

Religion, Spirituality, and the Black Death

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In Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, he writes, "... the People, from what Principle I cannot imagine, were more addicted to Prophecies, and Astrological Conjurings, Dreams, and old Wives Tales, than ever they were before or since..." (Defoe 2003). When examining documents during the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries about the plague, one can see that there was a variety of explanations regarding who or what was to blame for disease. Although the idea of contagion was just beginning to emerge and circulate in scientific communities, a prominent idea among many, as seen in Defoe's quote, is the idea that humanity itself is to blame for the Black Death. In this paper, I will argue that many believed humanity was so sinful that God either was the cause of the plague or was simply letting it happen, and therefore humanity needs to do penance for their sins to end the spread of disease. I will explore Defoe's book *A Journal of the Plague Year* as well as fourteenth-century documents from John Aberth's *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350* that demonstrate how people were determined to find "signs" in the sky or in the world around them that showed that the end was near, as well as how they decided to commit penance once they decided that humanity was being punished by God. To begin, I will analyze *A Journal of the Plague Year*, which goes into extensive detail about the signs from God that people claimed they saw. It is important to note that a potential bias within this novel stem from Defoe being five years old when this plague epidemic in London in 1665 was occurring, and it is theorized that he is writing from his uncle's perspective. Defoe was also a famed novelist who wrote *Robinson Crusoe*, and it is possible that some of the details that are described by Defoe were made up or exaggerated. Despite the problems with this source from a historian's perspective, it is still an important source for our modern-day understanding of what happened during the Great Plague of London. Defoe goes in depth into how the people of London tried to explain the oncoming plague through signs from God. He narrows his focus on a description of a scene that occurred before the beginning of the plague in which a woman claimed that she saw an angel in the sky. Defoe writes, "She described every Part of the Figure to the Life; shew'd them the Motion, and the Form; and the poor People came into it so eagerly, and with so much Readiness..." (Defoe 2003). The narrator (as we know that this is not Defoe's experience but someone else's) explains how he did not see the shape of the angel in the sky, and the woman told him "...that it was a time of God's Anger, and dreadful Judgments were approaching; and that Despisers, such as I, should wonder and perish" (Defoe 2003). The narrator has to leave the scene because he is so terrified that he is going to be "mobbed by them" since he does not see the same image in the sky that they did. In addition to the clouds in the sky, Defoe describes how comets appeared over London and many people, including him, saw them as "the Forerunners and Warnings of Gods Judgements" (Defoe 2003). They even potentially had different colors and speeds of movements based on the type of judgement that God was giving. These descriptions from Defoe's book are crucial to understanding who the people considered responsible for the onslaught of disease. Clearly, the people of London are not using scientific reasoning such as the popular miasma theory for the cause of the plague but take a more religious direction. The intensity in which the people looking at the cloud in the sky defend their viewpoint against the narrator shows how desperate people were for an explanation to the plague, but it also shows how people were insistent that humanity as a whole was responsible for the plague because God was angry with them. The woman in this scene proclaims to the narrator that God was angry with humanity for their sins and thus was bringing His punishments, or judgements, as she says, to the people through the spread of the plague. The comets in the sky over London were another sign from God, letting humanity know beforehand that He was angry with them, and, therefore, He was going to allow or cause the plague and the Great Fire of London as punishment for their combined sins.

Clergy begin to enforce this idea that humanity is responsible for the plague as well. Defoe writes that "...Ministers, that in their Sermons, rather sunk, than lifted up the Hearts of their Hearers; many of them no doubt did it for the strengthening the Resolution of the People; and especially for quickening them to Repentance..." (Defoe 2003). He describes people who frightened others to the point of tears, who "prophesying nothing but evil Tidings; terrifying the People with the Apprehensions of being utterly destroy'd" (Defoe 2003). The government becomes involved in this as well, with Defoe writing that "...The Government encouraged their Devotion, and appointed publick Prayers, and Days of fasting and Humiliation, to make publick Confession of Sin, and implore the Mercy of God, to avert the dreadful Judgement..." (Defoe 2003). London was not the only place in the Mediterranean world in which mass public penance and prayer events were conducted. The government of Damascus also takes action in the document "The Beginning and End: On History" in Aberth's collection of Black Death documents. The author of this document, Ibn Kathir, was a teacher of the Hadith, so it was easy for Ibn Kathir to witness how the city of Damascus and its people responded to the major threat of the plague. Throughout this document, Ibn Kathir describes the intensity in which the citizens of Damascus believed that they needed to pray penance to God to rid the city of plague. Ibn Kathir writes that "the people poured out their supplications that the city be spared the plague" (Kathir 2017). Supplications conducted by the people include the story of the flood of Noah being recited over three thousand times, fasting for three days, and were told to "humbly beseech God to take away this plague" (Kathir 2017). One of the most extraordinary scenes described by Ibn Kathir is when on the fourth day of the supplication of the city of Damascus, during the ceremonies that were being conducted, "...one saw in this multitude Jews, Christians, Samaritans, old men, old women, young children, poor men, emirs, notables, magistrates, who processed after the morning prayer, not ceasing to chant their prayers until daybreak" (Kathir 2017). After analyzing both Defoe and Ibn Kathir's descriptions of people from all different kinds of backgrounds participating in this mass repentance, it is clear what the common belief in the Mediterranean world of who was responsible for the plague: humanity. The cities of London and Damascus have common themes of fasting, public prayer and recitation, and supplication being conducted by the public; many believed that God was punishing humanity for their sins, and the correct way to abolish the plague was for the people to do everything in their power. This included doing penance repeatedly in fervent ceremonies, and constantly reciting relevant scriptures. As seen in the haunting description of the peoples of Damascus coming together to chant prayers, the belief that God was punishing humanity was not uncommon. Whether you were Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, Ibn Kathir's passage demonstrates how desperate the people were to appease God and to end the suffering that was the Black Death. Alongside the similar acts of penance that the people of the cities Damascus and London shared, Damascus also experienced events that were interpreted as signs from God about the judgements that are coming to humanity. Ibn Kathir describes a sandstorm that occurs over Damascus. He writes, "The population was in a state of anguish for about a quarter of an hour, imploring God, asking His pardon and lamenting all the more that it was afflicted by this cruel mortality" (Kathir 2017). In multiple cities, people were claiming that various natural events were signs from God; this demonstrates that this sudden onslaught of religious devotion was not exclusive to London. In addition, it also shows that the psychological effects of the plague were so strong that people were desperate to find any solution to or explanation for why so many people were suffering and dying from the plague. Surely, if humanity were innocent and free of sin, then the plague would not be happening in the first place. Therefore, the people of the Mediterranean world, as seen in both Defoe and Ibn Kathir's sources, decided to dedicate themselves to religious rituals and repetitive penance to try their best to cleanse their sins. To end this paper, I will look at the most prominent example of those who believed that humanity's evils were responsible for the plague: the flagellants. The flagellants, out of all the documents that I have examined, are probably the most extreme example of penance done for God's anger against humanity. In Fritsche Closener's "Chronicle," he describes the flagellants that would come through the town of Strasbourg and display their gruesome self-mutilation. Closener writes that twice a day, "they laid down in many ways, according to the sins which everyone had committed. After they had all lain down, the master began where he saw fit and stepped over one of them and hit his back with the scourge..." (Closener 2017).

The scourges in which Closener describes had “knots at the end into which thorns had been placed, and they whipped themselves across their backs so that many of them were bleeding a lot...”(Closener 2017). In fact, this self-harm was one of the most important parts of the flagellants’ penance to God. According to Closener, the flagellants went on pilgrimages for a little over thirty-three days (equivalent to the amount of time that God/Christ lived on Earth) and that they should “never have a good day nor night and spill your blood.” Through this pilgrimage and self-imposed torture, God would supposedly forgive humanity and “forget His anger” (Closener 2017). Along with the self-flagellation that the flagellants were named for, they followed some of the same trends of public prayer and chanting in Defoe and Ibn Kathir. They would chant “Now we lift up our hands and pray/O God take the great death away!” for three hours (similarly to the repetition of the flood of Noah in Damascus), and they would read the letter they received from the king of Sicily informing them of how they should commit penance to God, where “there rose great lamentation from the people, because they all believed it was true” (Closener 2017). I think the last quote is particularly important because, again, it demonstrates how eager the people were to believe any religious explanation for the plague that was given. These people were publicly whipping themselves, which may be disturbing for many; however, they were also offering a potential explanation and solution to God’s anger against humanity, which may have been relieving to hear. Had the belief that the plague was God’s judgement not been as widespread or popular, then perhaps the flagellants would not have been as accepted and welcomed as they were. Although the popularity of the flagellants changed, they are still a prominent example of the lengths people went to appease God and to cleanse themselves of their sins that were the cause of the plague. On one end of the spectrum, we see simple acts like public prayer in Damascus and London, and on the other, we see extremist groups like the flagellants. People engaged in acts of penance in various ways during the Black Death. To sum up, during the time of the Black Death, there existed a variety of explanations for the immense suffering and mortality that was the plague. These reasons ranged from the scapegoating of the Jewish community to the miasma and earthquake theory. People were desperate to find some sort of solution and answer as to why there was so much agony in the world. The most common explanation to the plague and the group considered responsible for disease in the Mediterranean world was humanity itself. We explored documents from London to Damascus that demonstrated how there was a widespread belief that the reason why the plague was spreading was because humanity had accumulated so much sin that God was sending (or allowing) the plague as punishment for their collective sins. The only solution and way to end the plague was to fervently repent and commit acts of penance towards God. Many believed this would appease God, and He would forgive His anger against humanity. “Signs” from God included comets, clouds in the shapes of angels, and massive sandstorms, and there was mass recitation of scriptures, public prayer, ceremonies, and self-flagellation; ultimately, the Mediterranean world engaged in a variety of forms of repentance that reflected how desperately the people were clinging to religion and spirituality during a time of mass death and misery