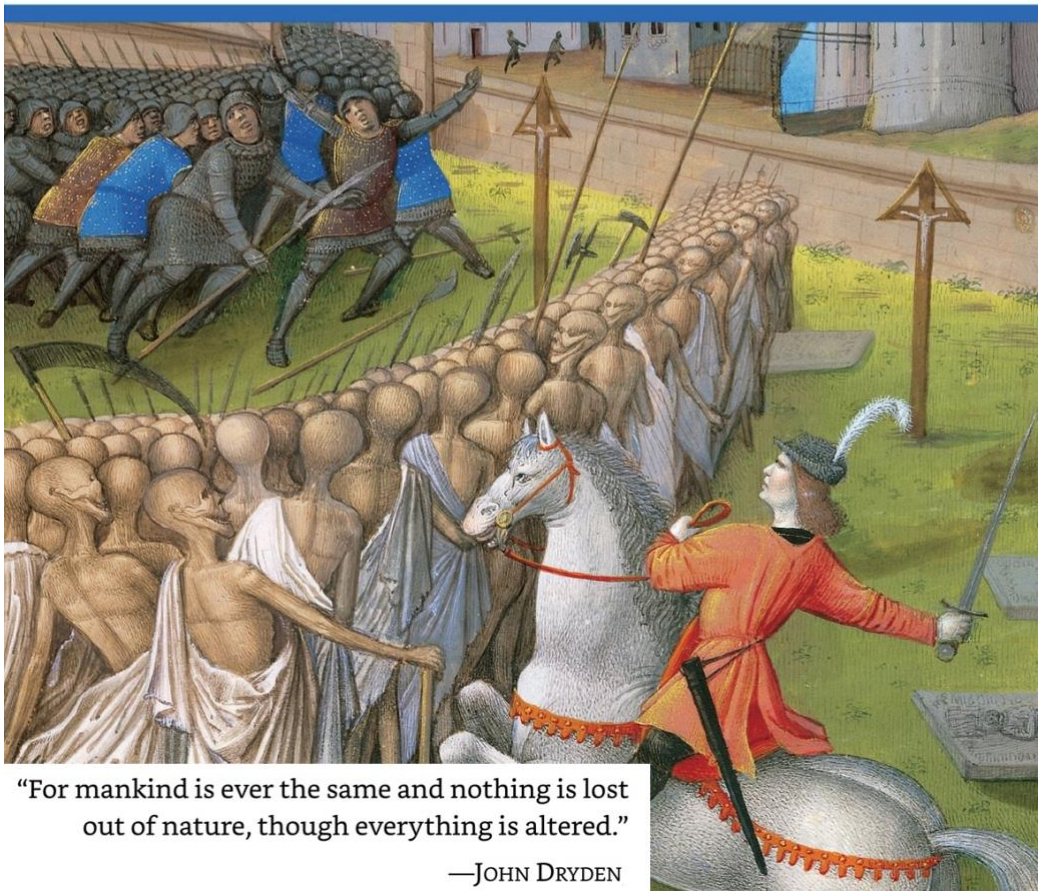
BARBARA W. TUCHMAN

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

A DISTANT MIRROR

The Calamitous 14th Century



"For mankind is ever the same and nothing is lost out of nature, though everything is altered."

—JOHN DRYDEN

Chapter 5

"This Is the End of the World": The Black Death

IN OCTOBER 1347, two months after the fall of Calais, Genoese trading ships put into the harbor of Messina in Sicily with dead and dying men at the oars. The ships had come from the Black Sea port of Caffa (now Feodosiya) in the Crimea, where the Genoese maintained a trading post.

Ignorance of the cause augmented the sense of horror. Of the real carriers, rats and fleas, the 14th century had no suspicion, perhaps because they were so familiar. Fleas, though a common household nuisance, are not once mentioned in contemporary plague writings, and rats only incidentally, although folklore commonly associated them with pestilence. The legend of the Pied Piper arose from an outbreak of 1284. The actual plague bacillus, *Pasteurella pestis*, remained undiscovered for another 500 years. Living alternately in the stomach of the flea and the bloodstream of the rat who was the flea's host, the bacillus in its bubonic form was transferred to humans and animals by the bite of either rat or flea. It traveled by virtue of *Rattus rattus*, the small medieval black rat that lived on ships, as well as by the heavier brown or sewer rat. What precipitated the turn of the bacillus from innocuous to virulent form is unknown, but the occurrence is now believed to have taken place not in China but somewhere in central Asia and to have spread along the caravan routes. Chinese origin was a mistaken notion of the 14th century based on real but belated reports of huge death tolls in China from drought, famine, and pestilence which have since been traced to the 1330s, too soon to be responsible for the plague that appeared in India in 1346.

The phantom enemy had no name. Called the Black Death only in later recurrences, it was known during the first epidemic simply as the Pestilence or Great Mortality.

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"In the time of that great mortality in the year of our Lord 1348," wrote a professor of law named Bartolus of Sassoferrato, "the hostility of God was stronger than the hostility of man." But he was wrong.

The hostility of man proved itself against the Jews. On charges that they were poisoning the wells, with intent "to kill and destroy the whole of Christendom and have lordship over all the world," the lynchings began in the spring of 1348 on the heels of the first plague deaths. The first attacks occurred in Narbonne and Carcassonne, where Jews were dragged from their houses and thrown into bonfires. While Divine punishment was accepted as the plague's source, people in their misery still looked for a human agent upon whom to vent the hostility that could not be vented on God. The Jew, as the eternal stranger, was the most obvious target. He was the outsider who had separated himself by choice from the Christian world, whom Christians for centuries had been taught to hate, who was regarded as imbued with unsleeping malevolence against all Christians. Living in a distinct group of his own kind in a particular street or quarter, he was also the most feasible target, with property to loot as a further inducement.

The accusation of well-poisoning was as old as the plague of Athens, when it had been applied to the Spartans, and as recent as the epidemics of 1320–21, when it had been applied to the lepers. At that time the lepers were believed to have acted at the instigation of the Jews and the Moslem King of Granada, in a great conspiracy of outcasts to destroy Christians. Hundreds were rounded up and burned throughout France in 1322 and the Jews heavily punished by an official fine and unofficial attacks. When the plague came, the charge was instantly revived against the Jews:

… rivers and fountains
That were clear and clean
They poisoned in many places …
wrote the French court poet Guillaume de Machaut.

The antagonism had ancient roots. The Jew had become the object of popular animosity because the early Church, as an offshoot of Judaism striving to replace the parent, had to make him so. His rejection of Christ as Saviour and his dogged refusal to accept the new law of the Gospel in place of the Mosaic law made the Jew a perpetual insult to the newly established Church, a danger who must be kept distinct and apart from the Christian community. This was the purpose of the edicts depriving Jews of their civil rights issued by the early Church Councils in the 4th century as soon as Christianity became the state religion. Separation was a two-way street, since, to the Jews, Christianity was at first a dissident sect, then an apostasy with which they wanted no contact.

The theory, emotions, and justifications of anti-Semitism were laid at that time—in the canon law codified by the Councils; in the tirades of St. John Chrysostom, Patriarch of Antioch, who denounced the Jews as Christ-killers; in the judgment of St. Augustine, who declared the Jews to be "outcasts" for failing to accept redemption by Christ. The Jews' dispersion was regarded as their punishment for unbelief.

The period of active assault began with the age of the crusades, when all Europe's intramural antagonisms were gathered into one bolt aimed at the infidel. On the theory that the "infidel at home" should likewise be exterminated, massacres of Jewish communities marked the crusaders' march to Palestine. The capture of the Holy Sepulcher by the Moslems was blamed on "the wickedness of the Jews," and the cry "HEP! HEP!" for Hierosolyma est Perdita (Jerusalem is lost) became the call for murder. What man victimizes he fears; thus, the Jews were pictured as fiends filled with hatred of the human race, which they secretly intended to destroy.

The question whether Jews had certain human rights, under the general proposition that God created the world for all men including infidels, was given different answers by different thinkers. Officially the Church conceded some rights: that Jews should not be condemned without trial, their synagogues and cemeteries should not be profaned, their property not be robbed with impunity. In practice this meant little because, as noncitizens of the universal Christian state, Jews were not allowed to bring charges against Christians, nor was Jewish testimony allowed to prevail over that of Christians. Their legal status was that of serfs of the king, though without reciprocal obligations on the part of the overlord. The doctrine that Jews were doomed to perpetual servitude as Christ-killers was announced by Pope Innocent III in 1205 and led Thomas Aquinas to conclude with relentless logic that "since Jews are the slaves of the Church, she can dispose of their possessions." Legally, politically, and physically, they were totally vulnerable.

They maintained a place in society because as moneylenders they performed a role essential to the kings' continuous need of money. Excluded by the guilds from crafts and trades, they had been pushed into petty commerce and moneylending although theoretically barred from dealing with Christians. Theory, however, bends to convenience, and Jews provided Christians with a way around their self-imposed ban on using money to make money.

Since they were damned anyway, they were permitted to lend at interest rates of 20 percent and more, of which the royal treasury took the major share. The increment to the crown was in fact a form of indirect taxation; as its instruments, the Jews absorbed an added measure of popular hate. They lived entirely dependent upon the king's protection, subject to confiscations and expulsions and the hazards of royal favor. Nobles and prelates followed the royal example, entrusting money to the Jews for lending and taking most of the profits, while deflecting popular resentment upon the agent. To the common man the Jews were not only Christ-killers but rapacious, merciless monsters, symbols of the new force of money that was changing old ways and dissolving old ties.

As commerce swelled in the 12th and 13th centuries, increasing the flow of money, the Jews' position deteriorated in proportion as they were less needed. They could not deal in the great sums that Christian banking houses like the Bardi of Florence could command. Kings and princes requiring ever larger amounts now turned to the Lombards and wealthy merchants for loans and relaxed their protection of the Jews or, when in need of hard cash, decreed their expulsion while confiscating their property and the debts owed to them. At the same time, with the advent of the Inquisition in the 13th century, religious intolerance waxed, leading to the charge of ritual murder against the Jews and the enforced wearing of a distinctive badge.

The belief that Jews performed ritual murder of Christian victims, supposedly from a compulsion to re-enact the Crucifixion, began in the 12th century and developed into the belief that they held secret rites to desecrate the host. Promoted by popular preachers, a mythology of blood grew in a mirror image of the Christian ritual of drinking the blood of the Saviour. Jews were believed to kidnap and torture Christian children, whose blood they drank for a variety of sinister purposes ranging from sadism and sorcery to the need, as unnatural beings, for Christian blood to give them a human appearance. Though bitterly refuted by the rabbis and condemned by emperor and pope, the blood libel took possession of the popular mind most rabidly in Germany, where the well-poisoning charge too had originated in the 12th century. The blood libel formed the subject of Chaucer's tale of a child martyr told by the Prioresse and was the ground on which many Jews were charged, tried, and burned at the stake.

Under the zeal of St. Louis, whose life's object was the greater glory and fulfillment of Christian doctrine, Jewish life in France was narrowed and harassed by mounting restrictions. The famous trial of the Talmud for heresy and blasphemy took place in Paris in 1240 during his reign, ending in foreordained conviction and burning of 24 cartloads of Talmudic works. One of the disputants in the case was Rabbi Moses ben Jacob of Coucy, intellectual leader of the northern Jewish community in the time of Enguerrand III.

Throughout the century the Church multiplied decrees designed to isolate Jews from Christian society, on the theory that contact with them brought the Christian faith into disrepute. Jews were forbidden to employ Christians as servants, to serve as doctors to Christians, to intermarry, to sell flour, bread, wine, oil, shoes, or any article of clothing to Christians, to deliver or receive goods, to build new synagogues, to hold or claim land for non-payment of mortgage. The occupations from which guild rules barred them included weaving, metal-working, mining, tailoring, shoemaking, goldsmithing, baking, milling, carpentry. To mark their separation, Innocent III in 1215 decreed the wearing of a badge, usually in the form of a wheel or circular patch of yellow felt, said to represent a piece of money. Sometimes green or red-and-white, it was worn by both sexes beginning between the ages of seven and fourteen. In its struggle against all heresy and dissent, the 13th century Church imposed the same badge on Moslems, on convicted heretics, and, by some quirk in doctrine, on prostitutes. A hat with a point rather like a horn, said to represent the Devil, was later added further to distinguish the Jews.

Expulsions and persecutions were marked by one constant factor—seizure of Jewish property. As the chronicler William of Newburgh wrote of the massacre of York in 1190, the slaughter was less the work of religious zeal than of bold and covetous men who wrought "the business of their own greed." The motive was the same for official expulsion by towns or kings. When the Jews drifted back to resettle in villages, market towns and particularly in cities, they continued in moneylending and retail trade, kept pawnshops, found an occupation as gravediggers, and lived close together in a narrow Jewish quarter for mutual protection. In Provence, drawing on their contact with the Arabs of Spain and North Africa, they were scholars and sought-after physicians. But the vigorous inner life of their earlier communities had faded. In an excitable period they lived on the edge of assault that was always imminent, It was understood that the Church could "justly ordain war upon them" as enemies of Christendom.

In the torment of the plague it was easy to credit Jewish malevolence with poisoning the wells. In 1348 Clement VI issued a Bull prohibiting the killing, looting, or forcible conversion of Jews without trial, which halted the attacks in Avignon and the Papal States but was ignored as the rage swept northward. Authorities in most places tried at first to protect the Jews, but succumbed to popular pressure, not without an eye to potential forfeit of Jewish property.

In Savoy, where the first formal trials were held in September 1348, the Jews' property was confiscated while they remained in prison pending investigation of charges. Composed from confessions extracted by torture according to the usual medieval method, the charges drew a picture of an international Jewish conspiracy emanating from Spain, with messengers from Toledo carrying poison in little packets or in a "narrow stitched leather bag." The messengers allegedly brought rabbinical instructions for sprinkling the poison in wells and springs, and consulted with their coreligionists in secret meetings. Duly found guilty, the accused were condemned to death. Eleven Jews were burned alive and the rest subjected to a tax of 160 florins every month over the next six years for permission to remain in Savoy.

The confessions obtained in Savoy, distributed by letter from town to town, formed the basis for a wave of accusations and attacks throughout Alsace, Switzerland, and Germany. At a meeting of representatives of Alsatian towns, the oligarchy of Strasbourg attempted to refute the charges but were overwhelmed by the majority demanding reprisal and expulsion. The persecutions of the Black Death were not all spontaneous outbursts but action seriously discussed beforehand.

Again Pope Clement attempted to check the hysteria in a Bull of September 1348 in which he said that Christians who imputed the pestilence to the Jews had been "seduced by that liar, the Devil," and that the charge of well-poisoning and ensuing massacres were a "horrible thing." He pointed out that "by a mysterious decree of God" the plague was afflicting all peoples, including Jews; that it raged in places where no Jews lived, and that elsewhere they were victims like everyone else; therefore the charge that they caused it was "without plausibility." He urged the clergy to take Jews under their protection as he himself offered to do in Avignon, but his voice was hardly heard against local animus.

In Basle on January 9, 1349, the whole community of several hundred Jews was burned in a wooden house especially constructed for the purpose on an island in the Rhine, and a decree was passed that no Jew should be allowed to settle in Basle for 200 years. In Strasbourg the Town Council, which opposed persecution, was deposed by vote of the guilds and another was elected, prepared to comply with the popular will. In February 1349, before the plague had yet reached the

city, the Jews of Strasbourg, numbering 2,000, were taken to the burial ground, where all except those who accepted conversion were burned at rows of stakes erected to receive them.

By now another voice was fomenting attack upon the Jews. The flagellants had appeared. In desperate supplication for God's mercy, their movement erupted in a sudden frenzy that sped across Europe with the same fiery contagion as the plague. Self-flagellation was intended to express remorse and expiate the sins of all. As a form of penance to induce God to forgive sin, it long antedated the plague years. The flagellants saw themselves as redeemers who, by re-enacting the scourging of Christ upon their own bodies and making the blood flow, would atone for human wickedness and earn another chance for mankind.

Organized groups of 200 to 300 and sometimes more (the chroniclers mention up to 1,000) marched from city to city, stripped to the waist, scourging themselves with leather whips tipped with iron spikes until they bled. While they cried aloud to Christ and the Virgin for pity, and called upon God to "Spare us!," the watching townspeople sobbed and groaned in sympathy. These bands put on regular performances three times a day, twice in public in the church square and a third in privacy. Organized under a lay Master for a stated period, usually 33½ days to represent Christ's years on earth, the participants were required to pledge self-support at 4 pence a day or other fixed rate and to swear obedience to the Master. They were forbidden to bathe, shave, change their clothes, sleep in beds, talk or have intercourse with women without the Master's permission. Evidently this was not withheld, since the flagellants were later charged with orgies in which whipping combined with sex. Women accompanied the groups in a separate section, bringing up the rear. If a woman or priest entered the circle of the ceremony, the act of penance was considered void and had to be begun over again. The movement was essentially anti-clerical, for in challenge to the priesthood, the flagellants were taking upon themselves the role of interceders with God for all humanity.

Breaking out now in the German states, the new eruption advanced through the Low Countries to Flanders and Picardy as far as Reims. Hundreds of bands roamed the land, entering new towns every week, exciting already overwrought emotions, reciting hymns of woe and claims that but for them "all Christendom would meet perdition." The inhabitants greeted them with reverence and ringing of church bells, lodged them in their houses, brought children to be healed and, in at least one case, to be resurrected. They dipped cloths in the flagellants' blood, which they pressed to their eyes and preserved as relics. Many, including knights and ladies, clerics, nuns, and children, joined the bands. Soon the flagellants were marching behind magnificent banners of velvet and cloth of gold embroidered for them by women enthusiasts.

Growing in arrogance, they became overt in antagonism to the Church. The Masters assumed the right to hear confession and grant absolution or impose penance, which not only denied the priests their fee for these services but challenged ecclesiastical authority at its core. Priests who intervened against them were stoned and the populace was incited to join in the stoning. Opponents were denounced as scorpions and Anti-Christs. Organized in some cases by apostate priests or fanatic dissidents, the flagellants took possession of churches, disrupted services, ridiculed the Eucharist, looted altars, and claimed the power to cast out evil spirits and raise the dead. The movement that began as an attempt through self-inflicted pain to save the world from destruction, caught the infection of power hunger and aimed at taking over the Church.

They began to be feared as a source of revolutionary ferment and a threat to the propertied class, lay as well as ecclesiastical. The Emperor Charles IV petitioned the Pope to suppress the flagellants, and his appeal was augmented by the no less imperial voice of the University of Paris. At such a time, when the world seemed to be on the brink of doom, to take action against the flagellants who claimed to be under Divine inspiration was not an easy decision. Several of the cardinals at Avignon opposed repressive measures.

The self-torturers meanwhile had found a better victim. In every town they entered, the flagellants rushed for the Jewish quarter, trailed by citizens howling for revenge upon the "poisoners of the wells." In Freiburg, Augsburg, Nürnberg, Munich, Königsberg, Regensburg, and other centers, the Jews were slaughtered with a thoroughness that seemed to seek the final solution. At Worms in March 1349 the Jewish community of 400, like that of York, turned to an old tradition and burned themselves to death inside their own houses rather than be killed by their enemies. The larger community of Frankfurt-am-Main took the same way in July, setting fire to part of the city by their flames. In Cologne the Town Council repeated the Pope's argument that Jews were dying of the plague like everyone else, but the flagellants collected a great

proletarian crowd of “those who had nothing to lose,” and paid no attention. In Mainz, which had the largest Jewish community in Europe, its members turned at last to self-defense. With arms collected in advance they killed 200 of the mob, an act which only served to bring down upon them a furious onslaught by the townspeople in revenge for the death of Christians. The Jews fought until overpowered; then retreating to their homes, they too set their own fires. Six thousand were said to have perished at Mainz on August 24, 1349. Of 3,000 Jews at Erfurt, none was reported to have survived.

Completeness is rare in history, and Jewish chroniclers may have shared the medieval addiction to sweeping numbers. Usually a number saved themselves by conversion, and groups of refugees were given shelter by Rupert of the Palatinate and other princes. Duke Albert II of Austria, grand-uncle of Enguerrand VII, was one of the few who took measures effective enough to protect the Jews from assault in his territories. The last pogroms took place in Antwerp and in Brussels where in December 1349 the entire Jewish community was exterminated. By the time the plague had passed, few Jews were left in Germany or the Low Countries.

By this time Church and state were ready to take the risk of suppressing the flagellants. Magistrates ordered town gates closed against them; Clement VI in a Bull of October 1349 called for their dispersal and arrest; the University of Paris denied their claim of Divine inspiration. Philip VI promptly forbade public flagellation on pain of death; local rulers pursued the “masters of error,” seizing, hanging, and beheading. The flagellants disbanded and fled, “vanishing as suddenly as they had come,” wrote Henry of Hereford, “like night phantoms or mocking ghosts.” Here and there the bands lingered, not entirely suppressed until 1357.

Homeless ghosts, the Jews filtered back from eastern Europe, where the expelled had gone. Two Jews reappeared in Erfurt as visitors in 1354 and, joined by others, started a resettlement three years later. By 1365 the community numbered 86 taxable hearths and an additional number of poor households below the tax-paying level. Here and elsewhere they returned to live in weakened and fearful communities on worse terms and in greater segregation than before. Well-poisoning and its massacres had fixed the malevolent image of the Jew into a stereotype. Because Jews were useful, towns which had enacted statutes of banishment invited or allowed their re-entry, but imposed new disabilities. Former contacts of scholars, physicians, and financial “court Jews” with the Gentile community faded. The period of the Jews’ medieval flourishing was over. The walls of the ghetto, though not yet physical, had risen.

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