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History

The Black Death and Persecution of the Jews

Catherine M. Porter

The Middle Ages were a time of great change for Europe. Countries were developing and growing rapidly. Due to the development and growth of the European countries, trade was becoming a worldwide industry. Expanded trade routes brought many good things to Europe, however; the advent of international trade brought to Europe a new scourge it was unprepared to face in the form of the bubonic plague. The plague, in turn, resulted in another wave of Jewish persecution. The European Jewry were no strangers to persecution preceding the advent of the Black Death. The Black Death of 1348 led to more widespread persecution as the European Jewry became the scapegoats for the cause of the plague.

The Black Death was not a new phenomenon in 1348. The plague had reared its ugly head in prior centuries and would continue to do so in future ones. However, the plague outbreak in 1348 is considered the most devastating and well-remembered in all of history. “The Black Death of 1348-49 was the greatest biomedical disaster in European and possible world history...[one] third at least of Western Europe’s population died in what contemporaries called ‘the pestilence.’”<sup>1</sup> The plague of 1348 purportedly infiltrated Europe on the backs of rats, and more specifically, the fleas that had taken residence on the rats. The rats and their flea companions found their way into the holds of cargo ships coming from China and infected the crews. Once the ships docked at their destinations, the crew would go out into the towns after a long sea voyage and would unknowingly spread the plague to more people.

The bubonic plague progressed through three distinct phases before the infected person succumbed to the disease.

The first stage is marked by flulike symptoms, normally accompanied by high fever. In the second stage, buboes...black welts and bulges – appear in the groin or near the armpits...[in approximately] 10 percent of plague victims...the buboes develop intra-abdominally...The third – and often fatal – stage of the plague is respiratory failure.<sup>2</sup>

During the second stage, the buboes would also increase in size and cause a tremendous amount of pain. Additional stomach flu-like symptoms would also manifest within the infected person with running a fever, vomiting, and diarrhea.<sup>3</sup> Death was relatively quick after the onset of symptoms. Victims would be dead within a matter of days. There was also a pneumonic version of the plague which manifested itself similarly but without the swelling and it was most definitely contagious through contact. The survival rate for victims of the Black Death of 1348 was relatively low.

Some scientists today argue that the Black Death of 1348 was more than just the bubonic plague. Anthrax spores have been found at “ten medieval abbeys or priories whose cattle herds were known to be diseased.”<sup>4</sup> The fact that the pestilence spread so quickly flummoxed scientists. The bubonic plague travelling on rats alone did not cause such a “rapid dissemination, a quality more characteristic of a cattle disease than a rodent-disseminated one.”<sup>5</sup>

The bubonic plague and anthrax have very similar symptoms. Medieval medical doctors and medicine in general in the 14<sup>th</sup> century were primitive at best. Diagnosing the plague and effectively treating the symptoms and the cause were for the most part out of reach. This led to blaming the cause on other avenues such as the European Jewry. In spite of this lack of current medical knowledge;

the 14<sup>th</sup> century was on the cusp of attaining higher learning and great advances in society.

Medieval clergy and rich lords were now well educated as far as medieval standards went, but had rudimentary medical knowledge and lacked scientific reasoning. They could not explain the plague symptoms or the causes. Explanations of why things happened in the world were still based on superstition and not sound scientific reasoning or facts. While people during the Middle Ages did practice basic hygiene, it was still a fairly filthy existence. Society had devolved from the grandeur of the Roman Empire where there had been running water and sewer systems. Rats were commonplace in medieval life. They could be found everywhere. Medieval doctors thought the plague was carried through the air. “Windows must remain closed and covered – for the affluent, with thick tapestries.”<sup>6</sup> The burning of incense was also very common in an attempt to ward off the plague: “...juniper, laurel, pine, beech, lemon leaves, rosemary, camphor, sulphur [sic] and others Handkerchiefs were dipped in aromatic oils....”<sup>7</sup> Even with these attempts, people kept getting sick and dying.

14<sup>th</sup> century reasoning for the plague took many forms. Some people blamed scandalous dress as the cause, which people then tied to the wrath of God and that God was punishing them. People clung very tightly to their religious beliefs, especially since no one in authority at the time could explain why the plague was happening. “The sin of pride manifested in this way must surely bring down misfortune in the future.”<sup>8</sup> Some people thought that God was punishing them for their sins by unleashing the plague upon them. Some of those who felt that God was punishing them went to extreme measures to attempt to appease him. Flagellation became more popular during the plagues. The plague of 1348 was no exception to the self-punishment of the flagellants. Flagellants also blamed the Jews for the plague.<sup>9</sup>

Boccaccio, an Italian poet, born in 1313, lived through the pestilence and composed his great work *Decameron*. His book opens up with his musings regarding the Black Death. The plague "...made its appearance that deadly pestilence, which, whether disseminated by the influence of the celestial bodies, or sent upon us mortals by God in His just wrath by way of retribution for our iniquities..."<sup>10</sup>

Boccaccio was not the only one who felt this way. Before Boccaccio wrote *The Decameron* even Pope Clement VI felt that God was punishing people. In Clement VI's papal bull in September of 1438, he wrote "this pestilence with which God is affecting the Christian people."<sup>11</sup> However, Clement VI reflected the scientific ignorance of his time. He reached out to astronomers and was told that Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars fell into a peculiar alignment and this "conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter notoriously caused death and disaster while the conjunction of Mars and Jupiter spread pestilence in the air."<sup>12</sup>

While the Catholic Church did not condone the persecution of the Jews, many Christians at the time still thought the European Jewry was responsible. There was no concrete or logical reason behind the blame except hundreds of years of prejudice and persecution. During the plague of 1348, a rumor was started that led to more persecution. Even today, this myth is still synonymous with the bubonic plague. A rumor was started that Jews were secretly poisoning water sources and that was the cause of all of Christianity's pain and suffering. Jean de Venette, a contemporary of the plague, put his thoughts to paper regarding the plague and the poisoning of the wells:

Some said that this pestilence was caused by infection of the air and waters, since there was at this time no famine nor lack of food supplies, but on the contrary great abundance. As a result of this theory

of infected water and air as the source of the plague the Jews were suddenly and violently charged with infecting wells and water and corrupting the air. The whole world rose up against them cruelly on this account.<sup>13</sup>

Jews have borne the brunt of persecution for centuries. Even in Biblical times, the Jews faced persecution. Christians held them responsible for the death of Christ. According to the Gospels, after Pilate had asked the crowd gathered in Jerusalem they responded, "...His blood *be* on us, and our children."<sup>14</sup> For many Christians there was no other proof for them except what was in the Bible.

In addition to the Biblical reason to persecute the Jews, many restrictions were already in place prior to the outbreak of plague in 1348. While the Catholic Church did not condone the flagellants going after Jews, the papacy was still guilty of persecuting the Jews. The papacy had enacted a law that required Jews to wear distinctive clothing in order to set them apart from Christians. In addition to the clothing restrictions, they were limited in what they could do professionally. They were mainly pigeonholed into being moneylenders or merchants due to restrictions. Their usefulness in the roles of moneylenders and merchants did assist in preventing some persecution. However, the turn of the 11<sup>th</sup> century brought about change for the Jews. Christianity had taken the world by storm as the predominant religion again, and many people were fanatical about their faith. Another change that affected and impacted them was the introduction of merchant guilds. "The growth of merchant guilds, which came to control international commerce, resulted in the exclusion of Jewish entrepreneurs from business by their gentile competitors. By the early 12<sup>th</sup> century their main economic recourse was usury."<sup>15</sup> As moneylenders, they were of great use to the general public, but like any collection agency today, they were hated when they tried to collect on the loans.

The Jews were persecuted for other reasons as well. They were blamed when Christian children went missing. “[Blood libels were] the myths which held that the Jews had a propensity for engaging in the ritual slaughter of Christian children.”<sup>16</sup> They were not only accused of slaughtering them, they were also accused of eating them.

Contrary to popular contemporary belief, not all Christians felt the same way. Gregory X attempted to protect the Jews from persecution. In his Letter on the Jews he proclaimed, “Inasmuch as the Jews are not able to bear witness against the Christians, we decree furthermore that the testimony of Christians against Jews shall not be valid unless there is among these Christians some Jew who is there for the purpose of offering testimony.”<sup>17</sup> However, the papal decree did very little and persecution for blood libel still occurred.

The plague was indiscriminate who it took to the grave. Young or old, male or female, rich or poor contracted the disease. Even Jews succumbed to the plague as easily as the Christians; but Christians still felt Jews were to blame. Clement VI realized this and attempted to stem the persecution against them by issuing papal bulls. He announced in the papal bulls that the plague was not caused by the Jews. He proclaimed that the plague “afflicted and afflicts the Jews themselves and many other races who have never lived alongside them.”<sup>18</sup> He also decreed that not a person should “dare (on their own authority or out of hot-headedness) to capture, strike, wound or kill any Jews or expel them from their service on these grounds.”<sup>19</sup> He threatened to excommunicate anyone who did not follow his wishes and also tried to persuade those if there were any truth to the accusations, to use the judicial and law systems instead of vigilante justice and outrage.

Even though the accusations and their results were cruel and horrific, it was not a farfetched idea that the pestilence people were suffering from could indeed be from poison. Poisoning presented

itself similarly with the stomach issues. However, the accusations against the Jews were completely unfounded. Who started this rumor is not clear or why they chose the Jews to be their scapegoats except for past incidents of persecution. Even though there was no veracity in the claims, many Jews confessed to the made up crimes. These confessions sealed their fate as the cause of the plague for many Christians.

The Count of Savoy was very quick to round up Jews, men and women both, to torture them. He had this "...done after public rumor had become current and a strong clamor had arisen because of the poison put by them into wells, springs, and other things which the Christians use-demanding that they die..."<sup>20</sup> One of the most convincing confessions comes from Agimet, a Jewish man from Geneva. He was tortured off and on to varying degrees until he finally confessed what his part had been in the poisoning of the wells. Agimet was to go to Venice to buy various items when a Jew by the name of Rabbi Peyret sought him out before he left for a special task. "We have been informed that you are going to Venice to buy silk and other wares. Here I am giving you a little package of half a span in size which contains some prepared poison and venom in a thin, sewed leather-bag. Distribute it among the wells, cisterns, and springs about Venice and other places to which you go, in order to poison the people who use the water..."<sup>21</sup> While Agimet confessed and provided great detail, the Rabbi Peyret was nothing but a delusion of a tortured man past his breaking point and willing to say anything. Other Jews put to torture also confessed to poisoning wells. A letter from a lord of Lausanne to the Burger of Strassburg names Bona Dies and that he "confessed to the same appalling crime"<sup>22</sup> as Agimet from Geneva. Letters from Bern also told of Jews confessing to poisoning the wells under torture.

A very similar confession to that of Agimet's was elicited out of a Jew by the name of Balavigny. He confessed that a Rabbi Jacob from Toledo had sent him poison to distribute in the various water sources but not to tell a soul. He distributed the poison as instructed and also confessed that the boy who delivered him the poison "showed him many identical letters addressed to numerous other Jews."<sup>23</sup> Balavigny confessed to warning other Jews not to drink from the wells. He also confessed to how the poison would spread after a person had become afflicted by it. Since he was a surgeon for his Jewish community, this lent further credence to his confession. "[I]f anyone suffering the effects of the poison comes into contact with someone else, especially while sweating, the other person will be infected; and that infection can be transmitted by breath as well."<sup>24</sup> He also made a blanket statement by bringing the wrath of Christianity on all the Jews, "[he was] certain that the other Jews cannot acquit themselves of the charge, for they knew perfectly well what they were doing and are guilty."<sup>25</sup>

These confessions called for drastic action on the part of Christians. Many cities and towns simply rounded the Jews up and murdered them. In the town of Basel, Jews were rounded up and forced into a large wooden structure which had been purposely built to be set on fire.<sup>26</sup> In other towns, they were murdered or were cast out. In Strasbourg, both occurred. There was a massacre on St. Valentine's Day in 1349. Two thousand were burnt and approximately one thousand accepted baptism to avoid being killed. Children were torn away from their mothers and fathers while on the pyre and baptized. After the Jews were put to death, the town council declared anyone who had been in debt to them was now free of it, and any property and possessions of the Jews was divided up. Financial gain became another motive to persecute them and be rid of them. In the town of Eslingen, "the whole Jewish

community burned themselves in their synagogue; and mothers were often seen throwing their children on the pile, to prevent their being baptized, and then precipitating themselves into the flames.”<sup>27</sup>

These are only a handful of the atrocities against the Jews during the plague outbreak of 1348. The outbreak in 1348 wiped out between thirty and sixty percent of Europe’s population. However, according to the Zionism-Israel Center, no definite number of Jews killed from torture or pogroms, or from the Black Death itself can be ascertained. Unfortunately, the Black Death was just a small period in Jewish history where they were singled out to be persecuted. Eventually the pogroms and torture ceased on the Jews blamed for the spread of the Black Death, but others would find new excuses to continue persecuting them for other misfortune and catastrophes in history.

The outbreak of bubonic plague in 1348 was one of the lowest points in medieval history. The plague brought many changes to the landscape of Europe as most of the population was stricken by it and succumbed to it. The economy was affected due to the available workforce being reduced. Uneducated and scared, people will always find a reason or a scapegoat to help them cope with disaster. Unfortunately, like most of their existence, the Jewish people of Europe were blamed and suffered for a conspiracy that was a fallacy; these poor tortured souls would confess to just stop the pain and hopefully end their suffering and that of their people.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Norman F. Cantor. *In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World it Made*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>7</sup> E.L. Skip, "The Black Death: Medical Measures" *History of Western Civilization*. 1995. <http://europeanhistory.boisestate.edu/westciv/plague/10.shtml> (accessed 13 Jan 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Rosemary Horrox, *The Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 131.

<sup>9</sup> Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization: Volume 1: to 1715*. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012), 307.

<sup>10</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, ed. and trans. by G.H. McWilliam. (London: Penguin Books, 1972), [http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian\\_Studies/dweb/texts/DecShowText.php?myID=d01intro&expand=empty&lang=eng](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/texts/DecShowText.php?myID=d01intro&expand=empty&lang=eng) (accessed 13 Jan 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Steven Kreis, "Lecture 29: Satan Triumphant: The Black Death" (August 2009). <http://historyguide.org/ancient/lecture29b.html> (accessed 13 Jan 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Phillip Ziegler, *The Black Death* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 38.

<sup>13</sup> "Jean de Venette on the Progress of the Black Death" In the History Guide. (February 2006) <http://www.historyguide.org/ancient/plague.html> (accessed 14 January 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Matt. 27:25 (King James Version)" in *The Official King James Bible Online*, <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/book.phpbook=Matthew&chapter=27&verse=25> (accessed 14 Jan 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Norman F. Cantor, *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 365.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> "Gregory X: Letter on Jews, (1271-76) Against the Blood Libel" In the Medieval Sourcebook (February 1996) <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/g10-jews.html> (accessed 14 January 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Horrox, 222.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> "The Black Death and the Jews 1348-1349 CE" In the Jewish History Sourcebook (July 1998) <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/jewish/1348-jewsblackdeath.html> (accessed 14 January 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Horrox, 211.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 212.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 214.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> J.F.C. Hecker "The Black Death," trans. B.G. Babington. [http://history-world.org/black\\_death.htm](http://history-world.org/black_death.htm) (accessed 14 January 2014).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

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