

And We All Fall Down:

*How the bubonic plague and John Wycliffe laid
the foundation for the Protestant Reformation in England.*



This painting by Bruegel illustrates the effect of the plague on every aspect of life, including artistic pursuits.

*~ She lay there motionless and silent, as if by not moving or making any sound
she could somehow defeat the bacteria multiplying in her tiny body. She hasn't moved
for days, save for her labored breathing and the occasional moan of agony. Her lymph*

nodes have swollen to four times their normal size in the last two days; it was all she could do to lie still as the plague ravaged her tiny little frame. Delirious, she calls out for her mother, forgetting that she had been left to die after the appearance of that first spot on her calf, a deep red spot surrounded by a ring of bright white.

“Ring around the rosie...pocket full of posie....Achtoo, achtoo, we all fall down,” she murmured in her half-sleep, unaware that as she sang the bacteria in her lymph nodes were reaching a critical point. With a blood-curdling scream, she felt the nodes burst. Unfortunately, she had no way of knowing that in bursting they had released trillions of tiny bacteria into her bloodstream. Sobbing, she lay there in the darkness of her tiny room, the dirt floor cold beneath her feverish body. Finally she lay quiet. Death had come for her, this child who would never see her sixth birthday. On a cold dirt floor, abandoned by her family, she had died alone.~

What could cause a scene like the one I just laid out for you?

The Black Death.

When the Black Death swept through Europe, there was no bond that could not be ignored, no vow that could not be broken. Parents abandoned children, husbands their wives, priests their faithful flocks as the plague decimated the

population. By the year 1352, over a quarter of the population in continental Europe had fallen victim to the bubonic plague. (Diamond 202)

Why was the plague able to decimate such a huge percentage of Europe's population? Jared Diamond writes about it in his book, *Guns, Germs and Steel*, saying,

"The major killers of humanity throughout our recent history—smallpox, flu, tuberculosis, malaria, plague, measles, and cholera—are infectious diseases that evolved from diseases of animals, even though most of the microbes responsible for our own epidemic illnesses are paradoxically now almost confined to humans... [These] so-called epidemic diseases...produce no cases for a long time, then a whole wave of cases, then no more cases for a while [...These diseases] spread quickly and efficiently from an infected person to a nearby healthy person...They are "acute" illnesses; within a short time, you either die or recover completely...Those who are fortunate enough to recover develop antibodies that leave us immune against a recurrence of the disease." (Diamond 199-201)

When the plague reached England's fair shores in 1348,

her fate was to be no different from the fate of any other European nation. In just two years, the Great Pestilence (as the plague had come to be known) had killed between 30-40% of the population, which amounted to an estimated 2 million dead in its first appearance on English soil. Although the plague would eventually disappear for a time, it was to reoccur numerous times over the next several hundred years, decimating the population time and time again. Jared Diamond wrote about this phenomena of reoccurrence, saying:

As the microbe can't survive except in the bodies of living people, the disease dies out, until a new crop of babies reaches the susceptible age—and until an infectious person arrives from the outside to start a new epidemic. (202)

To sustain themselves, crowd diseases like the plague need a human population that is both densely packed and numerous to assure that a new generation of susceptible children are available for infection by the time the disease would otherwise be waning. (Diamond) Edward Rutherford would aptly describe these conditions in his book, *London: The Novel*. He would use the experiences of Gilbert Bull, (a character descended from one of the four

families Rutherford focuses on in his novel), encountered upon the return of the plague to the city in 1361, more than a decade after it had first arrived in 1348, saying:

Despite the trauma, the city recovered with astonishing speed. Nothing could stop the trade of London. Fresh immigrants came. The children of survivors began to fill the yawning gap. Life seemed to have returned to normal. But the plague had not passed. It had only gone into hiding...

(Rutherford, 435)

The buildup of large, densely packed human populations began with the rise of agriculture some 10,000 years ago, and accelerated with the growth of cities. (Diamond) With the introduction of the heavy plow and the three-field system of crop rotation in much of Europe and England, agriculture was able to expand, lighting the way for the development of large, densely packed cities. These cities, like London, are often more dangerous because of the poor sanitation conditions and crowded living space, which in turn leads to presence of crowd diseases like the plague, smallpox, and tuberculosis.

The bacteria *Yersinia pestis* caused the plague that decimated Europe during the 14th century. Although the leading ideas at the time had 'bad air' and a Jewish conspiracy as leading causes for the Great Pestilence, the fleas found on the rodents who roamed the streets of England in fact carry it; those fleas then come into contact with humans when their rodent host dies. The plague these fleas would carry around Europe comes in three forms: bubonic, pneumatic, septic. These three forms would combine to decimate the populations of Europe, and especially England, during the 14th and 15th centuries. It was only after a large-scale change in hygiene and sanitation conditions swept through Europe that the plague would eventually find itself unable to sustain itself.

The bubonic form is the most common form of the plague; it is transferred directly from the flea host. The first onset of symptoms normally arrives within two to eight days of being bitten. These

symptoms include: the sudden onset of a fever or chills;



head and muscle aches; severe fatigue; and inflamed lymph nodes that are warm to the touch (pictured at right), which normally develop in the groin. These buboes would eventually burst, causing septicemia, a serious blood infection. This septicemia often led to complications like the onset of pneumonic and/or septic forms of plague.

(Cdc.gov)

The septic form of the plague often occurred as a complication of the bubonic form. However, if the bacteria were to enter your bloodstream directly, bypassing the lymphatic system, the septic form can occur on its own. Its symptoms included: fever and chills; severe abdominal pain, diarrhea and vomiting; bleeding from the external orifices (the mouth, nose, rectum, etc); shock; and the onset of

gangrene in the extremities, most commonly in the fingers, toes and nose. It quite literally turned the blood to poison, causing vital organ



failure as blood vessels began to rupture. The plague

actually took its name from this form, in which the breakdown of capillaries in the skin led to tissue death in the extremities (gangrene). (Mayoclinic.com)

The pneumonic form, by far the most dangerous of the three forms, normally caused death within 1-3 days after the onset of symptoms. While this form sometimes occurred as a complication of the bubonic or septic forms of plague, it often occurred as a separate form. As the only form of the plague that can be directly transferred from the infected to the healthy, it often affected doctors, priests, and the families of dying who spend hours in close proximity with the infected. Healthy individuals had only to come into contact with the sputum or bloody mucus of the infected individual in order to contract the disease themselves. This form caused the rapid onset of pneumonia, along with a high fever and general body weakness, which would eventually culminate in respiratory failure and death. (Cdc.org; mayoclinic.org)

The reactions of the people of England and Europe ranged the gauntlet from horror to anger to a morbid acceptance of death. Many would turn to their local churches for assistance in trying to avoid the plague, often in vain. (istrianet.org) As if to add insult to injury, Pope Clement VI had to navigate this most trying

time in the Church's history not from Rome, his historical seat of power, but from Avignon, where many would claim he was under the thumb of the French monarchy. Some even went so far as to claim that the Church was unable to cure or avoid the plague because it was "G-d's Will" that the church be cleansed. (luc.edu) This would undermine the power of the Catholic Church for years to come.

This disillusionment with the Catholic Church laid the ground for the rise of John Wycliffe, the man who would place the Bible within the reach of the common Englishman by translating it from Latin into the English vernacular. Rutherford wrote of the popularity of Wycliffe's ideas in his chapter titled *The London Bridge* saying:

At first Wycliffe's ideas had not been outrageous. If he complained about corrupt priests, so had all Church reformers for centuries. But eventually he had evolved more dangerous doctrines. "All authority," he pointed out, "came from G-d's Grace, not Man. If evil kings can be deposed by the Church, then why not corrupt bishops and popes even too? ...I cannot even accept... that miracle of the Mass takes place when the hands of the priest are impure."...This was shocking. Yet it was another of his

conclusions that really infuriated the Church.

"It cannot be right," he decided, "that the scriptures may only be interpreted to the faithful by often sinful priests."... Wycliffe appealed to Londoner's robust common sense.

(Rutherford, 476-477)

The loss of an estimated 40% of the English clergy by the Great Pestilence resulted in under-qualified and poorly trained men filling the yawning gap. The people of England became increasingly disillusioned with the Church as a result. Although he would be tied to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, Wycliffe actually advocated the duty of English citizens to obey existing civil authorities, regardless of their morality. He worked diligently on his translation of the Bible, believing that 'if the Scriptures could be understood and believed, the people would be delivered from the priests craft and G-d's blessings would descend upon the land.' (wayoflife.org)

Wycliffe would eventually come to publish a vast number of explanations of the Scriptures, in which he would refute the traditional Catholic dogma of transubstantiation, indulgences, the papacy, baptismal regeneration, and infant baptism. He would say in regards to the need for an English translation of the Bible, "Believers should ascertain for

themselves what are the true matters of their faith, by having the Scriptures in a language which all may understand." (wayoflife.org) When the Pope declared his works to be a heresy, Wycliffe would write:

You say it is heresy to speak of the Holy Scriptures in English. You call me a heretic because I have translated the Bible into the common tongue of the people. Do you know whom you blaspheme? Did not the Holy Ghost give the Word of God at first in the mother-tongue of the nations to whom it was addressed? Why do you speak against the Holy Ghost? You say the Church of God is in danger from this book. How can that be? Is it not from the Bible only that we learn that G-d has set up such a society as a Church on the earth? Is it not the Bible what gives all her authority to the Church? Is it not from the Bible that we learn who is the Builder and Sovereign of the Church, what are the laws by which she is to be governed, and the rights and privileges of her members? Without the Bible, what charter has the Church to show for all these? It is you who place the Church in jeopardy by hiding the Divine warrant, the missive royal of her King for the authority she wields and

the faith she enjoins. (wayoflife.org)

In 1381, the year of the infamous Peasant Revolt, Wycliffe lost the protection of John of Gaunt (brother of the current king) after claiming that the doctrine of transubstantiation was false. He was soon expelled from his teaching position at Oxford and was forced into exile, eventually dying in Lutterworth in 1384. However, before

his death, he had established a group of men who were to carry on his life's work. Known as Wycliffites, and Lollards, these men traveled from town to town



distributing the Scriptures and preaching the Word of G-d, as pictured at the right. Rutherford alludes to these Lollards in his book in the chapter entitled *London Bridge*. He writes of the misfortune befalling Geoffrey Ducket, a foundling who had been taken in by the aforementioned Gilbert Bull despite the enormous risk of taking in a foundling after a plague outbreak, after he has been found

with a Lollard Bible.

The Lollard movement would continue into the 1400's, but as a persecuted group. Many would die at the stake as heretics; Wycliffe's Bible would be banned, but still widely read by the literate portion of the population, both inside and outside of England. (frontline.org)

The Great Pestilence created the necessary cultural climate that would allow for men like Wycliffe to come to prominence in the late Middle Ages. The plague led to the decline in the power of the Catholic Church, and the rise of open dissenters, both of which would open the channels through which the Protestant Reformation would burst in the coming centuries. Truly, the Great Pestilence was more than just a physical epidemic; it was the means through which a spiritual cleansing of the English Church and population could occur. Although the ideas spawned would cause years of spiritual unrest and political turmoil not only in England but around the world for centuries to come, they could not have been developed without the drastic cultural changes wrought by the Black Death and the subsequent fall of the Catholic Church.

Works Cited (that are not available on Murl.com)

Diamond, Jared. "Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies." W.W. Norton and Company, Inc. New York, NY. 1997.

Rutherford, Edward. "London: The Novel." Random House Publishing Group. New York. 1997.