

Isaiah's Apocalyptic Myth and the Spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria

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Abstract

We argue that "Isaiah's apocalyptic myth," (Isaiah 26:20) was a cushioning effort amidst the corona-virus (COVID-19) pandemic in Nigeria between March and May 2020. Informed conversations frame myths with unhealthy actions leading to the spread of COVID-19. Despite this, Isaiah's apocalyptic myth led to improved behaviours against COVID-19 in Nigeria within the period under study. We relied on a mixed-method approach of data collection and analysis to draw a relation between the "Isaiah" apocalyptic oracle' and the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria between March and May 2020. This discourse presents ways in which superstitions mitigate the spread of pandemic disease.

Keywords: apocalyptic myth; coronavirus (COVID-19); Isaiah 26:20; pandemic disease; staying indoors

Introduction

Isaiah predicted "staying indoors for a while until God's wrath passed" (Isaiah 26:20) as a condition to the end of "challenging imperial meddling in Israel."¹ Interestingly, this oracle, which appears to be the climax of Isaiah's apocalyptic myth² (Isaiah 24–27), was contextualized by many Christians as a response to COVID-19. We observed that it encouraged appropriate behaviors to stem the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) in Nigeria between March and May 2020. Evidence has shown Isaiah's rendering in the aforesaid passage and similar other narratives to be a consistent characteristic of "apocalyptic myth."³ In contrast, robust literature on the reasons for the exponential spread of COVID-19 has pointed at the growing misinformation and myths.⁴ It is therefore interesting to note how myth could, in part, also be a viable method for containing the spread of the virus. Myth could encourage healthy behaviors to help control the spread of COVID-19. This positive role could be explained through the principles of "duality and ambivalent function of myth."⁵

The outbreak of COVID-19 seems to have changed the way we have lived for over a century. Around the world, new ways of interaction emerged in the course of containing the virus. Despite restriction of movement, lockdowns, and increased personal hygiene, the disease has continued to ravage many parts of the world. There were reports of rising numbers of infection in Brazil, Mexico, India, and South Africa. However, encouraging data from China, South Korea, Japan, Italy, France, Spain, and other countries have shown a downturn in the cases of infection and death rates at the time of this study.⁶ COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by a new virus, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). Being a highly contagious disease, it is worrying that presently there is no known cure. The controversies trailing the actual origin of the disease pushed the scientific communities as well as laymen into camps and different schools of thought, heightening conspiracy theories. Despite the clarification from several independent research groups and the World Health

Organisation (WHO) on the virus' natural origin,⁷ many people around the world had suspected that it was produced by Chinese scientists as a biological weapon,⁸ since outbreak of the disease was first recorded in the Chinese city of Wuhan. As at June 23, 2020, more than 13 million people have been infected, with over a million deaths around the world making the disease one of the worst pandemic and global health emergencies in history.⁹ In our different communities, there has been exchange of information and news regarding ways to stop the spread of the virus.

Through face-to-face interaction, town criers, conventional media platforms, and particularly social media, an unprecedented overflow of traffic of information known as "infodemic" emerged. WHO explains infodemic as an excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution.¹⁰ More worrying is the fact that infodemics travel faster than COVID-19.¹¹ With over 3 billion posts and over 100 billion interactions on the topic of COVID-19, coronavirus, and similar hashtags,¹² it is difficult, if not impossible, to control or sift through the right information as a response to the spread of the virus: "While scientists around the world try their best to find a remedy for the coronavirus, infodemic that threatens our planet (sic) by words becomes more dangerous than coronavirus pandemic."¹³ Part of the contents of the infodemic are unverifiable religious narratives (myths), which influence people's response to the virus. The belief that God protects his people against all diseases, as seen in Deuteronomy 7:15,¹⁴ is probably the motivation for many who did not protect themselves against the virus and subsequently contracted the disease. Famous Cameroonian pastor Frankline Ndifor, who had been "laying hands" (praying) on coronavirus patients as a means of healing was infected and later died of complications from the virus.¹⁵ The trust in the efficacious nature of prayer that could cure every sickness and disease is a dominant theme in the Bible, as seen in Psalm 103:2–4, Exodus 15:26, and Isaiah 38:15–16. Related to this is the belief that diseases are the result of sin.¹⁶ In other words, the righteous are immune to the virus, hence Lambart saw "repentance as a *sine qua non* for redemption and cure of diseases,"¹⁷ including coronavirus. With this later assumption, many people around the world, particularly Christians, have believed that COVID-19 is among the plagues mentioned in Revelation 16:17, as "the thought that 5G network is an apocalyptic sign which causes the disease is also rife."¹⁸ Similarly, studies have shown that these "biblical truths" and other related narratives are in contrast to empirical generalizations. Therefore, they lead to actions that aid the spread of COVID-19.

Hermeneutic interpretations of Isaiah's apocalyptic myth (Isaiah 24:27) show its poetic characteristics. As a *canticle* or song, it contains symbolism and imagery in the expressions "judgment is imminent and will fall on the whole earth," "the dead shall rise," etc. This also applies to the use of the term "chamber" in Isaiah 26:20.¹⁹ For example, staying a while in a "chamber" could be a metaphor for supplication and communion with Yahweh. Isaiah was explaining to his fellow Jews how to gain salvation and freedom from the exploitation by the powerful forces and rulership of a foreign nation.²⁰ He had implied that calamities, including "imperialism," are caused by sin. Ordinarily, Isaiah's "sin and punishment construct" could suggest that COVID-19 and other calamities are God's way of showing his wrath for humanity's immorality, but it has a different connotation and effect. The ideas which have features of myth, particularly as found in Isaiah 26:20, are contextualized as the basis for staying indoors to stop the spread of COVID-19. Dino Melaye was among the first notable Nigerians who posted Isaiah 26:20 on his Twitter and Facebook accounts, possibly as a way

to influence people to stay indoors to stop the spread of the virus. The researchers observed a growing acceptance of Melaye's interpretation of Isaiah's text among many Christians in Nigeria, particularly young adults, between March and May 2020. Pastors and many individuals relied on the myth to motivate positive actions against the spread of the virus. It is easy to accept this, considering that Nigerians are "notoriously religious." Cohen's theory of myth, which presents how myth could (re)order human actions, explains why Nigerians accepted Isaiah's apocalyptic narratives as a source of normative action. However, the main challenge was not the inability to heed Isaiah's staying indoors construct, but "the economic pressure which forced some people to defy the lockdown" rules.²¹

From the foregoing, we assessed the knowledge level of "Isaiah's myth" among Nigerians as a response to the spread of COVID-19 during the period under study. Following this introduction are other sections as outlined (i) Exegesis of Isaiah 26:20 (ii) Rereading Isaiah 26:20 and the construction of myth, (iii) Rising spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria: the myth factor, method and analysis of data, Conclusion and Recommendation.

Exegesis of Isaiah 26:20

In the first part of v. 20a, the expression *lĕk'ammî* could be interpreted as Yahweh's passionate appeal to "his people." In its construct state, the Hebrew *'ammî* could be translated as "my people." It is often contextualized in terms of the people of Israel. This can be found in Genesis 23:11, Genesis 41:40, and Exodus 3:7, among others. Moreover, the Hebrew word *lĕk* means go, enter, walk, accompany, and follow. Inferentially, *lĕk'ammî* suggests that the people of Israel were to follow instructions (mores) as a way to gain Yahweh's favor and providence.²² Despite this thinking, Nsiku had contemplated a literal understanding of "walking into the houses" as was the case during the Passover.²³ The former position is more likely, as no further reference within the entire corpus of Isaiah was made to exclusively support the latter.

Furthermore, in v. 20b, the Hebrew *bō'bahĕdārĕkâûs^eĝōrd^elātĕkāba'ădekā* could be rendered as "enter your chambers and shut your doors behind you." The word *bō'* stands for "come in, go in, and harbor." Yahweh called on his people (*'ammî*) to enter and harbor themselves in their *bahĕdārĕkâ* (chamber, house, room, bedroom, and innermost part). At the turn of the twentieth century, Hastings et al. had noted the obsolescence of the term "chamber" and defined "house" in ancient Israel in its place.²⁴ Other references to chamber which may not apply in this study are its figurative usage in terms of entombment: "chambers of death," Proverbs 7:27.²⁵ When one enters the chamber (house or room), protection, security, and safety are believed to be assured.²⁶ Gill's postulation coincides with the common understanding of chamber in ancient Israel as a place for calmness, rest, and relaxation. Also, Yahweh instructs his *'ammî* to *s^eĝōr* (shut, close, deliver, quarantine, isolate, and lock) themselves in their houses. The use of *s^eĝōr* indicates that the people were to enter their houses/rooms and close their doors, which will deliver them from any impending danger. The shutting of doors may also serve as a form of quarantine for the people of Israel against affliction and misfortune, as implied by Gledhill.²⁷ Furthermore, it could imply a sort of protection from the dangers of war and disease, as construed from Nsiku's reference to Passover.²⁸

In v. 20c, the people are instructed to *ḥăbîkim'at-reḡa'* ("Hide yourself for a little moment"). The Hebrew word *ḥăbî* means to hide, to withdraw, to conceal. This could also be comparable with the expressions rendered in 2 Kings 7:12, 1 Kings 22:25, and Joshua 2:16. The time frame for their hiding was to be *kim'at reḡa'* ("for a little while"). This "little while" was probably to enable them to escape the impending danger. Henry likened "hiding for a while in the chamber"²⁹ to Yahweh's providential defence of Israel, "as the divine punishment for the iniquity of earth's inhabitant is imminent."³⁰

Rereading Isaiah 26:20 and the Construction of Myth

The book of Isaiah is a constituent of the Old Testament scripture that has 66 chapters. In the canon and division of the Old Testament, it is considered as among the *nəbî'im*—"the prophets." Torah (law) and Ketubim (writings) are other parts of the classification. The effort to establish the original author of the book has challenged biblical scholars for centuries, casting doubt on the commonly held idea that a single author named Isaiah wrote the book. The gaps in timeline and the thematic and stylistic peculiarities influenced many Old Testament scholars to side with the "multiple authors" theory. This is the view of Blenkinsopp,³¹ Hays,³² and Motyer.³³ It has been hypothesized that the book of Isaiah can be divided into three distinct sections by different authors. Chapters 1–39 are thought to have been written by "proto-Isaiah." Chapters 40–55 are ascribed to an anonymous author ("deutero-Isaiah"), who lived during the exilic period, and Chapters 56–66 are thought to have been written by another unknown author ("trito-Isaiah") who probably lived after the exile.³⁴ Proto-Isaiah, who probably wrote the *pericope* of this study, Isaiah 26:20, is the prophet Isaiah, a major eighth-century prophet. The subsequent parts of the book may have been compiled or written by his disciples or followers.³⁵ This pattern of findings that considered form critical method was part of what Julius Wellhausen employed to discover multiple authors of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible), contradicting the single-authorship theory that favored Moses.³⁶ With this in mind, it is reasonable to agree with Gregory that Isaiah's period of writing (around 400 years) and the stylistic peculiarities must be the result of different authors contributing to the text. Isaiah 26:20 is in part a response to the precarious situation of the Israelites as they struggled for survival.³⁷ Babylon had defeated Israel in a war and taken many Jews into captivity. Isaiah's apocalyptic oracle in the text was to address this pitiable condition of Israel; to give hope of deliverance and bring an end to Babylon's imperial meddling.³⁸

The understanding of the first two words that introduce Isaiah 26:20 provides a clue as to the target recipients of Isaiah's oracle. The Hebrew *'ammî lēk* which could be loosely translated in the reverse order to "come (to go, walk) my people" probably referred to Isaiah's contemporaries, the Jews. It appears that Isaiah tried to communicate ways Yahweh would deliver his people and heal them from the pains of captivity and their defeat by Babylon. Albeit rendering his ideas in a poetic form, Isaiah clearly stated the principles to observe toward the liberation of the Jews. The phrase *bō'bahādārêkâ ûs'gōr*, "enter into your rooms and close your door," most likely one's front door, may allude to "seeking a shelter when a storm rages, until its fury is spent."³⁹ In the context of Isaiah, the tempest in all likelihood refers to war and unrest which will lead to Babylon's overthrow and defeat.

The idea of *kim'at-rega'* (“a little while”)—the time expected to be indoors in Isaiah’s context—could imply that the war (tempest) would not last long. For Albert, the call here is for the people of God to be calm while this battle rages in which the city should be taken, considering how Babylon was defeated in a single night (see the notes at Isaiah 13:14).⁴⁰

The indignation and anger (probably from God) would consume Israel’s enemy and the ungodly. These ideas might have influenced the argument that the instruction “come my people enter thou into thy chambers” indicates that when God punishes the ungodly, He will shut the righteous/saints away in a safe location, like Noah and his family were in the days of the flood (Genesis 7:16), and when Israel was commanded not to go out of doors on the night of the slaying of the Egyptian first-borns (Exodus 12:22–23; Psalms 31:20; Psalms 83:3).

Generally speaking, the ideas in Isaiah 26:20 are in line with the dominant theme in the Old Testament—the supremacy of Yahweh and how He deals with mankind through his chosen Jewish people.⁴¹ He punishes His people with defeat, drought etc, and redeems them as they repent for their evil ways.⁴²

The creation story in the book of Genesis and the numerous narratives of Yahweh’s punishment of Israel through wars, drought, and diseases⁴³ are consistent with myth. The book of Isaiah follows the same pattern of thought, linking the war defeat to Yahweh and hoping for deliverance through repentance. Interestingly, Isaiah’s oracle in Isaiah 26:20 might have increased fear, piety, devotion, and rituals among the Jews. Many Jews could have been encouraged by it and hoped for imminent deliverance from Yahweh. Similarly, a good number of Nigerians may have taken Isaiah’s text out of context to mean that God will protect them against COVID-19 as they “stay indoors” for “a little while,” believing that disease was a punishment for immorality in the world. These possible different outcomes and functions associated with myth coincide with the main thesis of Percy Cohen’s theory on the ambivalent functions of myth.⁴⁴

Rising Spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria: The Myth Factor

Since the outbreak of coronavirus in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019,⁴⁵ the disease has spread around the world at an alarming rate. Apart from Antarctica, which at the time of writing this article remains untouched by the virus⁴⁶, there has been an increase in cases of infection throughout the rest of the continents. Though many countries in Europe (such as Italy, France, and Spain), had reached the peak of the pandemic with a consequent downturn slope in the number of cases and deaths, Brazil (South America) and India (Asia) had become new epicenters for the virus as at the beginning of June 2020.⁴⁷ The number of cases in Africa by May 2020 was relatively low when compared to other parts of the world.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, the growing number of confirmed cases in Africa has raised a worrying concern. The cases could be much higher if the testing capacity in many African countries was improved.⁴⁹ Africa’s first recorded case of the virus was in Egypt on February 15, 2020.⁵⁰ It was not until February 27 that Nigeria recorded its first case. An Italian who moved from Milan (Italy) to Lagos was diagnosed with the coronavirus.⁵¹ Ever since the report of the index case, the virus has spread across the 36 states in Nigeria, including Abuja in the Federal Capital Territory. A week-by-week summary of the rate of spread in Nigeria shows that between March 19 and March 27, 2020, only about 12 persons in three states were infected with the

virus (see Figure 1). After 4 to 5 weeks, the record showed 65 confirmed cases in about 9 states. The first recorded death was on March 23, 2020. A study by Omenma, Ike, Agbo and Omenma⁵² shows that the increase in the number of cases in week 6 (288 new cases) in all likelihood was caused by community transmission.⁵³

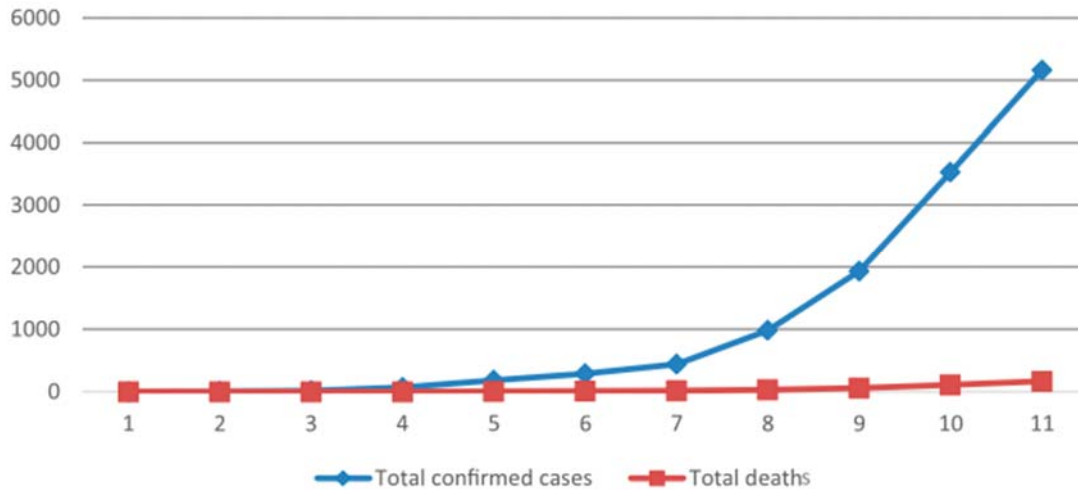


Figure 1. COVID-19 weekly confirmed cases and deaths in Nigeria. Source: NCDC, (2020).

As shown in Figure 2, more evidence to support this assumption on community spread is the exponential spread in weeks 7 and 8, with 442 and 981 cases. As explained by Omenma, Ike, Agbo and Omenma, “although there are 5162 confirmed cases in week 11 (May 8–14, 2020 and 167 deaths in 35 states including FCT) an emerging data (see Figure 2) shows the possibility of flattening the curve due to a huge drop (605 cases) of new confirmed cases between weeks 10 and 11.”⁵⁴ On the contrary, however, the new death rate shows a noticeable increase from 49 deaths (week 10) to 63 (week 11). It is thought that the noticeable flattening of the curve could be a result of the implementation of mainly lockdown and social distancing measures. Different state governments in Nigeria imposed restriction of movement and lockdown of many cities. Interstate travel was also banned except for essential reasons.⁵⁵ Many Nigerians (artisans, petty traders, and so on) who make their meager earnings by going to open markets on a daily basis were severely hit by the lockdown measures. There are predictions that the policy of total restrictions of movement and staying indoor for months as a measure to stem the spread of the virus, as practiced in many European countries, may not be possible in Africa.⁵⁶ This is mainly due to the peculiarities in income generation and poor palliative measures.

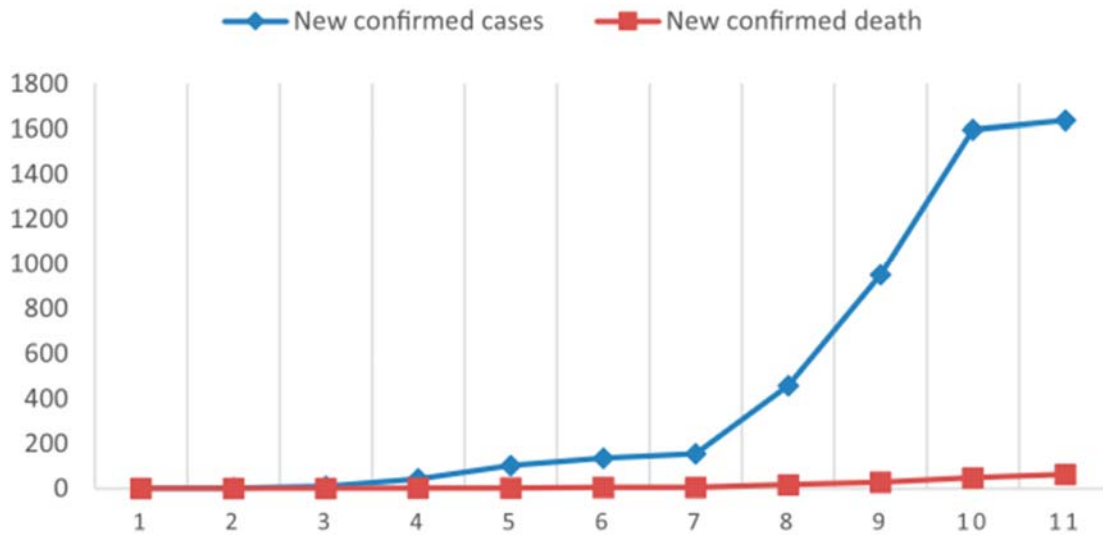


Figure 2. COVID-19 weekly new confirmed cases and deaths in Nigeria. Source: NCDC, (2020).

Law enforcement agencies, particularly the police, have killed scores of Nigerians in an attempt to enforce the government lockdown policy.⁵⁷ Among the variables that motivated people to defy the lockdown measures is hunger.⁵⁸ Additionally, myth is a significant *impetus agitat* or influence which relates with the rate of defying the lockdown measure and consequent spread of the virus. Initially, the trust that God created Africans strong, with melanin as an immune defence to the coronavirus,⁵⁹ was rife among Nigerians. Drawing from the Bible (see Table 1), it was believed that God was using the virus as punishment for eating unclean animals and for immorality among Asian and Caucasian races. For this reason, a Christian cannot be infected with such a disease. References from Christian scripture (see Table 1) show how God protects his people. With concrete evidence around the world that not only are Blacks being infected, but twice as likely to die due to social reasons from the disease than their Caucasian counterparts, the myth of immunity of the Black race was punctured. With confirmed cases around Africa and Nigeria in particular, the emphasis was moved to “not my portion” syndrome. Each individual Christian believes God will protect him or her, even if everyone else is infected. Even when one is infected, ideas from the Bible suggest that God (through prayer) heals all diseases, including COVID-19.

Table 1. Biblical texts (myths) that support coronavirus as a punishment from God.

Bible chapter/verse	Summarized content
Exodus 15:26; Leviticus 13, 26:16; Deuteronomy 7:15, 28:29–60; 1 Kings, 17; 2 Kings 5; 2 Chronicles 21	God may inflict disease on people as punishment

What influenced notable Cameroonian pastor Frankline Ndifor to “lay hands” (pray for healing) on people suffering from coronavirus is most likely biblical myths. Unfortunately, he contracted the virus and later died from complications.⁶⁰ In Nigeria, a famous Pentecostal pastor, Johnson Suleiman, made public his resolution to visit COVID-19 isolation centers so as to pray for the patients’ recovery,⁶¹ though no evidence exists that he actually laid hands on COVID-19 patients. A good number of Nigerians believe in prayer and miracles as an antidote

and cure for COVID-19. Some perceived the disease as a sign of the apocalypse predicted in Revelation 16:17. Author Sylvia Browne in 2010 foretold that “around 2020, a severe pneumonia-like illness will spread throughout the globe, attacking the lungs and the bronchial tubes and resisting all known treatments.”⁶² This and other variants of doomsday predictions have shaped the thinking of many Christians around the world. Among many Nigerian Christians, COVID-19, with its “attendant devastation and incurability, is a sign of the end of the world.”⁶³ All these beliefs give a good number of Nigerians an uncritical zeal of vulnerability to COVID-19. These myths in all likelihood influenced many people to act as if the disease was non-existent, making its contraction and spread inevitable. One report in the South East of Nigeria indicated that a good number of people do not believe COVID-19 exists.⁶⁴ The most likely reason for this trend is the premium placed on religion and myths. Religious beliefs and practices have permeated into the consciousness and thinking of Nigerians in such a way that they become the superstructure upon which other variables are interpreted. Regardless of educational, economic, and socio-political class, religion and associated myths are incorporated in the daily lives of Nigerians, which makes it easy to accept COVID-19 myths.

Method

The main thrust of this study was to examine Isaiah’s apocalyptic myth (Isaiah 26:20) as a mitigating factor to the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria between March and May 2020. The study was carried out in Nsukka environs, Enugu State, Nigeria. Nsukka is the location of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Given this, a good part of the demographic is made up of people from different parts of Nigeria and beyond, attracted to the town for education and job opportunities. The authors adopted two research designs, namely, ex post facto and quantitative instruments of cross-sectional surveys. Ex post facto research is a type of research design in which the investigation begins after the fact has already occurred, without interference from the researcher.⁶⁵ On the other hand, quantitative instrument research is a measure used in gathering/analyzing experiences or events and converting them into numerical data via rating scales. These numerical data can then be utilized in inferential analysis for predictions and generalization of policies.⁶⁶ The study focused on four leading church denominations (Roman Catholic Church, Anglican, Living Faith—Winners Chapel, and Redeemed Christian Church of God) in Nsukka environs. The study had infinite population, as there were no official registers/records of the members of the churches. The sample of the study was 100 participants from the four denominations, drawn using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The purposive sampling technique was based on 25 participants from each denomination to enable the researchers to manage the sample due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the snowball sampling method was based on using one member/clergy to gain contact to other members of the church. The instrument for data collection was a questionnaire on the perceptions of COVID-19 based on Isaiah’s apocalyptic myths (Isaiah 26:20) developed by the researchers. The questionnaire is divided into three sections, A, B, and C. Section A elicits information on the Church denomination, section B elicits information on COVID-19 and Isaiah 26:20 myth divided into three clusters A, B, C in line with the research questions and purpose. Cluster A entailed items on the perceptions of Nigerians on COVID-19, cluster B entailed items on Nigerians’ perceptions on the apocalyptic ideas in Isaiah 26:20 as regards COVID-19, and cluster C contained items on COVID-19 preventive measure practices by Nigerians (to collect quantitative data). The response

options for these three clusters A, B, C were Highly Strongly Agree (HSA), Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD), and Highly Strongly Disagree (HSD). The quantitative data were analyzed with mean and standard deviation for research questions with a criterion mean of 3.50 (any item with mean value 3.5 and above reveal Agree, otherwise Disagree) while hypotheses were analyzed with Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). Any probability value equal to or greater than 0.05 level of significance reveals no significant difference otherwise significant.

Result

The results of data analysis are presented as follows:

Research Question One: What are the perceptions of Nigerians of COVID-19?

The results in Table 2 reveal the mean and standard deviation of the respondents of the perceptions of Nigerians on COVID-19. The results show that the respondents averagely agree on item numbers 1, 4, 6, and 7, with mean values being close to and greater than the average criterion mean of 3.50. This implies that the respondents averagely agree that COVID-19 is real, is a business venture for money making, is a killer disease/virus, and there is prevention for the disease/virus. The results also show that the respondents disagree on item numbers 2 and 9, with mean values lesser than the average criterion mean of 3.50. This implies that the respondents disagree that COVID-19 is a scam and that there is a cure. Finally, the results show that the respondents highly agree on item numbers 3, 5, and 8, with mean values far greater than the average criterion mean of 3.50. These results show that the respondents highly agree that COVID-19 is real, but not the way it is being presented, or is severely exaggerated, that COVID-19 is a pandemic and that Africans (Nigerians specifically) survive in the midst of COVID-19. However, the results/values of the standard deviation of the item statement reveal very small dispersion in the responses of the respondents due to the closeness of the values.

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of respondents on the perceptions of Nigerians of COVID-19.

S/N	ITEM STATEMENT	\bar{X}	SD	DECISION
1	COVID-19 is real	3.512	.2145	Averagely Agree
2	COVID-19 is a scam	3.349	.3872	Disagree
3	COVID-19 is real but not the way it is being presented, or is exaggerated	4.897	.4568	Highly Agree
4	COVID-19 is a business venture for money making	3.613	.3914	Averagely Agree
5	COVID-19 is a pandemic	4.407	.5681	Highly Agree
6	COVID-19 is a killer disease/virus	3.549	.4134	Averagely Agree
7	There is prevention for COVID-19	3.882	.4413	Averagely Agree
8	Africans (Nigerians specifically) survive in the midst of COVID-19	4.219	.5394	Highly Agree
9	There is a cure for COVID-19	3.384	.4567	Disagree

Note: \bar{X} = Mean of Respondents, SD = Standard Deviation of Respondents, N = Total Number of Respondents.

Research Question Two: What are the perceptions of Nigerians of the prophesy (myth) of Isaiah 26:20 as regards the present state of COVID-19?

The results contained in Table 3 show the mean and standard deviation of respondents on the perceptions of Nigerians of the apocalyptic narrative of Isaiah 26:20 as regards the present state of COVID-19. The results reveal that the respondents disagree on item numbers

1, 5, and 6, resulting in the mean values of these items being lesser than the average criterion mean value of 3.50. These results indicate that the respondents disagree that Isaiah’s apocalyptic narrative was coincidental to the outbreak of COVID-19, agree that the lockdown was the fulfillment of Isaiah’s apocalyptic construct, and agree that the stay-at-home order was also in line with the ideas in Isaiah 26:20. The results also reveal that the respondents averagely agree on item numbers 2, 4, and 7, with mean values close to and greater than the average criterion mean of 3.50. These results imply that the respondents averagely agree that COVID-19 was foretold in Isaiah 26:20 and that the lockdown agrees with the ideas in Isaiah’s apocalyptic myth. The results again show that the respondents highly agree that COVID-19 is really the anger of God in item number 3 with a mean value of 4.981, highly greater than the average criterion mean of 3.50. Moreover, the items’ standard deviation values indicate small/less variations in the responses of the respondents due to the nearness of the value.

Table 3. Mean and standard deviation of respondents on the perceptions of Nigerians of Isaiah’s apocalyptic narrative (Isaiah 26:20) as regards COVID-19.

S/N	ITEM STATEMENT	\bar{X}	SD	DECISION
1	Isaiah’s apocalyptic narrative was coincidental to the outbreak of COVID-19	3.314	.3143	Disagree
2	COVID-19 was foretold/indicated in the apocalyptic narrative	3.891	.4413	Averagely Agree
3	COVID-19 is really the anger of God	4.981	.5431	Highly Agree
4	The lockdown was the fulfillment of the apocalyptic narrative	3.561	.4134	Averagely Agree
5	The lockdown was to make the apocalyptic ideas come true	3.124	.3411	Disagree
6	The stay-at-home order was to confirm the fulfillment of the apocalyptic narrative	3.233	.4011	Disagree
7	The stay-at-home order was to implement Isaiah’s apocalyptic ideas.	3.614	.4341	Averagely Agree

Note: \bar{X} = Mean of Respondents, SD = Standard Deviation of Respondents, N = Total Number of Respondents.

Research Question Three: What are the preventive measure practices by Nigerians to curtail the spread of COVID-19?

The results in Table 4 reveal the mean and standard deviation of the respondents on the preventive measure practices by Nigerians to curtail the spread of COVID-19. The results indicate that the respondents averagely agree on item numbers 1, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 11, with the mean values close to and greater than the average criterion mean of 3.50. These therefore show that the respondents averagely agree with the implementation of Isaiah’s apocalyptic narrative of the total lockdown and stay-at-home order, regular wearing of face masks in public places, avoiding crowded places like churches, bars, markets among others, avoiding handshakes, obeying Isaiah’s order of staying at home, and eating spices such as ginger, garlic, and bitter kola among others. The results also show that the respondents highly agree on item numbers 2, 3, 7, and 10, with mean values far greater than the average criterion mean of 3.50. These results therefore indicate that the respondents highly agree with regular washing of hands with clean running water and soap, regular sanitizing of hands with alcohol-based disinfectants, praying for God’s anger to cease, and creating awareness among the public. Again, the results also reveal that the respondents disagree on item numbers 9 and 12, with mean values lesser than the criterion mean of 3.50, which indicates that respondents disagree with going for regular check-ups and testing for any symptoms and taking hard alcohol such as spirits/local gin. However, the values of the standard deviation of the item statements show less/small dispersion in the responses of the respondents due to the closeness of the values.

Table 4. Mean and standard deviation of respondents on the preventive measure practices to curtail the spread of COVID-19.

S/N	ITEM STATEMENT	\bar{X}	SD	DECISION
1	Implementing Isaiah's apocalyptic narrative (Isaiah 26:20) by total lockdown and stay-at-home order	3.714	.4931	Averagely Agree
2	Regular washing of hands with clean running water and soap	4.997	.3342	Highly Agree
3	Regular sanitizing of hands with alcohol-based disinfectants	4.878	.4713	Highly Agree
4	Regular wearing of face masks in public places	3.978	.3991	Averagely Agree
5	Avoiding crowded places like churches, bars, markets among others	3.761	.3563	Averagely Agree
6	Obedying Isaiah's apocalyptic narrative (Isaiah 26:20) stay-at-home order	3.513	.4741	Averagely Agree
7	Praying for God's anger to cease	4.899	.3681	Highly Agree
8	Avoiding shaking of hands	3.543	.4953	Averagely Agree
9	Going for regular check-ups and testing for any symptoms	3.333	.5876	Disagree
10	Creating awareness among the public	4.414	.3343	Highly Agree
11	Eating of spices such as ginger, garlic, bitter kola among others	3.613	.4541	Averagely Agree
12	Taking hard alcohol such as spirits/local gin	3.201	.5798	Disagree

Note: \bar{X} = Mean of Respondents, SD = Standard Deviation of Respondents, N = Total Number of Respondents.

Hypotheses Test

H₀₁: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of the church denominations on the perceptions of Nigerians of COVID-19.

The results in Table 5 reveal the ANOVA mean comparison of Church denominations on the perception of Nigerians of COVID-19. The results show significant difference in the mean ratings with a probability value of 0.000 which is less than the 0.05 level of significance. Hence, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Table 5. ANOVA summary of church denominations on perceptions of Nigerians of COVID-19.

SOV	PoNoC					Decision
	SS	DF	MS	F-ratio	P-Val	
Between Group	3.02	3	1.01	7.76	< 0.05	Significant
Within Group	9.74	96	0.13			
Total	12.76	99				

Note: SOV = Source of Variation, SS = Sum of Squares, DF = Degree of Freedom, PoNoC = Perceptions of Nigerians on COVID-19; MS = Mean of Square, P-Val = Probability Value, α = Level of Significance, N = Total Number of Respondents, K = Group Category.

H₀₂: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of the church denominations on the perceptions of Nigerians of the prophesy-myth of Isaiah 26:20 as regards the present state of COVID-19.

The results presented in Table 6 show the ANOVA mean comparison of church denominations on the perceptions of Nigerians of the myth of Isaiah 26:20 as regards the present state of COVID-19. The result indicates no significant difference greater than the 0.05 level of significance. Consequently, the null hypothesis is confirmed and accepted.

Table 6. ANOVA summary of church denominations on the perceptions of Isaiah’s myth as regards COVID-19.

SOV	PolMC					
	SS	DF	MS	F-ratio	P-Val	Decision
Between Group	2.39	3	0.80	2.10	> 0.05	Not Significant
Within Group	28.45	96	0.38			
Total	30.84	99				

Note: SOV = Source of Variation, SS = Sum of Squares, DF = Degree of Freedom, PolMC = perceptions of Isaiah’s myth as regards COVID-19, MS = Mean of Square, P-Val = Probability Value, α = Level of Significance, N = Total Number of Respondents, K = Group Category.

H₀₃: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of church denominations on the preventive measure practices by Nigerians to curtail the spread of COVID-19.

The results contained in Table 7 show the mean comparison of church denominations on the preventive measure practices to curtail the spread of COVID-19. The result indicates no significant difference in the mean ratings, with a probability value of 0.347 which is greater than the 0.05 level of significance. As a result, the null hypothesis is confirmed and accepted.

Table 7. ANOVA summary of church denomination on the preventive measure practices to curtail the spread of COVID-19.

SOV	PMPCC					
	SS	DF	MS	F-ratio	P-Val	Decision
Between Group	3.74	3	1.25	1.12	> 0.05	Not Significant
Within Group	83.70	96	1.12			
Total	87.44	99				

Note: SOV = Source of Variation, SS = Sum of Squares, DF = Degree of Freedom, PMPCC = preventive measure practices to curtail the spread of COVID-19, MS = Mean of Square, P-Val = Probability Value, α = Level of Significance, N = Total Number of Respondents, K = Group Category.

Discussion

Myths have played an important role in influencing behaviors of people in a way that increase the spread of COVID-19. Researchers and stakeholders in the fight against COVID-19 have stressed the strategies and ways to curb the influence of myths on the spread of the disease.⁶⁷ Hardly any research has been done on how myths affect responses to curtailing the spread of COVID-19. Interestingly, this paper established that Isaiah’s apocalyptic myth has had a compelling influence on people to adopt healthy actions to stem the spread of COVID-19. Through the study conducted in Nsukka, Enugu state between March and May 2020, we found that a significant number of people did not only accept the idea that COVID-19 is a sign of God’s anger but had applied Isaiah’s recommendation (Isaiah 26:20) of staying indoors for a while until God’s anger passed (See Tables 3 & 4). This suggests that the assumption that COVID-19 was an apocalyptic symbol triggered the consciousness of observing COVID-19 protocols of “hiding” or staying indoors to prevent its spread. These results seem plausible due to the fact that during the time of this study, the myth that Africans were immune to COVID-19⁶⁸ had been punctured.

Initially, the belief that COVID-19 affected the Chinese for eating abominable animals and food was rife. Also common was the belief that Europeans and Americans have poor morals and that their support of homosexuality led to the spread of the coronavirus disease in these areas.

Despite the strong trust in certain biblical texts (see Table 1) as a guide to protection from COVID-19, and the preceding beliefs herein, the disease did not only affect Africans (Nigerians) but many died from its complications (see Figure 2). It is possible that this new experience changed people's pattern of belief and mythical narrative. This might inform the result (see Table 3) that stresses COVID-19 as God's anger or punishment for misbehavior. With this kind of perception, it becomes easier for people to connect their perceived solution to the redeeming powers of God. It is interesting to situate how the depiction of Isaiah's apocalyptic myth (Isaiah 26:20) supports the COVID-19 lockdown protocols. This resemblance perhaps increased the trust in Isaiah 26:20 as a viable means of influencing people's behaviors in observing COVID-19 lockdown and social distancing protocols (see Table 3). A careful observation of the pattern of spread of COVID-19 between March and April 2020 in Nigeria shows an increase in the number of cases of infection and deaths (see Figure 1).

However, by the end of May 2020, a sharp drop in the number of infections is recorded (see Figure 2). Arguments as to what contributed to this sharp drop in the number of cases may not be denied. At least during this period, the Nigerian government imposed lockdown protocols, with some studies indicating their usefulness.⁶⁹ Our study showed that, in part, Isaiah's apocalyptic myth, especially Isaiah 26:20, significantly triggered the consciousness to observe the COVID-19 lockdown protocols among many Nigerians within the period of this study. The premium placed on religious beliefs in Africa is notoriously high. Many Africans (particularly Nigerians) tend to interpret every human occurrence through a religious prism. It is therefore not surprising that, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the fear it elicited as regards its incurability and death toll, many Nigerians resorted to a "religious solution" by invoking Isaiah's apocalyptic myth to deal with the disease. We limited our study to the responses of Nigerian Christians to COVID-19. We hope that there will be further studies on the Muslim perception of myth as a positive influence in response to COVID-19 preventive measures within the period of this study, March to May 2020, to comprehensively understand the reason for the sharp decline in the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Isaiah's apocalyptic myth, particularly the content of Isaiah 26:20, was instrumental towards influencing many Nigerians between March and May 2020 to comply with the lockdown principles. Indeed, prevailing studies on myth show correlation between myth/misinformation and unhealthy behavior, which increases the spread of COVID-19. With the understanding of the ambivalent function of myth as explained earlier, this study provided evidence that Isaiah's apocalyptic myth was used on the contrary towards improved behavior that helped in stemming the spread of COVID-19.

Recommendations

Drawing from the findings of this study, the researchers advocate exploring the positive side of myth in cushioning the spread of pandemic disease(s) through the following ways: i. reinterpreting and contextualizing myths to inform and shape healthy actions of people; ii. the involvement of mythologists and experts in belief/religion to refine mythical narratives in ways that motivate healthy behavior in pandemic situations; iii encouraging church leaders to challenge misleading information/myths; iv. government formulation and implementation of policies to disseminate myths that could mitigate the spread of diseases during outbreak of disease(s); v. government creation of agencies to monitor the teachings of religious leaders that spread misleading myths.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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