**Attitudes toward Epidemics in the Bible**

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**Abstract**

Disease and pain are physiological phenomena, but they also possess social and cultural meanings, with different attitudes toward pain and diseases in different cultures. Using the genealogical method, this paper examines the cultural roots of attitudes toward epidemics, diseases, and the body as they appear in the biblical text, a foundational text in Western culture. Genealogy deals with the past, but its purpose is to understand and critique the current reality.

Epidemics in the Bible are perceived as collective punishment for sins, and are also mentioned as one of the punishments predicted for the “End of Days.” Over time, this biblical narrative was expressed in various secular contexts and was even used by the media during the spread of the Covid-19 virus. In the Bible, overcoming an epidemic – or plague – requires a religious act, as part of the general biblical conception that the body, its health, and sickness are related to religious acts. The purpose of bodily afflictions in the Bible is to purify the soul or to lead one to repent. Exploring the biblical narratives related to epidemics enables a renewed examination of values and attitudes on this topic, in Western culture in general, and in Judaism in particular.

**Key Words**

Plague as punishment, End of Days, Pain, Western Culture

**1. Introduction**

With the spread of the Covid-19 virus, we witnessed the financial, political, and social consequences of the pandemic. Alongside the health measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus, it was impossible to ignore the cultural aspect of attitudes toward the pandemic. One of the ways in which humanity copes with epidemics is by trying to give them meaning. From the beginning of history, people in various cultures tended to attribute significance to the relationship between their own behavior and natural disasters, if only to lend a sense of control over their unpredictable fate. Extreme circumstances give us the opportunity to cope with questions touching upon the meaning of life and to search for explanations of the events. Camus (1990) describes questions of this sort as a way of coping with existential absurdity. For him, the absurdity stems from the relationship between humanity and the world – between humanity’s need for rationality and the lack of rationality in the world.

Cultures are founded on socially-determined patterns of meaning, according to which people perceive, behave, and act. Cultures are conceptions about the world, thought systems that guide the initiation of acts (Geertz 1973). Attitudes toward the body, pain, and sickness have a cultural aspect as well. Disease and pain are physiological phenomena, but they also possess social and cultural meanings, with different attitudes toward pain and diseases in different cultures. (Zborovsky 1990). It is the culture that lends narrative meaning to diseases and offers the various metaphors that are used in the discourse related to them. These metaphors often stem from popular mythology (Sonntag 1980, 18). Foucault (1972) revealed the cultural discourse related to mental illness, and research on mental illness since is not disconnected from the cultural conversation (Castillo 1997). Culture is a learned set of values, beliefs, meanings, and laws that are passed down from generation to generation through particular forms of learning (Flaskerud 2000). It is our culture that creates the prisms through which we see and experience the world (Nir 2016).

Western press coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic tended, from its onset, to describe the goings-on as life on the brink of the Apocalypse. ‘Living on the brink of the Apocalypse’ is a foundational narrative in Western society that emerges in times of crisis (Lebovic 2020). I claim that this narrative, as well as other narratives connected to the concept of epidemics within the culture, are deeply rooted within Western culture. In this paper, I use the genealogical method to examine the cultural roots of the attitude toward epidemics, diseases, and the body in Western culture, primarily through the biblical text.

I will not present here an exhaustive genealogy of the cultural attitudes toward the pandemic, through which we could comprehend the current reality. Since many factors contributed to the history of Western culture, we would need a genealogy that traces processes along a more extended timeline. Furthermore, it may be impossible to present a neat process structure of this broad topic. In this paper, I will illuminate a number of select cultural forms from the distant cultural past regarding epidemics, while focusing on the biblical text as a foundational text. This type of study will not yield a causal explanation of the present; however, understanding the existence of these forms is instructional, and encourages critical thought of our cultural roots. Carl Gustav Jung (1987) notes that worldviews that were deeply rooted in religious experience are often mysteriously preserved also in secular experience. It is therefore worthwhile to understand these roots, even centuries later.

When dealing with the genealogy of someone or something, we tell a story of its past and its sources (Rosink 2004). This can help us understand and critique the present through a reinterpretation of this past, as culture is sometimes controlled by premises so deep they are usually only perceived by hindsight (Foucault 1977, 152). Adopting the genealogical method as a critical practice is based on the ideas of Nietzsche and Foucault. Nietzsche is considered the father of genealogy as a critical method, claiming that people ‘live historically,’ aware and conditioned by their past (Nehamas 1994, 270-272). Hoy (1994) presents Nietzsche as a genealogist who thinks that we will never be able to reach the world’s “secret springs” and will therefore never be able to gain a wide and perfect perspective of the phenomenon. While Nietzsche’s genealogy can create an empirical environment, it is not a dialectical or logical necessity. He rejects all claims about the true image of the world, claiming that the concept “true image of the world” is empty (Porush 1995, 128).

Nietzsche (2000) claims that the observation of our cultural past is, in and of itself, vital for us as individuals and as a society, “and here we find how necessary it is for a person… Observing the past, sometimes taking a third path, the critical one… Necessitate a person to have the strength, which is to be used from time to time, to break and melt the past so that he could live, and he achieves this by putting it on trial, examining it and harshly questioning it…” (Nietzsche 2000, 36). His genealogy is a hermeneutic strategy that demands precise attention to our historical footprints (Conway 1994, 321-328), a methodology applied and continued by Foucault (Deleuze 2006, 2).

As noted above, I apply the genealogical method primarily to the biblical text. Thought systems and cultural values are reflected in the religious doctrines of any given culture, and religion is a clear identity marker for a culture. Western Christian culture and religion were based on the holy texts of the Jews (Malchin 2003,44), and the Bible was perceived as a holy text in both religions. The Reformation placed the Jewish holy texts in the center of European identity (HaCohen 2006, 23; Eliav-Feldon 1997, 30). With these facts in mind, I will examine the attitude of the biblical text toward the body and disease, particularly to epidemics. Many factors impacted the attitude of Western cultural history toward epidemics and diseases. Our understanding of the cultural present should rely, among other things, on an understanding of our own cultural past, by delving into our culture’s foundational texts.

**2. Epidemics as Collective Punishment**

The Hebrew word for epidemic, *magefa*, comes from *negef* (meaning ‘affliction’), and implies severe illness or physical injury. In its *piel* form, *nigaf* means one who has lost a battle or has been beaten by an enemy. This connection between the various meanings associated with the root *ngf* leads to the notion that disease is a form of punishment. The Bible often makes this explicit, citing several examples to reinforce this connection.

Korah questioned Aaron’s exclusive rights to the high priesthood, leading a rebellion aimed at replacing him. They were punished with an epidemic: “The plague had already started among the people” (Num 17:12), which was ended by the presence of incense: “Aaron offered the incense and made atonement for them. He stood between the living and the dead, and the plague stopped. But 14,700 people died from the plague, in addition to those who had died because of Korah. Then Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance to the tent of meeting, for the plague had stopped” (Num 17:12-15).

David commanded Joab to count the Israelites, despite the prohibition against such as census (2Sam 24, 1-11). Gad the Seer told David to choose one of three forms of punishment. David chose a plague, explaining: “I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into human hands” (1Sam 24:14). After 70,00 perish, David is given an opportunity to repent: “Gad went to David and said to him, ‘Go up and build an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.’ So David … built an altar to the Lord there and sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. Then the Lord answered his prayer on behalf of the land, and the plague on Israel was stopped” (2Sam 24:18-25).

While the Israelites camped in the plains of Moab, before they entered the land of Canaan, many committed sexual offenses with Moabite and Midianite women, and compounded their transgression by also partaking in the ritual feasts and worship of the Moabite deity, Ba’al Peor: “While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. And the Lord’s anger burned against them” (Num 25:1-3); “They yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor and ate sacrifices offered to lifeless gods; they aroused the Lord’s anger by their wicked deeds, and a plague broke out among them” (Ps 106:28-29). These sins reached a climax when Zimri the son of Salu, leader of the tribe of Simeon, publicly lay with the Midianite woman Kozbi, while Moses and the Israelites looked on helplessly (Num 25:6). In response, God commanded Moses to execute the leaders who were found worshipping the foreign deity (Num 25:5), while an epidemic wiped out the remaining sinners: “They aroused the Lord’s anger by their wicked deeds, and a plague broke out among them” (Ps 106:29); “and those who died in the plague numbered 24,000” (Num 25:9). Aaron’s grandson Phineas, described as a zealot for God’s honor, ran Zimri and Kozbi through with a spear, and their deaths marked the end of the plague: “Phinehas stood up and intervened, and the plague was checked” (Ps 106:30). He was rewarded with the high priesthood: “Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites, [so that] I did not put an end to them in my zeal… Therefore…He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites” (Num 25:11-13).

For the Egyptians, the epidemics – or plagues – demonstrated that the Israelite God holds sway over foreign nations as well. God is presented as a universal deity, who punishes the Egyptians with plagues for not heeding the command to “Let my people go” (Ex 9:1). Among these plagues, two are physical diseases, boils and pestilence: “The hand of the LORD will bring a terrible plague on your livestock in the field—on your horses, donkeys and camels and on your cattle, sheep and goats” (Ex 9:3); “Festering boils will break out on people and animals throughout the land… and festering boils broke out on people and animals. The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils that were on them and on all the Egyptians” (Ex 9:9-11).

During Samuel’s time as leader, one war ended with the Philistines capturing the Ark of the Covenant: “After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then they carried the ark into Dagon’s temple and set it beside Dagon” (1Sam 5:1-2). The Philistines soon realized that the ark caused widespread plague, and “death had filled the city with panic” (1Sam 5:11). The ark was transferred to other Philistines cities, each of which then suffered plague; “Those who did not die were afflicted with tumors, and the outcry of the city went up to heaven” (1Sam 5:12).

**3. Disease: Marking and Distancing Individuals**

The biblical text often connects the behavior of an individual or community to the diseases or epidemics that they suffer. Sometimes these are presented as collective punishment, while other instances relate to the individual. Physical suffering comes in response to negative behavior, whereas healing is described as reward and recompense: “If you listen carefully to the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, who heals you” (Ex 15:26). The God of the Bible plays a double role: On the one hand, he punishes and afflicts, while on the other hand, he heals (Hulse 1975, 87-105). Miriam is one example of this: “Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite” (Num 12:1), resulting in her being afflicted with *tzara’at* (biblical leprosy). Moses prays for her health, and God concedes, healing Miriam.

Lockdowns and quarantines appear in the Bible as well. Miriam was distanced from society, spending a week beyond the borders of the Israelite camp (Num 12:14-15). Similarly, king Uzziah was also afflicted with *tzara’at*. Though described as one who “did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father Amaziah had done” (2Chr 26:4), “the high places, however, were not removed; the people continued to offer sacrifices and burn incense there” (2Kgs 15:4). The king and his household were loyal to God, at least regarding the official rituals carried out in the Temple, still, popular rites and rituals abound. The book of Kings presents Uzziah’s illness as fact, lacking any religious overtones, but Chronicles adds some details regarding his affliction: “But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the Lord his God, and entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense… While he was raging at the priests in their presence before the incense altar in the Lord’s temple, leprosy broke out on his forehead… the Lord had afflicted him… King Uzziah had leprosy until the day he died. He lived in a separate house...” (2Chr 26:15-21). His financial and political successes led him to also claim the right to carry out the Temple rituals, an act reserved for the Temple priests. The biblical account connects Uzziah’s sin with his subsequent *tzara’at*. This *tzara’at* was incurable, remaining on his forehead forever, as a mark of Cain.

In his anger, God can “also bring on you every kind of sickness and disaster not recorded in this Book of the Law, until you are destroyed” (Deut 28:61); like Uzziah, others with *tzara’at*  will also be distanced from society: “As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp” (Lev 13:46). Conversely, if God wishes, he will “keep you free from every disease. He will not inflict on you the horrible diseases you knew in Egypt, but he will inflict them on all who hate you” (Deut 7:15); and he can also “take away sickness from among you” (Ex 23:25).

*Tzara’at*, like other dermatological diseases in the Bible, was deeply connected to impurity and strict quarantine. Distancing the diseased person served to prevent the spread of the disease; however, since the disease was perceived to be a punishment, this distancing also marked the individual with the socially negative mark of impurity. The biblical text presents every physical ailment as a divine sign, and therefore, quarantine and distancing also included a cultural aspect expressed through the society’s attitude toward the ill, an issue well-known from the Middle Ages (Rawcliffe 1995, 14-17). This idea of impurity also appears in the present-day metaphorical discourse on sexual diseases (Sonntag 1980, 38).

Marking and separating those who will be smitten from those who will not is prominent in Egypt’s final plague, the killing of the firstborn. According to the book of Exodus, God commands Moses to tell the Israelites about the upcoming Paschal sacrifice: “The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt” (Ex 12:13).

**4. Physical Affliction as a Test**

Disease, in the Bible, is perceived as punishment. Therefore, Job, who “was blameless and upright,” who “feared God and shunned evil” could not comprehend why he was ill. Disease and pain were not taken to be natural phenomena, leading Job to search for the causational relationship to his behavior. However, bodily affliction and suffering do not appear in the Bible only within the context of punishment; they may also be a form of divine test. God grants Satan permission to test Job. Satan believes that if Job were to suffer bodily disease, Job would then curse God: “stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face” (Job 1:11). God agrees to the challenge: “Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life” (Job 2:6). Satan then afflicts Job with boils, from head to toe: “So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head” (Job 2:7). The narrator describes a man who is half-dead, whose body no longer functions properly, and whom his wife advises to curse God and die.

Job refuses to accept that his suffering attests to a prior sin, as he is certain that he had not sinned. He searches for a cause that would explain his suffering, given the assumption that suffering and pain serve as punishment, but cannot find one. He asks God: “Do not declare me guilty, but tell me what charges you have against me” (Job 10:2). Job views his circumstances as arbitrary acts of God, who afflicts him with no apparent reason. Job is faced with a world that seems irrational and unethical (Weiss 1987, 390).

This approach does not connect suffering to sin; rather, it suggests that suffering may be God’s way of testing the righteous (such as Abraham and Job). Most biblical descriptions of joy are presented as recompense to the righteous, while descriptions of suffering and illness appear in the context of punishment or test – with a causational relationship. Few biblical descriptions view suffering as an integral part of life, unrelated to a person’s behavior. However, Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) takes a different approach. He advises us to be content with our lot, and not question the divine rule or its motives: “When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe the labor that is done on earth… then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all their efforts to search it out, no one can discover its meaning. Even if the wise claim they know, they cannot really comprehend it” (Ecc 8:16-17).

**5. Attitudes toward Pain and the Body**

Within any given culture, attitudes toward disease and pain are also related to the concept of body. Some of the most important Western philosophers, from antiquity until today, dealt with the body-mind problem: are the body and mind two separate entities that merely coexist, or is this perception merely a distortion of reality, dictated by man’s limited perception? (Leibowitz 1995). The Bible is the first to give mankind the ability to control their bodies, as part of a general perception that differentiates people from nature. While the polytheist lives in harmony with his surroundings, the biblical text presents a complete revolution within the religions of the ancient Near East (Muffs 2006). Nature becomes the object of a person’s desire (Wright 1978, 39), while humanity is separated from nature throughout the entire biblical narrative (Nir 2016). For example, God says to Cain: “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it” (Gen 4:7). This verse points out a person’s free will, or the ability to overcome one’s natural inclinations.

The Torah commandments were given to living people, with no distinction between their physical and psychical functions – “there are no *mitzvot* [commandments] for a person’s soul, as soul” (Leibowitz 1995, 37). We may claim that the biblical approach is monistic, and recognizes the psycho-physical unity, or we can posit that this is a materialistic approach that only recognizes the body with no distinction between physical and psychical realities, similar to pre-Socratic Greek philosophies (ibid 37). We can also find a few biblical examples of dualism, such as in Isaiah’s prophecy “both soul and body” (Isa 10:18), or in Psalms, “My soul thirsts for You; My flesh longs for You” (Ps 63:2). Ecclesiastes explicitly refers to the eternal soul, serving as testimony to ideational dualism (Rosen-Zvi 2012): “And the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (Ecc 12:7). However, Ecclesiastes is a later book belonging to the Second Temple period, and as such, was influenced by the dualistic Greek philosophy. These influences also penetrated the Book of Maccabees, which combines biblical and Greek concepts (Rosen-Zvi 2012).

Members of the sect that lived in Qumran preferred to do “what God wanted” over “what their own souls wanted” (Dihle 1982, 77-78). In post-biblical literature, this was the first attempt to independently define free will in the sense of controlling one’s physical and psychical natures. The Qumran literature is dualistic in many aspects, but still does not distinguish between body and soul nor identify evil with physicality, a concept developed in Pauline Christianity. Christian asceticism brought people’s control over their bodies to a high level of separation between a person and their body (Kleinberg 2000). This model was not clearly precedented in Christian holy writ, while Judaism rejected asceticism.

As noted above, the biblical approach to the body presents a primarily materialistic perception that recognizes the body without distinction between its physical and mental aspects (Leibowitz 1995, 38). The body holds a central place in Judaism, as opposed to Christianity, and therefore disease is perceived as threatening. This religious approach is found at the roots of Jewish culture, one that sanctifies the body and views pain and illness as unnatural phenomena, indicative of punishment or divine test. Diseases in the Bible are described as afflictions, punishment, and shame: “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Isa 53:3). Even ‘natural’ birthing pains are described, in the Eden story, as punishment. The woman is cursed with punishments relating to the bodily pain that accompanies her life cycle: “I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Gen 3:16).

**6. Epilogue: From Biblical Epidemics to Narratives in Western Culture**

Disease and pain are physiological phenomena that also possess social and cultural meaning. Different cultures have different stances toward pain and diseases. Zborovsky’s (1990) article describes Jews and Italians as particularly sensitive to pain as compared with other groups, with the Jews even using the term “torment.” As noted above, it is a culture that lends narrative meaning to diseases and supplies the various metaphors employed in discourse related to diseases.

The Bible, as discussed above, describes epidemics as collective punishment for transgressions. Epidemics are also mentioned as anticipated punishment during the “End of Days,” for all nations who will not come and worship at God’s Temple: “This is the plague with which the Lord will strike all the nations that fought against Jerusalem: Their flesh will rot while they are still standing on their feet, their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongues will rot in their mouths” (Zech 14:12). This prophecy emphasizes the foundational End of Days narrative. Israelite prophets were deeply concerned with the End of Days, which were perceived to be dependent upon the conduct of the nation and the community. Over time, this biblical narrative took on various secular expressions and even appeared in the media coverage of the Covid-19 epidemic (Lebovic 2020). The general sense of Apocalypse rises mainly during times of crisis, but is based on deep cultural structures that are entrenched in Western culture.

Time, according to Western Judeo-Christian thought, has a beginning: “In the beginning…” (Gen 1:1); and it also has an end, “In the last days…” (Isa 2:2). The prophets assure us that we have a decisive influence over this end. The End of Days is not predetermined: “If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly…then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors forever and ever” (Jer 7: 5-7). This belief in the End of Days found its way into Christianity primarily through the apocalyptic Book of Revelation. This book was written under the influence of Daniel’s apocalyptic visions, “I am going to tell you what will happen later in the time of wrath, because the vision concerns the appointed time of the end” (Dan 8:19). These visions became the foundation of perception of history in Western culture (Flusser 2009, 131-132; Dan 2000, 38).

Epidemics are often described in the Bible as collective punishment, but disease and physical ailments that afflict individuals in biblical narrative can also be a form of divine test, where healing is described as recompense and reward. A person’s religious actions prevent disease, while transgressions cause it. God afflicts as he wishes and heals as he wishes: “The Lord will keep you free from every disease” (Deut 7:15); if he wishes, God will punish by afflicting an incurable disease (Lev 13:46).

Media coverage of the most recent epidemic often used the phrase “to beat the epidemic.” In the Bible, eradicating an epidemic is accomplished through religious acts: Phineas kills the sinners (Ps 106:30); David erects an altar (2Sam 24:18). One of the Torah commandments related to the prevention of epidemics is the obligation to give a yearly donation of half a shekel to the Temple: “When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each one must pay the Lord a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them. Each one who crosses over to those already counted is to give a half shekel” (Ex 30:12-13).

The Bible presents the general perception of the body, its health and illness, as related to religious acts. Physical torment, in the Bible, helps purify the soul or leads to repentance. When Jonah reaches Nineveh and prophecies its destruction, the king commands his people to fast. They are saved; physical torment lead to salvation. “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish” (Jon 3:7-9). The book of Jonah is traditionally read during the afternoon services on the Day of Repentance, given its discussion of tormenting the body as well as the power of repentance to overturn God’s evil decree.

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