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Exploring Biblical Solutions to the Menace of Ebola Epidemics in Our Society

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Abstract- In this paper, an attempt is made to discuss the origin and evil effects of Ebola epidemics in our society. It also examined the importance of exploring Biblical solutions to end the scourge of Ebola. The discourse relies on written materials, Holy Bible as well as oral testimonies. The paper revealed that the outbreak of Ebola could be a direct punishment for not following strictly the Biblical instructions that had warned against the avoidance and eating of certain animals, birds and foods. The words and instructions given to the Israelites then were not only relevant in this generation but equally provide a pattern for physical, spiritual and moral healthy living in our time. Though, man may not always understand the wisdom of God's law but by obeying and adhering strictly to them, one would surely thrive. Hence, the work noted that apart from seeking medical solutions to the problem, the secular world need to recognize that reading, studying and applying the biblical instructions are the major preventive measures and cure that could be explored for any hopeless and terrible case like Ebola.

Keywords: *ebola, epidemics, biblical, word, virus, god.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, the outbreak of Ebola disease in our society has been a major concern to all and sundry. It has killed and still killing many in some African countries and up to now, no one has been able to get permanent solutions to this deadly and incurable disease. However, it seems seeking Biblical viewpoints may likely be the solutions that this generation need to consider. This is because there was from the beginning, instructions in the Bible on the need to abstain from certain animals and foods in order not to contact deadly diseases. The Israelites at that time by all standards adhere strictly to those instructions given to them through Moses, so there was no record of such outbreak. However, in recent time, there happen to be cold compliance to such Biblical injunctions and so the resultant effect the outbreak of various kinds of diseases that were alien to men of old.

Ebola disease is a very terrible disease; the true glimpse of what it is really like could be captured in the work of an African poet which read thus:

You are famous.....

*Those who have not heard you, do not understand you
You bring destruction to the rich and to the poor
Also to the great and small, you leave no traces*

*You were a thief,
You steal joy and happiness
Confidence and pride
You grow inside like a love herbs
You wait stealthily to strike
The one you have captured.....¹*

From the above it could be said that the challenges and problems this disease pose, thus forms the basis of this paper. The approach would be to first of all to trace the origin of Ebola, the extent of its damage, the biblical teachings or instructions about certain animals and birds. The work will conclude with appropriate recommendations from biblical perspectives.

II. WHAT IS EBOLA?

Ebola hemorrhage fever (EHF), or simply Ebola is a disease of humans and other primates caused by an ebolavirus. Symptoms start two days to three weeks after contracting the virus, with a fever, sore throat, muscle pains and headaches. Typically, vomiting, diarrhea and rash follow, along with decreased functioning of the liver and kidneys. Around this time, affected people may begin to bleed both within the body and externally. The virus may be acquired upon contact with blood or bodily fluids of an infected animal, spreading through the air have not been documented in the natural environment. Fruits bats are believed to be a carrier and may spread the virus without being affected. The disease may spread between people as well, via semen, direct contact with blood or bodily fluids from an infected person (including embalming of an infected dead person) or by contact with objects contaminated by the virus for examples needles and syringes.²

In addition, bats are noted to drop partially eaten fruits and pulp on land which mammals such as gorillas and duikers at times feed on. This chain of eaten according to scientist forms a possible indirect means of transmission from the natural host to animal populations. Bush meat, carcasses of gorillas and chimpanzees which later become source of human infectors. The risk of transmission is increased among

¹ Grace Esegbo (2006). "Biblical solutions to the HIV/Aids scourge" in Biblical view of sex and sexuality from African Perspective, S. O Abogunrin(ed), Biblical studies series, No 3, Nigeria, Alofe Nigeria Enterprise, pp322- 323.

² "Fruit bats may carry Ebola virus" BBC News. 2005-12-11. Retrieved 2008-02-25.

those caring for people infected. Recommended measures by medical experts include,

*Isolating

*Sterilizing equipment and surfaces

* Wearing protective clothing including masks, gloves, gowns and goggles

* No direct contact with a person who dies as a result of Ebola disease

*Raising community awareness of the risk factors for Ebola disease

*regular hand washing using soap and water

*Quarantine, that is, enforced isolation like the one carried out in Liberia and Nigeria during the 2014 outbreak, schools were closed down and those who are exposed to someone with the disease should be closely observed for 21 days.³

a) Prevention



A researcher working with the Ebola virus while wearing a BSL-4 positive pressure suit to avoid infection

b) Treatment



A hospital isolation ward in Gulu, Uganda, during the October 2000 outbreak

No vaccine is currently available for humans, then if there is ebolavirus specific treatments exists, this is where religion can play a pivotal role. Although this may be frowned at by various critics if the millions of Dollars that world health organizations and various governments had spent on research have not yielded the needed solution, how can one then be confident in saying that religious values and ethics can solve the problem of Ebola?

III. EBOLA AS A GLOBAL THREAT

The wisdom of our elders teaches that "prevention is better than cure" and that "a stitch in time saves nine". There is the need to look critically at the ways one can prevent this deadly disease. The disease, Ebola typically occurs in tropical sub-Saharan Africa from 1976 (when it was first identified) through 2013, the World Health Organization reported 1,716 confirmed cases. The largest outbreak to date is the ongoing West Africa Ebola virus outbreak which is affecting Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Nigeria⁴. As of 13 August, 2,127 cases have been identified, with 1,145 deaths. The first identified case of Ebola was on August 26th 1976, in Yambuku, a small rural village in Mongala District in Northern Democratic Republic of the Congo (then known as Zaire). The first victim, and the index case for the disease, was village school headmaster Mabalo Lokela, who had toured an area near the Central African Republic border along the Ebola river, between 12–22 August. On 8 September he died of what would become known as the Ebola virus species of the ebola virus. Subsequently a number of other cases were reported, almost all centered on the Yambuku mission hospital or having close contact with another case. 318 cases and 280 deaths (a 88% fatality rate) occurred equally.⁵ The Ebola outbreak was contained with the help of the World Health Organization and transport from the Congolese air force, by quarantining villagers, sterilizing medical equipment, and providing protective clothing. The virus responsible for the initial outbreak, first thought to be Marburgvirus was later identified as a new type of virus related to Marburg, and named after the nearby Ebola river. Another ebolavirus, the Sudan virus species, was also identified that same year when an outbreak occurred in Sudan, affecting 284 people and killing 151. The second major outbreak occurred in 1995 in the Democratic Republic of Congo, affecting 315 and killing 254. The next major outbreak occurred in Uganda in 2000, affecting 425 and killing 224; in this case the Sudan virus was found to be the ebolavirus species responsible for the outbreak. In 2003 there was an outbreak in the Republic of Congo that affected 143 and killed 128, a death rate of 90%, the highest to date. In August 2007, 103 people were infected by a suspected hemorrhagic fever outbreak in the village of Kampungu, Democratic Republic of the Congo. The outbreak started after the funerals of two village chiefs, and 217 people in four villages fell ill. The 2007 outbreak eventually affected 264 individuals and resulted in the deaths of 187.⁶

⁴ Pourrut, Kumulungui B, Wittmann T, Moussavou, Delicat A, Yaba P, Nkoghe D, Gonzalez JP, Leroy EM (2005). "The natural history of Ebola in Africa". *Microbes and infection/ Institut Pasteur* 7 (7-8): 1005-1014. Doi: 10.1016/j.micinf.2005.04.006. PMID 16002313.

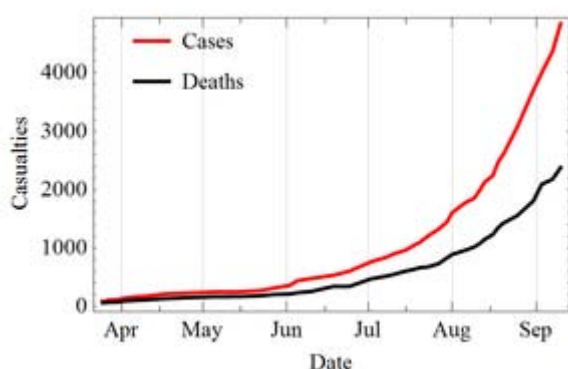
⁵ "Ebola virus disease, West Africa – update 28 August 2014". WHO. 2014-08-29.

³. Simpson DIH (1977). *Marburg and Ebola virus infections: a guide for their diagnosis, management and control* (PDF). WHO offset publication, 1977, No. 36. p. 10f

On 30th November 2007, the Uganda Ministry of Health confirmed an outbreak of Ebola in the Bundibugyo District in Western Uganda. After confirmation of samples tested by the United States National Reference Laboratories and the Centers for Disease Control, the World Health Organization confirmed the presence of a new species of *Ebolavirus*, which was tentatively named Bundibugyo. The WHO reported 149 cases of this new strain and 37 of those led to deaths.

The WHO confirmed two small outbreaks in Uganda in 2012. The first outbreak affected 7 people and resulted in the death of 4 and the second affected 24, resulting in the death of 17. The Sudan variant was responsible for both outbreaks. On 17 August 2012, the Ministry of Health of the Democratic Republic of the Congo reported an outbreak of the Ebola-Bundibugyo variant in the eastern region. Other than its discovery in 2007, this was the only time that this variant has been identified as the ebolavirus responsible for an outbreak. The WHO revealed that the virus had sickened 57 people and claimed 29 lives. The probable cause of the outbreak was tainted bush meat hunted by local villagers around the town of Isiro and Viadana⁷.
2014 outbreak

Main article : 2014 West Africa Ebola virus outbreak



Increase over time in the cases and deaths during the 2014 outbreak

In March 2014, the World Health Organization (WHO) gave a report of major outbreak in Guinea, a western African nation; it is the largest ever documented, and the first ever recorded in the region. Researchers traced the outbreak to a two-year old child who died on 6th December, 2014.

On 8 August 2014, the WHO declared the epidemic to be an international public health

emergency. Urging the world to offer aid to the affected regions, the Director-General said, "Countries affected to date simply do not have the capacity to manage an outbreak of this size and complexity on their own. I urge the international community to provide this support on the most urgent basis possible. By mid-August 2014, Doctors without Borders reported the situation in Liberia's capital Monrovia as "catastrophic" and "deteriorating daily". They report that fears of Ebola among staff members and patients have shut down much of the city's health system which has resulted in leaving many people without treatment for other conditions. By late August 2014, the disease had spread to Nigeria through a Liberian, Patrick Sawyer.⁸

By 6th September 2014, 4,293 suspected cases including 2,296 deaths had been reported, however the World Health Organization has said that these numbers may be vastly underestimated as there may be some other cases not officially declared. Additionally the outbreak has resulted in more than 120 healthcare worker deaths partly due to the lack of equipment and long hour. On 8 September 2014, WHO warned the number of new cases in Liberia was increasing exponentially, and would increase by "many thousands" in the following 3 weeks?

Aside from the human cost, the outbreak has severely eroded the economies of the affected countries. In August 2014, attempts to contain the outbreak were enacted by placing troops on roads to cordon off the infected areas and stop those who may be infected from leaving and further spreading the disease. By September, with the closure of borders, the cancellation of airline flights, the evacuation of foreign workers and a collapse of cross-border trade, the national deficits of Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia were widening to the point where the IMF was considering expanding its financial support to the 3 countries. The WHO, Médecins Sans Frontières, and UN health care workers have all criticized the travel restrictions saying they are not justified and are potentially worsening the crisis. Moreover Nigeria today has been declared Ebola free, but this does not mean that they should not take necessary precautions against the outbreak of the virus again⁹.

The above simply points to the facts that Ebola is now a global threat. There is therefore the need to ask ourselves whether there are any teachings in the Bible relating to Ebola. This will however take us to look at what the Bible says about certain animals, birds and foods. From there one will be able to proof whether faith communities, specifically Biblical solutions can become part of the solution in arresting the spread of Ebola virus.

⁶ "CDC' urges all US residents to avoid nonessential travel to Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone because of an unprecedented outbreak of Ebola". CDC. 2014-07- 31. Retrieved 2014

⁷ Gatherer D (2014). "The 2014 Ebola virus disease outbreak in West Africa". *J. Gen. Virol.* **95** (Pt 8): 1619–1624. Doi : 10. 1099/ vir. 0.06667199-0 PMID 24795448.

⁸ "CDC Telebriefing on Ebola outbreak in West Africa" CDC. 2014-07-28. Retrieved 2014-08-03.

⁹ .WHO: Air travel is low- risk for Ebola transmission." WHO. 14 August 2014. Retrieved 8 September 2014.

IV. A BIBLICAL APPROACH

Although the Bible did not present any systematic discourse on the disease called Ebola, but its attitude around the subject can be glimpsed in the book of Leviticus. One's research into the book of Leviticus indicates civil rules for handling food, disease, animals, birds and sex were taught. In those physical principles, many spiritual principles were equally suggested. The question that comes to one's mind here is that, is it through only eaten of certain animals that one can contact Ebola disease. The answer is in the affirmative because it has been established that the root cause of the problem is having contacts with certain animals and birds. For instance, bats are believed to be a carrier and may spread the virus without being affected. The other outbreaks are usually traceable to a single case where an individual has handled the carcass of gorilla and chimpanzee. Fruit bats are also eaten by people in parts of West Africa where they are smoked, grilled or made into a spicy soup. Then the other secondary source of contacting it is having sex with an infected person, saliva, sweat, hand shake and body to body contact.¹⁰

Meanwhile, being compassionate on this matter calls for straight talk which must openly declare that it is only when people are ready to change their behavior and start engaging in healthier practices and living in obedience to what the scripture says will the pandemic reduce significantly. In the ceremonial law described in the book of Leviticus, there are some sorts of flesh meats, fishes, birds and animals that are allowed to be eaten and some declared unclean mainly to maintain holiness among the nation Israel.

The most of the creatures which by this law were declared unclean were birds and those that had high veneration among the heathen such as eagle, a bird of prey, that is being sacrificed to Jupiter, owl to Minerva and dog to Hecate. Some others in this category are bat (which is one of the primary hosts of Ebola disease), hawk, red Kite, pelican and the likes. (Leviticus 11v. 19) Similarly animals that walk on all fours or on many feet and some domesticated animals like pigs are detestable and must not be eaten. Whoever that touches their carcasses or who picks up their carcasses are declared unclean, Monkey and Chimpanzee that is equally the primary host of Ebola fall into this category.¹¹ The designations clean and unclean were used to define the kind of animals the Israelites could and could not eat. Unclean so to say do not mean sinful or dirty but there are certain reasons for this restrictions which are:

- To ensure the health of the nation
- The forbidden foods were usually scavenging animals that fed on dead animals and rotten fruits thus diseases could be transmitted. Though the animals and birds in question are not affected by such diseases but if man eats them they would easily contact diseases from such creatures.
- To visibly distinguish Israel from other nations. The pig, for example, was a common sacrifice of pagan religions.
- To avoid objectionable associations. The creatures that move about on the ground, for example, were reminiscent of serpents, which often symbolized sin.
- Some of the diseases that could be contacted through associations with those animals and birds were highly contagious, therefore it was important for people to stay away from people with such diseases and so the Bible prescribed total separation from those who had it. No wonder it would be dangerous for any pastor to try and test God by making a move to lay hands on somebody with Ebola virus all in the name of anointing.¹²

The ceremonial laws then helped the Israelites to avoid diseases that were serious threats in that time and place. Although they wouldn't have understood the medical reasons for some of these laws their obedience to them made healthier. Many of God's laws must have seemed strange to the Israelites. His laws, however, helped them avoid not only physical contamination, but also moral, spiritual and physical infection.¹³

Also a closer look at the New Testament give a clue on how to avoid problems especially on the issue of sex which is another main cause of Ebola. Though no direct information, about this issue being discussed but for a total solution to this problem there is need to yield to biblical principles from illicit sexual relationship. I Corinthians 6: 18 says "run away from fornication", that is one need to abstain from sex before marriage. Equally there is also the need to be content with one's wife or husband. Proverbs 5: 18-23 says:

Let your fountain be blessed and rejoice with the wife of your youth.

Let her be as the loving deer and graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you

At all times..... and why will my son be infatuated with an immoral woman,

¹¹ .Williams E. " African monkey meat could be behind the next HIV". *Health News - Health & Families*. The Independent. "25 people in Bakaklion, Cameroon killed due to eating of ape"

¹² . A statement made by the General Overseer of The Redeemed Christian Church of God, Nigeria, Pastor Enoch Adejare Adebayo

¹³ 13. Life Application study Bible, New Living Translation., Grand Rapids, Michigan and Illinois, Zondervan Publishing House and Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1991.

¹⁰ . Smith, Tara (2005). *Ebola (Deadly Diseases and Epidemics)*. Chelsea House Publications. ISBN 0-7910-8505-8.

And embrace the bosom of seductress? For the ways of man are before the eye of the lord and he ponders all his paths. His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself, and he shall be held with the cords of his sins. He shall die for lack of instruction. The above represents God's position on the need to be cautious and obedient to his instructions as the main solution to the problem of Ebola disease.

V. IMPLICATIONS OF THE ABOVE FOR HUMANS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The word of God still provides a pattern for physical, spiritual and moral healthy living. We may not always understand the wisdom of God's laws, but if we obey them, one will surely thrive. However does it mean it is necessary man follows the Bible instructions on health and dietary restrictions? In, general, the basic principles of health and cleanliness are still healthful practices, but it would be legalistic, if not wrong to adhere to each specific instruction today. Some of these regulations were intended to mark the Israelites as different from the wicked people around them. Others were given to prevent God's people from becoming involved in pagan religious practices. However this does not implying that because it was meant for the Israelites they are not relevant for this generation. They are relevant in the sense that it was the same word of God that specified that God declared the end from the beginning.(Isaiah 43: 8 and Isaiah 41: 26) In other words, God knew the danger inherent in the eating and associations with such animals and so he gave the instructions beforehand so that man would not be victim of any disease and not only that he prescribed the treatment of quarantine for any victim which we are following today.

Also, while one agrees that Ebola can be prevented through education and information, one still believes that going back to the basics which is strict adherence to the word of God is the major solution to this problem. With the rapid spread of diseases, calamities and pestilence in our society today, God's teaching, commands and injunctions become very relevant and useful. The teaching of the Bible on both clean and unclean things including sexual relationship may lead to sound health. In addition the suggestion of Tinyiko on AIDS may equally be applied here for Ebola virus. Where he used AIDS, EBOLA will be inserted; it reads:

A theology of Ebola must be constructed as an "activist" theology of advocacy

EBOLA is the new "site of struggle" and as with all true struggles, sheer verbal

And written theological constructions will not suffice. A theology of EBOLA can

Never be merely a book or pulpit theology. It must encompass the book, the

pulpit and the brain for sure but it must be more encompassing, more activist.¹⁴

It is therefore important for believers to adhere to religious teachings on health standards. This work is hereby concluded with the words of George Esegbue that reads:

The word of God has answers to issues that borders on moral behavior, Hence there is need to search the word of God with diligence and obey them. Deuteronomy 11: 26-28 says: "Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse, a blessing if you obey the commandment of the lord your God, which I command you this day, and a curse, if you will not obey the commandment of the lord your God."¹⁵

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¹⁴ 14.Tinyiko S. Maluleke, " Towards a New Theological Education Curriculum for the 21st Century in Africa: HIV/AIDS and the New Kairos", in WCC special Report: Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological Programmes, (Geneva WCC, 2001), p. 40.

¹⁵ Grace Esegbue (2006). "Biblical solutions to the HIV/Aids scourge" in Biblical view of sex and sexuality from African Perspective, S. O Abogunrin(ed), Biblical studies series, No 3, Nigeria, Alofe Nigeria Enterprise, pp322- 323.

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