used in this verse is in its accusative feminine singular form from *ἀνομία*, which means living a lawless life, living in iniquity and unrighteousness. The condition of without law and transgression of the law lead to chaos. During the last days, many acclaimed followers of Jesus would be slaves to lawlessness. Because lawlessness will increase, love of many acclaimed followers of Jesus will grow cold. The love referred to in this context is *ἀγάπη*, which is God's kind of love.

In verse 13, the verb *ὑπομείνας* used in this verse is in its participle aorist active nominative masculine singular form from *ὑπομένω*. Jesus uses '*ὑπομείνας εἰς τέλος*' (shall endure to the end) to identify those who would be saved. Jesus reveals the need for each believer to endure till the end for him or her to be *σωθήσεται* (saved). At the *τέλος* (end) of all things, being saved should be the focus of Jesus' disciples. The end-point of Jesus coming to the world as the Messiah, for which he inaugurated his kingdom and for which the Jews and the Gentiles were and are still being invited to identify with him and his kingdom is for them to be saved. It is only those who

continue in faith till the end will receive salvation on the final day. Salvation is the end-point for which the gospel is to be preached, taught and lived.

In verse 14, Jesus emphatically intimates to his disciples what would happen to indicate and pinpoint the end coming but not the exact time of his coming and when the world would end. Nevertheless, Jesus in Matthew hints to his disciples that the eschatological event that would function as the ultimate prerequisite heralding Jesus' coming, 'is the evangelization of all nations (24:14)' (Wenham 1977:72), and this consolidates Matthew's heavy emphasis on the universality of the gospel. Whereas Jesus says that other phenomena would not mark when the world will end (24:6), but in verse 14, he unambiguously declares that universal proclamation of the gospel would mark the end coming. Matthew consolidates his heavy emphasis on the Gentile mission. Because salvation is the core mission of Jesus, he consolidates that the gospel of the kingdom (*τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας*) shall be preached (*κηρυχθήσεται*) in the whole world before his second Parousia would take place. To Keener (1999:642), 'the world controls many other factors, but this is the one factor Jesus' followers may determine: they must complete the mandate of preaching to all nations before this age will come to a close (Mt 28:19–20)'. It is in the gospel lies the deeds and the word of God which are endued with the power of God to persuade humankind to salvation. It is therefore 'this proclamation of the gospel to all nations that would help to get the world inhabitants ready for the second coming of Jesus' (Marxsen 1969:177). Also, the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom to all nations demands repentance (Brodie 2021:1) from those who hear the gospel. Because the world inhabitants will be judged based on their rejection or acceptance of Jesus and the gospel of his kingdom; therefore, the gospel is to be preached to the whole world (*ὅλη τῆ οἰκουμένη*) (Mt 24:14; Mt 26:13). The reason for which the gospel will be preached in the entire world is that the preaching will serve as a *μαρτύριον* (witness) to all nations. Having stated this, Jesus categorically answers the second question raised by his disciples pertaining to the sign that would indicate the end of the world. Jesus answers that it is after the gospel of the kingdom would have been preached in the whole world, which would serve as a witness to the entire nation; then would the end come.

## Is COVID-19 a natural-occurring outbreak, a man-made end-result from dealing with highly contagious and deadly viruses or a pandemic that is an eschatological event heralding the Parousia of Jesus?

A novel coronavirus was officially announced by the Chinese Center for Disease and Prevention (Li & Meng 2020) to be an infectious disease that is posing a challenge to their public health and to other countries in the world on 08 January 2020 (Phelan et al. 2020). There were many protective vaccinations and clinical trials that test various potential antivirals. Though vaccination is going on in many countries, the

current management of cases aims to relieve the symptoms while the body's immune system fights the illness (Schultze & Aschenbrenner 2021). Much more than Ebola and its consequent death, health and social disruptions (Althaus et al. 2015), COVID-19 exacted much more social disruption, economic and theological implications on the people of the world with special reference to Nigeria. Because of the ravaging impact of COVID-19 on the world, it influenced many people in many parts of the world to advance conspiracy theories that circulated from doubtful sources (Jolley & Lamberty 2020).

The Chinese communist party, some western scientists and some global media advanced that COVID-19 originated from a natural-occurring outbreak acquired by humans after exposure to infected animals (Sellin 2020). The Chinese government advanced from their 'close relative evidence' that COVID-19 jumped from animals to humans inside the Wuhan Seafood Market (Sellin 2020). It was suggested that viruses from the coronavirus lineage responsible for COVID-19 may have been circulating in bats for decades long before the virus started infecting people in late 2019. It is important to note that 'how exactly the virus jumped to humans is still a mystery' (Garcia De Jesus 2020).

On the other hand, some also advance that COVID-19 originated from man-made end-results from dealing with highly contagious and deadly viruses empowered by bioengineering, which resulted in the conscious or unconscious creation of dangerous new viruses or release of viruses from containment facilities (Sellin 2020). Hence, some hold the position that COVID-19 is the result of genetic shuffling among known coronaviruses (Boni et al. 2020). Still, whether COVID-19 is naturally occurring or man-made, from another purview, many scholars, theologians, pastors and lay Christians relate it to sin (Ayokunle 2020) and a demon being behind it (Krippahl 2020), antichrist (Ossai 2021) and it is one of the eschatological events. Most of these opinions (Jolley & Lamberty 2020) and conspiracy theories (Sardarizadeh & Robison 2020) were generated and advanced to unveil the truth and facts behind COVID-19 or to control the ignorant and the vulnerable.

Nigeria is one of the countries in the world in which the ravaging impacts of COVID-19 were and are still being felt. Being Nigerians as Africans are religious in nature, events that directly or indirectly impact them are most often spiritualised. Consequently, many Nigerians were caught in the web of spiritualising COVID-19 (Olonade et al. 2021). Some acclaimed ministers of God and lay Christians in Nigeria perceive COVID-19 to be the prelude or an eschatological event ushering in the mark of the beast (Bohlinger 2020; Ossai 2021). Because COVID-19 is being 'spiritualized', many views, opinions and conspiracy theories have been advanced about COVID-19 in Nigeria. On 'the spiritualization of Covid-19', some Nigerians perceived the pandemic to be a tool of the antichrist and divine

communication and it is one of the eschatological events (Ossai 2021). From a theological standpoint and the findings from exegesis of Matthew 24, as these are eschatological days, it is in line with Jesus' eschatological prophecies for a pandemic like COVID-19 to have ravaged and still negatively impacting the world either as a natural or man-made occurrence or as one of the eschatological events.

## Convulsive impacts of COVID-19 in Nigeria and its theological nexus to the presaged eschatological events in Matthew 24:1–15

- COVID-19 exposed and shocked religious institutions and religious practices that stood for centuries such as the Jerusalem temple, which was then the ultimate symbol of God's glory (Mt 24:1–2), and which was later destroyed (Keener 1999:634). Likewise, COVID-19 as an eschatological event exposed the religious superficiality of most churches. COVID-19 with its ravaging effects in the world revealed the theological valuelessness of most churches' religious activities and programmes that undermine the main aspects of the mission mandate of the church. During the peak of COVID-19, many religious institutions were deserted because of the government's policies and ban on religious and social gatherings in Nigeria as a means to contain the pandemic (Xinhua 2020). Those who had hopes in these religious institutions were disappointed during the climax of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Churches in Nigeria were closed; church programmes halted and were only broadcasted online. Christians stopped going to their worship places, while those who had the means participated online. Muslim clerics promoting their Zionist thesis related the closure of religious prayers in their sacred centres as a plot to place a barrier between Muslims and their religious practices. While most Christian clergies related to COVID-19 pandemic to be an eschatological event (Ossai 2021), in addition, others used the numerous conspiracy theories (Jolley & Lamberty 2020) that emerged to advance their stance and to explain it.
- COVID-19 exerted destructive effects on many structures such as some big and small financial institutions in Nigeria and in other parts of the world, which world powers and individuals esteem highly like Jerusalem. The corollaries which COVID-19 had with the closure of religious centres directly impacted on social gathering of the adherents and the financial accumulation of religious sector (Xinhua 2020). Then, financial institutions, markets and schools were closed. COVID-19 to a far-reaching degree negatively impacted these institutions.
- COVID-19 raised people's curiosity to know and to relate it to the sign of Jesus' second coming and the end of the world. Many scholars and laymen alike are curiously anticipating Jesus' second Parousia with all its accompanying fulfilment of prophecies (Levitt 1979:2).

Like the disciples who were curious to know about the signs of the end time, many Nigerian Christians were curious to know if COVID-19 is one of the signs of the promised Parousia and the world coming to an end (Mt 24:3) (Ossai 2021). Many Nigerians were curious and anxious to know and be informed about the sign of Jesus' second coming and the end of the world but many have refrained from being discerning and being ready for Jesus' second coming. This curiosity exposes them to be gullible and vulnerable to deceptions. As there will be deceivers in the last days, Jesus forewarns his disciples to 'see' that no one deceives them (Mt 24:4).

- COVID-19 exposed many acclaimed plenipotentiaries of God to be false prophets and teachers. In Nigeria, many men and women are posing to have been divinely called, anointed and sent (Orjinmo 2020) as Jesus presaged in the Olivet's discourse (Mt 24:5). Many pseudo-plenipotentiaries of God are using the name of Jesus to mislead many Nigerian Christians but the advent of COVID-19 exposed them to be deceivers. In Nigeria, the problematic corollary of COVID-19 served as a leverage for many acclaimed prophetic plenipotentiaries of God, Christians and non-Christians, scientists and scholars in Nigeria and in other parts of the world to start preaching, teaching and researching on COVID-19 (Corzine 2020). Some were quick to relate COVID-19 to be the sign of the end of the world coming to materialisation. Still, others erroneously relate COVID-19 to be the eschatological event that would exactly function in pinpointing when Jesus' Parousia would take place (Omotaye 2020). Many Christians in Nigeria being gullible could not discern (Tetty & Nel 2021) those who are clandestine false prophets, believed them because they claimed to have been called and sent in the name of the Lord, as a consequence of this, many were and are being led astray (Mt 24:5).
- COVID-19 and solution-seeking Christians and false prophets: COVID-19 generated many problems for many individuals, many business organisations and most countries in the world (Jones, Paulmbo & Brown 2021). These problems generated by COVID-19 needed solutions. Being human beings are solution-oriented in nature (Jaynes 2018), many acclaimed prophets claim to have the anointing to be proffering solutions to any human problems and for the issues that arose and escalated because of COVID-19. Jesus in advance informed his disciples that in the last days many false prophets shall rise (Mt 24:5, 11, 23) boasting to have the power and the anointing to be performing signs and wonders. Spurious prophets capitalise on the solution-oriented nature of many acclaimed followers of Jesus to mislead the gullible-minded. At the peak of COVID-19, neglecting government policies to contain the pandemic (Onyedika-Ugoeze 2020), one plenipotentiary of God encouraged his members to keep coming to their worship centre prophesying that the pandemic will not infect them and that the pandemic will end on 27 March 2020; this acclaimed prophet was mocked when his prophecy failed to materialise (Orjinmo 2020).

Some claimed to be curing those with COVID-19, and some were busy generating and analysing COVID-19 conspiracy theories that have negative consequences (Jolley & Lamberty 2021). Many of their followers were deceived by being fed with biased information about COVID-19. Many church founders and ministers used the zoom and other social media platforms to be holding fellowships and programmes dishing out prophetic words to impact their members and their online followers to transform them for their acclaimed divine experiences and revivals. Jesus forewarned his followers not to be believing false prophets and pseudo-prophecies concerning eschatological events.

- COVID-19 with its destructive effects and rumours of its convulsing effects around the globe relate to Jesus' prophecy about hearing of wars and rumours of wars (Mt 24:6) in the last days that consolidate fear and hardship. The convulsing effects of COVID-19 include high rate of its infectious nature, many being sick, hospitals being filled to more than their capacities, lack of ideas to medically cure COVID-19 patients, death of many medical front-liners and COVID-19 patients in Nigeria and other parts of the world. All these and many more were happening concurrently in many countries in the world. Consequently, it generated media coverage of the epidemic and rumours that stirred fear and panic (Wahj-Jorgensen 2021). The rumours containing some facts and false claims from the early stage of the coronavirus outbreak, conspiracy theories about the origin and scale of the disease were spread on the media platforms and otherwise (Sardarizadeh & Robinson 2020). The media were writing, printing and posting online scary and frightening stories about the contagious pandemic. The rumours of the convulsing impacts of COVID-19 on the infected individuals, pressure on the hospitals where they were admitted, lack of clues on how to manage or cure them, the increasing number of medical and other front-liners in the battle to unmask the mysterious nature of the COVID-19 and how to contain it being not infected and killed by COVID-19 consolidated fear in the hearts of many humankind. Vicini (2021:116) notes that 'each day the media update the macabre totals'. The media and the roles of social media in spreading the information about the convulsing impacts and valid containment information about the COVID-19 are recognised and cannot be over-emphasised. At the peak of the convulsing impacts of COVID-19, many sites and social media were updating figures daily and are still being updated and published by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Parker 2020). In Nigeria, the news about COVID-19 and its convulsive impacts was being updated from all the states by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC 2020). The news and rumours about the convulsive nature of the pandemic impacted Nigerians with fear, anxiety, depression, hopelessness and hardship, and many became vulnerable. Although the news updates about the convulsing effects of COVID-19 were frightful, Jesus in Matthew, being the Lord of the church, commands his

disciples not to be frightened, for eschatological birth-pangs must be taking place; however, they would not indicate that the end has come (Mt 24:6).

- COVID-19 manifested in the form of a pestilence with the corollary of famine as Jesus prophesied in his eschatological response to the query of his disciples concerning the end of the age and his second coming (Mt 24:7). Jesus enlisted λοιμός and λιμός as some of the eschatological events. Pestilence [*loimos*] and famine [*limos*] (Torrey 1897) in this verse relate to COVID-19 as a pestilence and its corollary famine exacted upon many countries in the world. λοιμός relates to an epidemic disease that is highly contagious or infectious. COVID-19 as a highly infectious disease warranted the World Health Organization to brand it a pandemic that demanded the quickest control measures to halt its spread and to contain it. COVID-19 is seen by many Christians to be a plague or an eschatological event signalling the nearness of the end of the world and the eventual occurrence of the expected Parousia (Ossai 2021). Being a pandemic that caused diverse forms of sufferings for the people of the world, it also consolidated the corollaries of many being vulnerable to mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and hunger (Cordero 2021). Because of corruption, poverty, insecurity and the advent of COVID-19, many people in Nigeria experienced and are still experiencing a high rate of hardships that predispose many to be unable to feed themselves and their significant others (Kalu 2020). The high rate of poverty and hunger warranted the need for some individuals, governmental bodies and non-governmental bodies who cared to venture into giving out palliatives to alleviate the pains and sufferings of the needy ones (Dabang & Ukomadu 2020).
- COVID-19 a bio-weapon of warfare?: COVID-19 has been perceived by some scholars to be a bio-weapon of warfare manufactured in China to mastermind the dethronement of world powers, to pull down economic powers of the world and to control the world inhabitants for some hidden purposes (Mt 24:7) (Jolley & Lamberty 2020). Sellin (2020) notes that 'in the absence of conclusive evidence that Covid-19 is naturally occurring, the burden of proof as to the origin of Covid-19 is now on China'. Many see Covid-19 as a Chinese 'convert biological weapons programme' (Gertz 2020) and its vaccine is also seen to be a weapon of control that some politicians and wealthy people with ulterior intentions manufactured to use to control the world inhabitants. There has been 'a long-standing fear that the use of bio-weapons for biological warfare has frequently struggled to find a place on the political agenda...' (Bentley 2020). It is noteworthy that the suggestions of COVID-19 to be a bioweapon have been refuted by many experts (Carbonaro 2020). But, if Covid-19 is a bioweapon, it relates to a kingdom using modern technologies to be rising against another kingdom and as Jesus in Matthew presaged (Mt. 24:7), Christians are not to respond by being anxious for their

convulsive impacts will not determine when the world would end.

- COVID-19 and safety measures: At the peak of COVID-19, peoples' movements were restricted in relation to 'let him who is on the housetop not go down to get the things out that are in his house' (Mt 24:17). 'Not come down' implies movement restricted for safety. Also, 'neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes' (Mt 24:18) relates to restricted movements for security. Similar to the safety measure instructed in Matthew 24:17–18, COVID-19 pandemic forced world governments to impose lockdown and restriction on movements. As a result of lockdown of varying capacities, people experienced restrictions to go out and get their needed victuals, and go about their daily endeavours and essential duties. Similar to the reading of Matthew 24:18, 'neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes', during the pandemic, people who went across boundaries for sundry reasons experienced restrictions to return to their desired locations. People were given many safety measures and tips to adhere to so as to be safe from being infected with the pandemic (WHO 2020). The insights of Matthew 24:16–18 indicate that Christians are to be responding to eschatological convulsive events by responding to security and safety measures that will be put in place to protect life.
- COVID-19, famine and lawlessness: Lockdown, restriction of movement, famines and insecurities are the corollaries of the convulsing effects of COVID-19 in Nigeria. Hunger was caused by lockdown and restriction of movements that denied many access to buy food for their nourishment and sustainment (Kalu 2020). While many who deal on perishables victuals lost out, others who needed to buy food items and other valuables being locked down had no or limited access to buy the food supplies they needed. In Nigeria, during the lockdown period, COVID-19 resulted in hunger coupled with insecurity and an increased theft rate (Osadebamwe 2020). So many people were robbed, some homes burgled, and some shops and markets torched (Dabang & Ukomadu 2020); these relate to the lawlessness Jesus presaged (Mt 24:12). It also caused so much hardship for people who are small business owners. Those who go out daily to work for their daily incomes also experienced great difficulties and challenges. In Nigeria, COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to the era of governments, non-governmental organisations, churches and well-meaning individuals giving palliative to those they could give (Dabang & Ukomadu 2020). All these caused many who were directly or indirectly affected by COVID-19 to worry and sorrow. In causing sorrow, many Nigerians experienced intolerable anguish and different kinds of pains, anxiety, loneliness and depression (Cordero 2021). This relates to the travails which were presaged by Jesus to be among the calamities that were predestined to precede the second advent of the Messiah (Mt 24:8).
- COVID-19 pandemic and crises of faith. COVID-19 is a pandemic that was experienced as a crisis and a tragedy in many countries of the world (Vicini 2021:116). The

inhabitants of the world are learning on how to contain it or live with it. In the fight to contain the pandemic, some saw faith as opposed to science (Marshall 2020), and this contributed to the crisis of faith which so many people experienced in Nigeria. Because of the crisis of faith that COVID-19 consolidated, Melloni (2020) avers that 'Covid-19 was asking religious communities, religious doctrines and religious faith systems to prove to be useful'. The way COVID-19 crisis was handled resulted to diverse kinds of tragedies and sufferings in the world. It caused social disorder, social distrust, political dynamics, economic hardships, depressions, crisis of faith, etc. (Schilling, Gamble & Gamble 2020). Because of the convulsive effects of this pandemic, many people in Nigeria were terrified, hopes were dashed and many questioned their faith in God; notwithstanding the convulsing effects, some had their faith strengthened. Tragically, Covid-19 consolidated far-reaching impacts on the lives of ordinary people; it increased the sheer number of people who are suffering and needed solutions to their problems and religion offered a beacon of hope (Marshall 2020). The convulsive impacts of COVID-19 influenced many professing followers of Jesus to be offended because of the hard ethical choices they were confronted with and some of them, they were to make even for or against their faith in Jesus. Jesus had already pre-informed his disciples that the events of the last days could make many to be offended. In being offended, they would betray one another and hate one another (Mt 24:10). The Greek word *σκανδαλιζω* means to put a stumbling block or impediment in the way for another to trip and fall. If Covid-19 is a man-made bio-weapon, then it made many to stumble. The sicknesses, deaths, famine, economic meltdown and social disorders it consolidated predisposed some to begin fear and distrust God whom they ought to trust and obey (Schilling, Gamble & Gamble 2020). COVID-19 exposed many people to loneliness and social disorder. Many lost their lives, many lost their family members and many lost their friends, acquaintances and jobs; these caused many to experience deep displeasure and most indignant that God could allow such a thing to happen to them. Many contracted the infectious disease in diverse places, including centres of worship (Conger, Healy & Tompkins 2020). Following this, worship centres were also deserted (Abulude & Abulude 2020). Love flow and fellowship were reduced. Individualism became the new normal; people began to be scared of having physical contact with one another. However, in the midst of every eschatological convulsive events, Jesus commands his disciples not to be troubled (Mt 24.6).

- COVID-19 and lack of genuine compassionate love: COVID-19 pandemic experiences showed that many world governments, churches and their leaders and some individual Christians may show compassion being influenced by diverse kinds of motivations. While some showed genuine compassion, there are others who do not have and manifest genuine compassion. With the advent

of COVID-19, the world became chaotic; many Nigerians had so many reasons to worry and needed to be shown love (Kalu 2020). While the government, willing wealthy individuals and companies invested in providing palliatives to the needy and hungry Nigerians, still many state governments were accused of hoarding the palliatives with the plans to sell the supplies later. This made many angry and hungry Nigerians to devise means of looting government warehouses where the palliatives were stored (Dabang & Ukomadu 2020). Most of the food relief sent to alleviate the sufferings of the poor and starving masses in each state in Nigeria, by the Federal Republic of Nigeria, were hoarded by some political leaders (Young 2020) showcased those politicians to be compassionless leaders. Though the government of Nigeria may have truly made arrangements for palliatives to care for the needy Nigerians, a large number of needy Nigerians did not benefit from it (Agbedo et al. 2020). During the lockdown, many Nigerians who could not get the federal government's palliatives received palliatives from well-to-do individuals and non-governmental organisations such as churches being motivated for diverse reasons.

## Theological implications of COVID-19 as an eschatological event

This study's findings unravel that many dispositions of the COVID-19 pandemic qualify it to be classified as one of the eschatological events occurring in these last days. The exposition of Jesus on the enquiries pertaining to the sign of the eschatological events reveals that, theologically, he does not want his disciples in any age to dwell in questioning about the sign of the end of the age and of his Parousia (Mt 24:4). Though he gave his disciples pre-information about the sorrowful events that are predestined to be heralding the nearness of his second-coming and of the end of the world, also importantly, he taught them what he wants his disciples to focus on and how they are to be responding to eschatological events. Jesus wants his disciples in Nigeria and elsewhere in the globe to focus on being saved (Mt 24:13). Hence, for the theological value of salvation or being saved, to be grounded, Jesus then teaches his disciples and Nigerian Christians in advance on how he would want his disciples to be responding to eschatological events as they would be unfolding as the church would be active in the interim waiting for his promised Parousia. Nigerian Christians are to be responding to eschatological events as Jesus taught, warned and commanded. As Christians are to be focusing on being saved, they are to be responding to the eschatological event such as COVID-19 by not fearing by believing and adhering to the pseudo-teachings of pseudo-prophets but by genuinely repenting from their sins, watching and reading the scriptures with understanding, praying, participating in mission mandate of the church being motivated by compassionate love, being ready for the parousia by being faithful in adhering to Jesus teachings, exhortations and commands. Through the theological insights deduced from Matthew 24:16–18, Christians are also to be responding

to convulsive impacts of pestilence and other forms of eschatological events by adhering to security measures, health tips and cleanliness protocols.

## Conclusion

COVID-19 as a pandemic ravaged the world and its negative impacts are still being felt in the world. With the advent of COVID-19 pandemic, many scientists, politicians, world governments, non-governmental organisations, theologians, clergies, lay Christians and non-Christians have variously explained the pandemic. While some relate COVID-19 to be a natural occurrence, yet, some others relate it to be a man-made bioweapon created to function as a weapon of control; still some others relate COVID-19 to be a convulsing event that indicates that the world is in the eschatological age as presaged by Jesus. The nexus between Matthew 24:1–15 and the COVID-19 pandemic unveils that the curiosity that existed in the mind of many people in the world concerning COVID-19 relates to the curiosity that was in the mind of the disciples of Jesus in the context of Matthew 24 in which the disciples questioned Jesus to know about the signs of his second coming and of the end of the world.

Jesus who is the Lord of the church in answering their 'when questions' posed to him by his disciples in Matthew 24 pre-informed his disciples and to the people of the world about the eschatological events that would be heralding the nearness of his second coming and that of the end of this age. Since Jesus died, resurrected and ascended to heaven, many eschatological events have been unfolding as they have been theologically predestined. The findings from the application of the exegesis of Matthew 24:1–15 to the advent of COVID-19 with its paroxysmal effects in Nigeria and in many other countries in the world relate COVID-19 pandemic to be one of the eschatological events that is functioning to be heralding the nearness of the Parousia of Jesus and the end of this age. Though, it is an eschatological event, it is not saddled with the theological function to pinpoint the exact time when Jesus' second Parousia and the end of the world will take place. Just as the disciples in Matthew 24; similarly many plenipotentiaries of God and lay Christians in Nigeria do not understand the theological implication of COVID-19 functioning as an eschatological event. However, sourcing from the Olivet discourse prophecies, warnings and the hortation Jesus gave to his disciples, clarity is drawn about eschatological events and lessons are drawn on how Christians in Nigeria are to be responding righteously to an eschatological event like COVID-19.

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C.P.U. is the sole author of this article.

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The data sets are available publicly through web links.

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