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

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A Document Based Question (DBQ)
World History

STUDENT GUIDE SHEET

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

Directions: In the mid-14th century the plague spread around the world from China to Europe. Known today as the Black Death, it was responsible for the deaths of approximately one-third of the population of Europe and the Middle East. How people responded to this calamity seems to have been influenced by their religion and world-view. This document based exercise asks you to determine how Christian and Muslim responses to the Black Death differed.

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We suggest you proceed in the following way:

1. Read the Background Essay. It gives an overview of the Black Death, Christianity, and Islam.
2. Quickly skim through the documents to get a sense of what they are about.
3. Read the documents slowly. For each, use the margins or a Document Analysis Sheet to record:
 - a. What or who is the source? Is it primary or secondary?
 - b. What is the main idea (or ideas) in the document?
4. Organize the documents into analytical categories. These categories might be: general context, causes and explanations, and responses by the living. Or, you may want to simply have two categories, Muslim responses and Christian responses.
5. Using evidence from the documents, generalize as to just how different Christian and Muslim responses were from each other.

The Documents:

- Document 1: Paths of the Black Death (map)
- Document 2: Statistics of the Dead (chart)
- Document 3: Descriptions from Italy and Syria
- Document 4: The Role of God
- Document 5: Non-religious Causes and Preventions
- Document 6: William Dene, “The people ... became more depraved”
- Document 7: Anti-Semitism
- Document 8: The Pope Responds
- Document 9: Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa*
- Document 10: Michael Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East*

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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, but wherever it struck it brought death. In 1346 European traders began to hear reports about earthquakes, floods, locusts, famine, and plague in faraway China. Little did they know then that the plague they were hearing about would follow the same trade routes to the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe that they themselves used. In five short years, the plague killed between 25 and 45% of the populations it encountered. It was 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

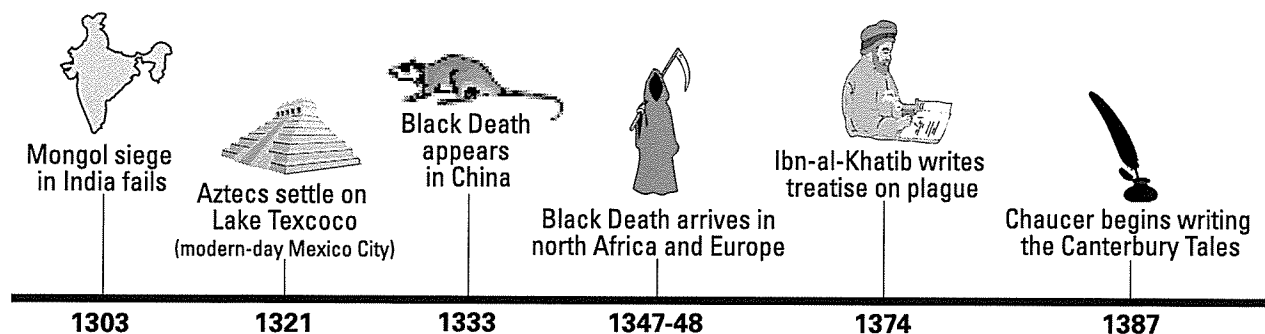
these bacteria strains to become unstable in the fleas. If this occurs, the fleas then infect the rats. When the rats die, the fleas will fly to another host. If that new host is human, a plague epidemic will erupt.

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 heartbeat. The infected person would then develop inflamed swellings filled with pus referred to as “buboes.” 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 an agonizing death.

The History of the Plague

The 14th century was not the first time plague had spread across parts of the world, but expanded trading networks assured that the Black Death would be more deadly. Even when it had mostly played itself out in 1351, it continued to strike the world in a series of waves, revisiting Europe into the 18th century and Asia and Africa into the 20th 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



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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.



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

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 poor and weak, 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. 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 seventh 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.)

Although Mohammed's teachings about how people should treat each other were similar to Christ's, the underlying duty of all Muslims (followers of Islam) was to submit themselves 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. There he continued his teachings and wrote the **Koran**, the book containing Islam's fundamental beliefs, as God had directed

him to do. 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 14th 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 10 documents to analyze. The first three provide context. The remainder provide insights into Christian and Muslim beliefs and behavior regarding the plague. Your job is to analyze each document thoroughly and then use that information to answer the following question: *The Black Death: How different were Christian and Muslim responses?*

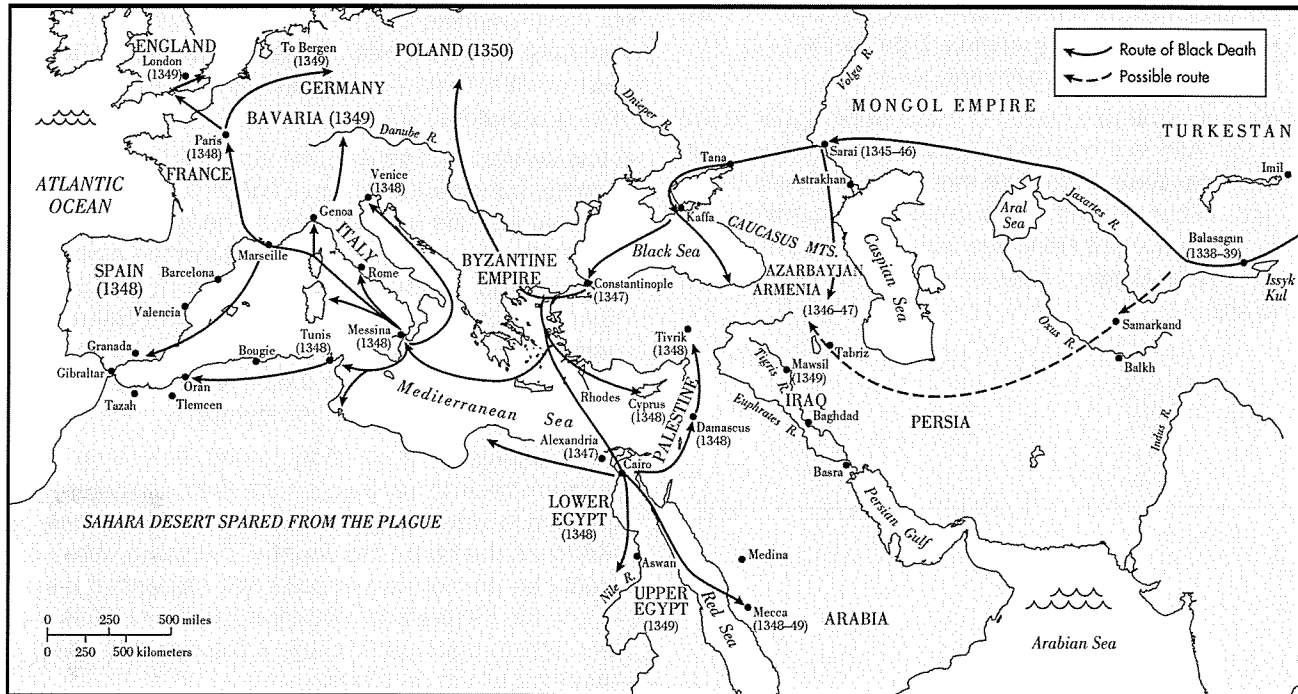
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Document 1



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

Paths of the Black Death



Document 2

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 3

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.

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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 4

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.

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 5

Source: Varied, including Michael Dols and Philip Ziegler.

Causes of the Black Death: Non-Religious Explanations

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

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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 6

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 7

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.

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Document 8

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.

Note: This writing was one of the official documents issued by the Pope called "papal bulls."

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Document 9

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 10

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.