**The Attitude toward Epidemics in the Bible**

**Dr. Bina Nir**

**Abstract**

Disease and pain are physiological phenomena, but they acquire social and cultural meaning. Different cultures have different attitudes toward pain and diseases. Using the genealogical method, this paper examines the cultural roots of attitude 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 it aspires 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 received various secular expressions and was even used by the media during the spread of the Covid-19 virus. In the Bible, eradicating an epidemic – or plague – requires a religious act. The Bible presents a general 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. Exposing 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**

As we witnessed the spread of the Covid-19 virus, we also saw the financial, political, and social consequences of the epidemic. Beyond the health measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus, one could not ignore the cultural aspect of attitudes toward the epidemic. One of the ways in which humanity copes with epidemics is by trying to give them meaning. From our early ancestors on, 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. In extreme cases, we are given the opportunity to cope with questions touching upon the meaning of life and to search for explanations of the events. Questions of this sort are described in Camus (1990) as a way of coping with existential absurdity. For him, the absurdity stems from the relationship between man and the world – between man’s need for rationality and the lack of rationality in the world.

 Cultures are based 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. Sickness and pain are physiological phenomena; however, they acquire social and cultural meaning. Different cultures show differing attitudes toward pain and diseases (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) exposed the cultural discourse related to mental illnesses, and therefore, modern research on mental illness 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 learning forms (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 epidemic 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 wish to 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.

 In this paper, I will not present a broad and exhaustive genealogy of the cultural attitude toward the epidemic, through which we could comprehend the current reality, as many and various factors operate within the history of Western culture. For this, we would need a genealogy that traces processes along a more extended timeline. Furthermore, it may not be possible to present a neat and firm process structure regarding this broad topic. Therefore I wish, in this paper, to expose, illuminate, and present 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 causational relationship to the present, but understanding the existence of these forms is instructional, and encourages critical thought of our cultural roots. When weltanschauungs are deeply rooted in the religious experience, as Carl Gustav Jung (1987) posits, they often have a hidden ability to also be preserved in the secular experience over time – and therefore we must understand these roots even centuries later.

 When we deal with the genealogy of someone or something, we tell a story of its past and its sources (Rosink 2004). Genealogy deals with the past, but it aims to understand and critique the present through a reinterpretation of the past. Culture is occasionally 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, while Foucault applied and continued his work (Deleuze 2006,2). People, according to Nietzsche, live historically – they are 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 gain a wide and perfect perspective of the phenomenon. Nietzsche’s genealogy can create an empirical environment, but not a dialectical or logical necessity. Nietzsche rejects the very argument about the true image of the world, claiming that the term “true image of the world” is unfounded (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). Nietzsche’s genealogy is a hermeneutic strategy that demands precise attention to our historical footprints (Conway 1994, 321-328).

 As noted above, the genealogy will be applied primarily to the biblical text. Thought systems and cultural values are reflected in the religious doctrines of any given culture. 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), where 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). Therefore, in this paper, we will examine the attitude of the biblical text to the body and to disease, particularly to epidemics. Many and various factors impacted the attitude of Western cultural history toward epidemics and diseases. Our understanding of the cultural present should rely, among others, also on an understanding of our own cultural past, by delving into our culture’s foundational texts.