

The Black Death: How Different Were Christian and Muslim Responses?

Introduction

Civilization both in the East and the West was visited by a destructive plague which devastated nations and caused populations to vanish.... The entire inhabited world changed.

—Ibn Khaldun, fourteenth century Muslim historian

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It was known as the Great Pestilence, the Great Plague, and the Black Death. Wherever it struck it brought fear and unimaginable heart-break. By 1346 European traders had begun hearing rumors about great cataclysms that were wreaking havoc in China which included a fearful plague. Little did they know that this plague was already moving quickly along the same trade routes they themselves used and would soon be on the doorstep of the Middle East and Europe. In five short years, it would kill between 25 and 45% of the populations it encountered. It would be the worst natural disaster and the single most destructive natural phenomenon in the history of the world.

Causes and Symptoms

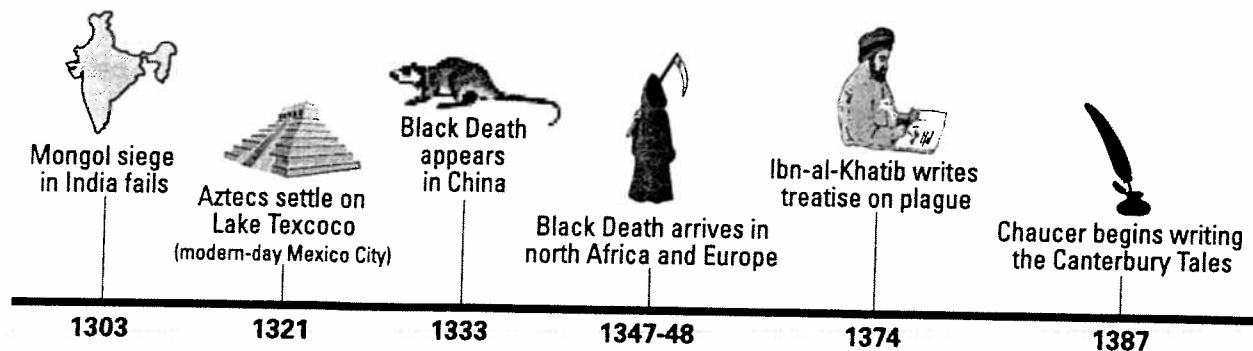
From Cairo to Paris, medical knowledge in the 14th century was primitive compared to today. Bacteria and viruses were largely unknown to doctors. They were certainly unknown to the general public. Although the causes of the plague are still debated by historians today, most believe the Black Death was caused by bacterial strains. These strains live in the stomach of certain fleas which live in the fur of rodents,

particularly the black rat. Through a complicated process it is possible for these bacteria strains to become unstable in the fleas. If this occurs, the fleas then infect the rats. When the rats die, the fleas will fly to another host. If that new host is human, a plague epidemic will erupt. By the mid-14th century a complex trading network connecting Asia to the Middle East and to all of Europe spread migrating rats and their parasitic fleas across much of the known world.

The Black Death was actually a combination of three plagues from three bacterial strains: **bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic**. The most common was bubonic. Symptoms included chills, high fever, delirium, vomiting, and rapid heart-beat. The infected person would then develop inflamed swellings filled with pus referred to as “buboes.” Buboes could be as large as eggs and usually appeared in the armpit or groin area. These buboes were extremely painful and within three to six days of their appearance, 50 to 80% of the victims died. Pneumonic plague was less common but more deadly; it infected the respiratory system and killed most of its victims, usually in hours. The third strain, septicemic plague, infected the bloodstream and killed all of its victims. No matter which form, plague resulted in a horrible and agonizing death.

The History of the Plague

The 14th century was not the first time plague had spread across parts of the world, and it was not to be the last. The first documented plague lasted from 541 to 544 CE. Known as the Plague of Justinian, scholars believe it



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originated in East Africa and spread to the Middle East. The Plague of Justinian greatly weakened the Byzantine Empire, but had little effect on the rest of Europe and Asia.

Expanded trading networks assured that the next onslaughts of the plague would be even more deadly. And so it was when the Black Death charged across 14th century Asia, Europe



14th-century woodcut showing plague victims in front of a church

and north Africa. But even when the Black Death played itself out in 1351, the plague was not finished. It continued to strike the world in a series of waves, revisiting Europe into the eighteenth century and Asia and Africa into the twentieth century.

When the Black Death struck Europe and the Middle East in the mid-14th century, religion was the most powerful force in the lives of most people. In this region of the world, two religions predominated, Christianity and Islam. Before we proceed to compare and contrast the responses of each faith to the plague, a basic review of Christian and Muslim beliefs is in order.

Christianity

Christianity had its origins with Jesus Christ in the first century of the Common Era. Christ was a Jew from Judea in today's Israel. A charismatic leader who connected with the

downtrodden, Christ preached about brotherly love and the "golden rule," to "do unto others as you would have done unto you." He established a following of **disciples** who came to view him as the son of the one and only God. The Romans who ruled Judea were threatened by Christ's popularity and had him crucified on a cross, thus martyring Christ in the minds of his disciples. The

cross became the symbol of Christ, and his disciples began spreading his teachings around the region. The disciples, who were also Jewish, added writings to the Jewish Bible (or Old Testament) that came to be known as the New Testament. Over the next 400 years an institutional church was established in Rome, led by the Pope. The Church taught that people were born in a state of original sin and

needed the help of the Church to receive redemption from God. Christians spread their religion throughout Europe. When the Black Death arrived on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean in 1348, most Europeans were Christian.

Islam

In the early 7th century in Mecca, a city in today's Saudi Arabia, a man named Mohammed claimed he had received the word of God (**Allah**) and called on the people to submit to Him (the word "**Islam**" means "submission to God" in Arabic). Mohammed's teachings about how people should treat each other were similar to Christ's, but the underlying duty of all Muslims (followers of Islam) was the submission to Allah. These teachings appealed to poorer people and angered the wealthy. By 622 Mohammed and his followers were forced to flee to nearby Medina. He continued his teachings

and felt directed by God to write the **Koran**, the book that contains Islam's fundamental beliefs. These beliefs rest on five pillars: the profession of faith to Allah, daily prayer, charity, fasting, and a pilgrimage to Mecca. By 630 Mohammed had gained a huge following and was able to return to Mecca to convert the city. He died in 632, but his followers spread Islam quickly. Within two decades of Mohammed's death most of Arabia was converted, and by the fourteenth century, Islam stretched from North Africa to India.

The Question

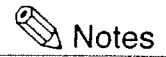
In 1348 Christianity and Islam came face to face with the Black Death. It was an unprecedented challenge: how would their followers react to the disease? Would they turn

to religion for hope and direction? Or, would followers turn away from religion out of anger and despair? In truth, Muslims and Christians responded in many different ways. However, there are some generalizations that can be made about how the followers of each religion responded to the Black Death.

You will have 17 documents to analyze. Your job is to examine each document and then use that information to answer the following question: *The Black Death: How different were Christian and Muslim responses?*

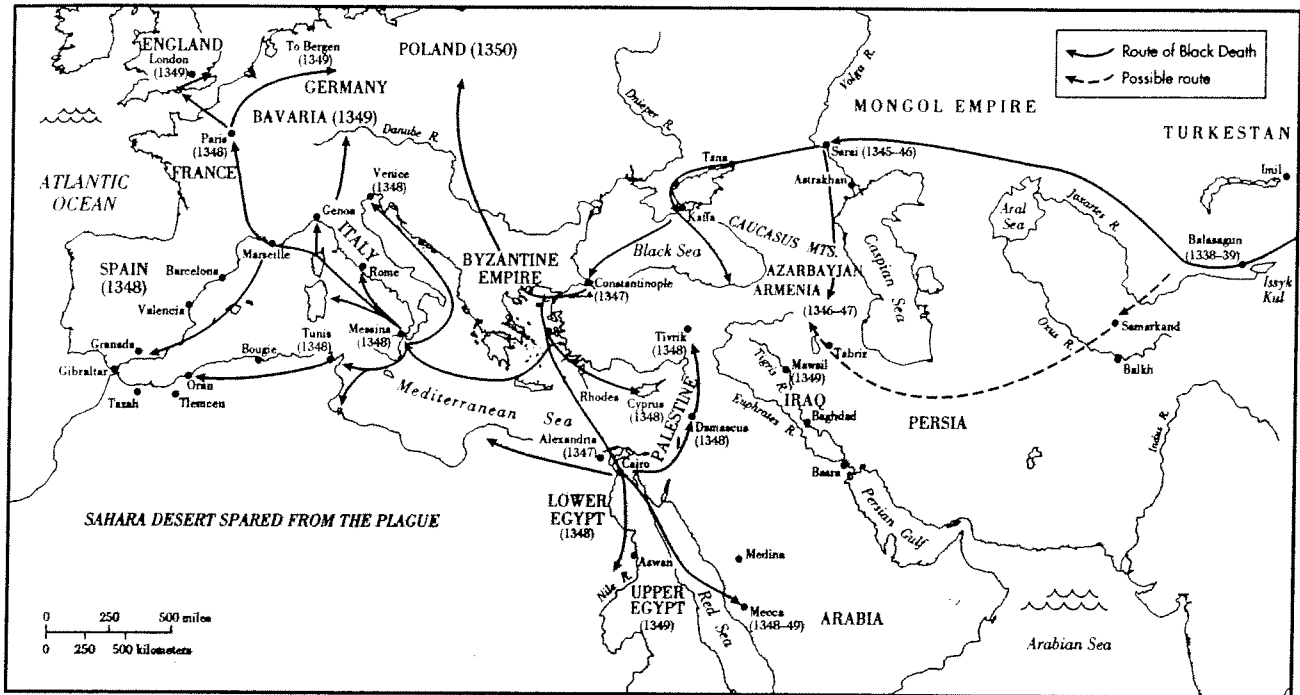
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Document A



Source: Adapted from Michael Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East*, Princeton University Press, 1977.

Paths of the Black Death



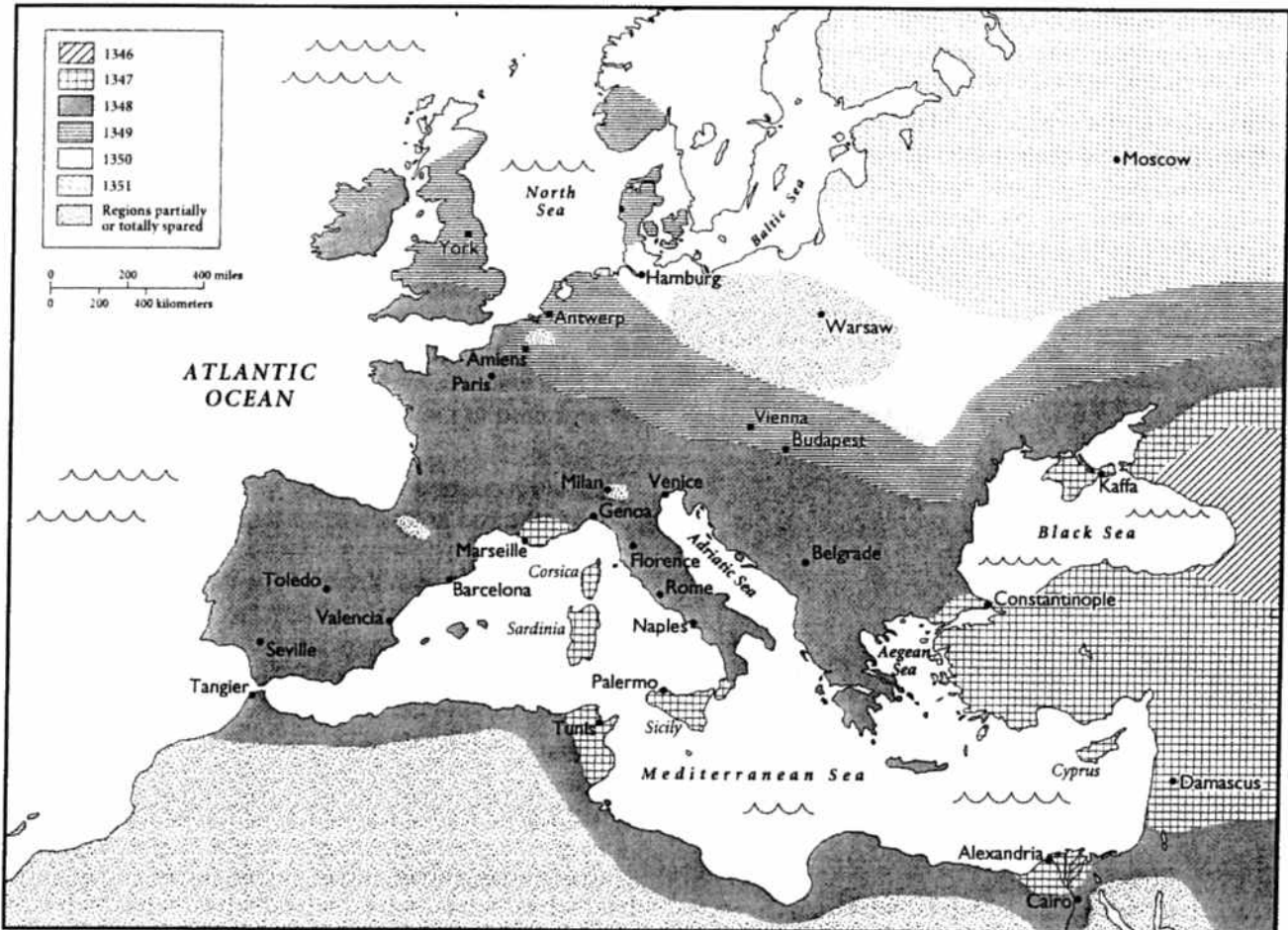
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Document B

Notes

Source: Map created from various sources.

Spread of the Black Death



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Document C

Source: Robert S. Gottfried, *The Black Death*, New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1983.

Black Death mortality estimates for Christian Europe by agents of Pope Clement VI, 1351

Pre-plague population of Europe:	75,000,000
Population of Europe 1351:	51,160,000
Mortality rate:	31%

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Source: Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death*, London: Collins Press, 1969.

Black Death mortality estimates for England calculated by historian Philip Ziegler

Estimated pre-plague English population	4,200,000
Estimated post-plague English population	2,800,000
Death rate of general English population	33%
Death rate of all parish priests in England	45%
Death rate of English monks in monasteries	44%

Source: Michael Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East*, Princeton University Press, 1977.

Black Death mortality estimates for the Middle East from selected Egyptian and Syrian sources

Pre-plague Egyptian population	4 to 8,000,000
Pre-plague Syrian population	1,200,000
Death rate of Egyptian population	25 to 33%
Death rate of Syrian population	33%

Document D

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Source: Chronicler Agnolo di Tura (The Fat), *Cronaca senese*, Italy, 1348, in Robert Gottfried, *The Black Death*, New York: The Free Press, 1983.

The mortality in Siena (Italy) began in May (1348). It was a cruel and horrible thing; and I do not know where to begin to tell of the cruelty and the pitiless ways. It seemed that almost everyone became stupefied by seeing the pain. And it is impossible for the human tongue to recount the awful truth. Indeed, one who did not see such horribleness can be called blessed. And the victims died almost immediately. They would swell beneath their armpits and in their groins, and fall over while talking. Father abandoned child, wife husband, one brother another; for this illness seemed to strike through breath and sight. And so

they died. And none could be found to bury the dead for money or friendship. Members of a household brought their dead to a ditch as best they could, without priest, without divine offices. Nor did the death bell sound. And in many places in Siena great pits were dug and piled deep with the multitude of dead. And they died by the hundreds, both day and night, and all were thrown in those ditches and covered with earth. And as soon as those ditches were filled, more were dug. And I, Agnolo de Tura, ... buried my five children with my own hands.... And so many died that all believed it was the end of the world.

Source: al-Maqrizi, circa 1400, in Michael Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East*, Princeton University Press, 1977.

The malady (in Damascus, Syria) manifested itself in the following manner: a small swelling grew behind the ear which rapidly suppurated. There was a bubo under the arm and death followed very quickly. One noticed also the presence of a tumor which caused a serious mortality. They were occupied with this for a time; then they spat blood, and the population was terrified by the multitude of the dead. The maximum of survival after the spitting of blood was fifty hours.

Note: An Egyptian historian, al-Maqrizi was born in 1364, some fifteen years after the Black Death passed through Egypt and Syria.

Document E

Source: Gabriele de Mussis, *Historia de Morbo*, a Piacenzan chronicler, 1348, in John M. Dunn, *Life During the Black Death*, San Diego: Lucent Books, 2000.

I am overwhelmed, I can't go on! Everywhere one turns there is death and bitterness to be described. The hand of the Almighty strikes repeatedly, to greater and greater effect. The terrible judgment gains in power as time goes by.

What shall we do? Kind Jesus, receive the souls of the dead, avert your gaze from our sins and blot out all our iniquities. We know that whatever we suffer is the just reward of our sins.

Now therefore, when the Lord is enraged, embrace acts of penance, so that you do not stray from the right path and perish.

Note: Piacenza is a town in northern Italy, 40 miles southeast of Milan.

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Source: Muhammad al-Manbijji, *Fi Akhbar at-taun (Report of the Plague)*, 1364, in Michael Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East*, Princeton University Press, 1977.

Prayer for lifting the epidemic is abhorrent because plague is a blessing from God; at the least, a Muslim should devoutly accept the divine act.

Note: Muhammad al-Manbijji was an Islamic scholar from the Hanbalite school, the most influential and the most conservative school of orthodox Islamic law in Syria.

Document F

Source: Varied, including Michael Dols and Philip Ziegler.

Causes of the Black Death: Non-Religious Explanations

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Europe

- miasma (impure air) carried by warm southern winds
- the March 20, 1345, conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars
- excessive clothing; outrageous fashion

Near East

- miasma due to wind carrying stench of Mongol bodies from Crimea
- miasma due to overpopulation causing “evil moistures”
- abundance of shooting stars
- warm ovens
- evil jinn (fairies) or demons
- sin; alcohol and prostitution

Prevention of the Black Death: Non-Religious Practices

Europe

- build fires to purify contaminated air
- reside in a house facing north to avoid southerly winds
- cover windows with wax cloth
- fill house with flowers and sweet smelling plants
- drink liquefied Armenian clay, rose-water, peppermint
- avoid sleeping on back
- breathe in latrine vapors

Near East

- consume pickled onions, pumpkin seeds, and sour juices
- build fires and fumigate
- drink a solution of Armenian clay
- pass severe laws against alcohol and prostitution
- stay indoors
- use letter magic
- avoid sad talk

Document G

Source: Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, Florence, Italy, circa 1348 - 1353.

Now a general procedure was followed more out of fear of contagion than because of charity toward the dead. Alone or with the help of whatever porters they could find, they dragged the corpses from their houses and piled them in front so, particularly in the morning, anyone abroad could see countless bodies. Biers (platforms for the dead) were sent for and when they were lacking, ordinary planks carried the bodies. More than one bier carried two or three together.... Countless times, it happened that two priests going forth with a crowd to bury someone were joined by three or four biers carried behind by bearers, so that while the priests thought they had one corpse to bury, they found themselves with six, eight or even more. Nor were these dead honored with tears, candles or mourners. It had come to such a pass that men who died were shown no more concern than dead goats today.

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Document H

Source: Jean de Venette, a Carmelite friar and master of theology at the University of Paris, 1348, in Richard Newall, editor, *The Chronicle*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1953.

So high was mortality at the Hotel Dieu (Paris's principal hospital) that for a long time more than 500 dead were carried daily with great devotion in carts to the cemetery of the Holy Innocents in Paris for burial. A very great number of the saintly sisters of the Hotel Dieu who, not fearing to die, nursed the sick in all sweetness and humility, with no thought of honor, a number too often renewed by death, rest in peace with Christ, as we may piously believe.

Document I

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Source: Ibn Abi Hajalah, *Kitab at-tibb al masnun fi daf' at-ta'un*, mid 1300s, in Michael Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East*, Princeton University Press, 1977.

The martyrs and those who died in their beds argue with our Lord about those who were killed by the plague. The martyrs say, our brothers (plague victims) died as we died. The deceased on their beds say, our brothers died on their beds as we died. Our Lord said: Consider their wounds which resemble the wounds of the slaughtered, and they are among them. And behold, their wounds had been similar; so they joined the martyrs.

Note: Some passages of the Koran state the highest form of death is dying for Islam in battle or otherwise defending the faith. Such a person is called a martyr.

Document J

Source: Michael Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East*, Princeton University Press, 1977.

Although biers and benches for carrying corpses were manufactured gratuitously in Cairo, there was not an adequate supply. Bodies were transported on simple wooden planks, ladders, doors, window shutters, and even in baskets. In some cases a single bier or plank would be used to carry two or three bodies; the same observation is made of the plague dead by Boccaccio in his description of the Black Death in Florence.... For some inhabitants of Cairo, the final indignity was a summary burial in open trenches, where thirty or more were deposited.

Note: Dols also lists the following wages for Egyptian and Syrian workers during the time of the plague.

- Daily wage of laborer on a Nile River dam project: 1 1/2 dirhems + 3 loaves of bread
- Daily wage of a groom: 3 - 4 dirhems
- Daily wage of Black Death body carrier: 6 dirhems
- Reader of Koran funeral prayer during Black Death: 10 dirhems per reading

Document K

Source: William Dene, chronicler in Rochester, England, circa 1350, in Sir Arthur Bryant, *The Age of Chivalry: The Atlantic Saga*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963.

The people for the greater part ever became more depraved, more prone to every vice and more inclined than before to evil and wickedness, not thinking of death nor of the past plague nor of their own salvation.... Priests, little weighing the sacrifice of a contrite spirit, betook themselves to where they could get larger stipends than in their own benefices, on which account many benefices remained unserved. Day by day, the dangers to souls both in clergy and people multiplied.... The labourers and skilled workmen were imbued with such a spirit of rebellion that neither king, law nor justice could curb them.

Note: "Benefice" in this case means parish or territory.

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Document L



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Source: Ibn Taghri Birdi, *an-Nujum az-zahirah fi muluk Misr wal-Qahirah*, Cairo, Egypt, 1437, in Michael Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East*, Princeton University Press, 1977.

A strange thing happened: The people had rumored that men were all to die on Friday, and the resurrection* would come. Most of the populace feared (death by plague), and when the time for prayer arrived on this Friday, and the men went to prayers, I too, rode to Azhar Mosque, as men were crowding to the baths so that they might die in a state of complete purity....

The muezzins chanted the call to prayer, then the preacher came out as usual ... preached, and explained traditions to the people; when he had finished his first address he sat down to rest before the second sermon. He sat a long time, and people were worried, until he had rose and began the second preaching, but before he had finished his address he sat down a second time and leaned against the side of the pulpit a long time, like one who had fainted. As a result the crowd ... was agitated ... they believed ... that death had made

the preacher the first victim (of the day).... Someone called out, "The preacher is dead."

The Mosque was thrown into confusion...there was much crowding against the preacher until he recovered ... and entered the prayer niche; he recited the prayer inaudibly, and abbreviated it.... The crowd cried out that the Friday service was not valid, since the preacher ... had been interrupted when he fainted. Then one of the men came forward, stood up, and recited the noon-prayer.... But when he had finished leading the men in prayer others rose and cried out that this second Friday service also was not valid, and they performed the prayer service with another man leading them in the noon-prayer....

So on this day in the Azhar Mosque the address from the pulpit was given twice and the noon-prayer twice also.

Note: *In Islam, the "resurrection" refers not to the resurrection of Christ but to the resurrection of the deserving dead, including plague victims, after the Last Judgement.

Document M

Source: Jean de Venette, a Carmelite friar and master of theology at the University of Paris, 1348, in Richard Newall, editor, *The Chronicle*, Columbia University Press, 1953. From Robert Gottfried, *The Black Death*, The Free Press, 1983.

While the plague was still active and spreading from town to town, men in Germany, Flanders, Hainault and Lorraine uprose and began a new sect on their own authority. Stripped to the waist, they gathered in large groups and bands and marched in procession through the crossroads and squares of cities and good towns. They formed circles and beat upon their backs with weighted scourges, rejoicing as they did so in loud voices and singing hymns suitable to their rite and newly composed for it. Thus, for 33 days they marched through many towns doing penance and affording a great spectacle to the wondering people. They flogged their shoulders and arms, scourged with iron points so zealously as to draw blood.



A FLAGELLANT.

From Johann Wolf's Chronicle.

Note: The flagellants were religious zealots who believed they could stop the Black Death by performing public acts of penance for their sins. Their numbers were probably in excess of forty thousand, well less than 1% of the European adult population.

Document N

Source: Michael Kleinlawl, as reported in the *Strasbourg Chronicle* (Alsace), 1348, in Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death: A Chronicle of the Plague*, New York: Harper and Row, 1969.

And at that time, when death did rage
 In countries far and near,
 Yea, and throughout all Christenage,
 Of this it seemed quite clear,
 The Jews were guilty of this crime
 As all around was said,
 By poisoning wells at this same time,
 As on the rack when laid,



Woodcut titled "Burning of the Jews"
 c. 1351

Some (as were stated) to have done
 Themselves confessed it true,
 And, therefore, without mercy shown
 Were burnt in many a lieu.
 And death in this dread form
 To Strasbourg now drew nigh,
 And of its people killed a swarm
 Young, old and low and high.
 Particularly in forty-nine,
 When sixteen thousand died,
 The citizens did much incline
 To measures elsewhere tried.
 Three masters stoutly did resist
 All measures of this kind,
 The Jews they wanted to assist
 And loudly spake their mind.
 The people to the mister trooped,
 The masters soon must yield,
 And on the Jews they quickly swooped,
 Revenge to seek afield.

Note: The town council of Strasbourg tried to protect the Jews from a mob. The council was thrown out of office and replaced with new anti-Semitic members. Of the 1,884 Jews of Strasbourg, more than 900 of them were burned on the grounds of the Jewish cemetery and the rest were banned from the city. Anti-Semitic riots, known as pogroms, occurred throughout Europe during the Black Death. By 1351, 60 major and 150 smaller Jewish communities had been destroyed, and over 350 separate massacres had taken place.

Document O

Source: Pope Clement VI, July 5, 1348.

Since this pestilence is all but universal everywhere, and by a mysterious decree of God has afflicted, and continues to afflict, both Jews and many other nations throughout the diverse regions of the earth to whom a common existence with the Jews is unknown, (the charge) that Jews have provided the cause of the occasion for such a crime is without plausibility.

Source: Pope Clement VI, October 20, 1349.

Already flagellants under pretense of piety have spilt the blood of Jews, which Christian charity preserves and protects, and frequently also the blood of Christians, and, when opportunity offered, they have stolen the property of the clergy and laity.... We therefore command our archbishops and suffragans (bishops) that in their dioceses they declare in our name as godless and forbidden all societies, meetings, uses, and statutes of the so-called flagellants, which we at the advice of our brethren have condemned, and exhort all members of such societies, the secular and monastic clergy as well as the laity, to stand aloof from the sect and never again to enter into relations with them.

Note: These writings were parts of the official documents issued by the Pope called "bulls."

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Document P

Source: Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354*.

(As a result of the plague) the people fasted for three successive days.... (Afterward they) assembled in the Great mosque until it was filled to overflowing ... and spent the night there in prayers.... Then, after performing the dawn prayer..., they all went out together ... carrying Korans in their hands. The entire population of the city (of Damascus) joined.... The Jews went out with their book of the law and the Christians with the gospel,... (all) of them in tears ... imploring the favor of God through His Books and His Prophets.

Note: Ibn Battuta was a world traveler in the fourteenth century. He traveled throughout Africa, Asia, and Europe writing of his experiences. Battuta encountered the Black Death in Damascus and again in North Africa.

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Document Q

Source: Michael Dols, *The Black Death In The Middle East*, Princeton University Press, 1977.

There is no evidence for the appearance of messianic movements* in Muslim society at this time that might have associated the Black Death with an apocalypse**.... The unassimilated communities were tolerated in medieval Muslim society and, in this instance, were not held responsible for the ravages of the pandemic.... In no case is there a direct causal relationship to be found between the Black Death (or subsequent plague epidemics) and the active persecution of minorities, as in Europe.

Note: *Messianic movements are religious activities meant to challenge the authority of the Church. **An apocalypse is an end-of-the-world event.