

*The Black Death, A Personal History* reveals how the most fundamental beliefs and practices of the average person were put into question by the devastation caused by The Black Death. From the assumptions of the nature of God to the manner in which the average person acts in life and death were put into question and confusion. The character Master John carries these fundamental beliefs into the depths of his heart and displays them truly in his actions. Ultimately, Master John is left disoriented by what he experiences from The Black Death and the changes that it causes. His life represents the exemplar of *a way to be* and, his death, the death of that way.

Master John is described in contrast to his predecessor who hired him, Robert Shephard. Shepherd is cunning and caring for practical matters over principles. Master John on the other adheres to principle at the cost of his own physical, or in any way, practical benefit. Master John only wishes to *serve the will of God*: “Time and again John had disappointed his friends and sponsors by refusing to offer flattering words or a bribe to gain promotion, or by turning down some toilsome office that did not directly serve God. His principles had brought him a harsh life with few comforts...”<sup>1</sup> For these reasons, we can conclude that Master John lives according to his beliefs.

The Black Death throws into question the manner and ideas in which people die. This is contrasted in the death of William Wodebite and, one of the first to die from the plague in Walsham, John Chapman. William Wodebite dies in the *standard ritualistic manner*. Wodebite, with some difficulty, confesses of his sins and takes the body and blood of Christ. “It was agreed with satisfaction that William died a good death.”<sup>2</sup> At that time there was a significant emphasis on the last hours of life, viewing it as a battle for the soul between good and evil. Wodebite, on the other hand, dies without confessing and in seemingly complete rejection of the entire ritual. “Agnes was in a state of despair at her husband’s inability to confess, and at his sacrilegious violence in the face of death and Master John.”<sup>3</sup> This was common in which people were dying from the Black Death. “Almost all the victims of the pestilence that he and his colleagues had so far ministered to had been incapable of responding to the questions put to them, and unable to confess adequately or to express sufficient contrition.”<sup>4</sup> The examples demonstrated above were not even the worst. Many people had been abandoned by their families and left to die alone without a priest or even a candle. Many children had died. This led to the people questioning God's nature. “...his bewildered parishioners demanded answers to their urgent questions: Why is God scourging us with this cruel torment, and poisoning and destroying the blameless along with the sinful? What have we done to deserve such cruelty? Why does he permit the good to die and the evil to live? Why does God kill innocent children, even infants who have had no chance to sin? For Master John, providing satisfactory answers was much more challenging than

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<sup>1</sup> John Hatcher, *The Black Death A Personal History*, 15

<sup>2</sup> John Hatcher, *The Black Death A Personal History*, 30

<sup>3</sup> John Hatcher, *The Black Death A Personal History*, 179

<sup>4</sup> John Hatcher, *The Black Death A Personal History*, 179

ministering to the contagious on their deathbeds in plague-ridden houses.”<sup>5</sup> This illustrates how there is a conflict and confusion in Master John and his followers in the nature of God and death.

The clergy’s answer to the question of, “why is this happening?”, was simply that it was God punishing sinners. However, this answer did not suffice even for Master John and he is thrown into confusion.

...Master John hesitated to follow the example of other priests by berating parishioners with accusations that the evil in the world was now many times greater than it had been in the time of Noah. Instead he would say, “As the Bible tells us, God drowned the whole world in the time of Noah because the wickedness of men was great on the earth, and all the thought of their heart was bent upon evil. But I do not know what is the true answer today, and it is not for me or you to interpret the mysterious will of a kind and forgiving God.” And he encouraged them to consider the offense caused to God by the lechery, greed, hypocrisy, and frivolity which abounded in their own village, even in the midst of death.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, Master John finds his faith again and survives the plague. However, the results of the plague in the minds of people changes their faith and image of God.

Master John’s dealings with a number of ardently pious individuals and groups within his parish were becoming a daily burden to him rather than a source of delight and fulfillment. He was continually pestered by parishioners who demanded more and more explanation of the will of God, and more and more explication of the word of God, all of which was far beyond what was proper for them to be told, and sometimes far beyond John’s wit to tell. Such folk would not be satisfied unless they were offered frequent sermons and innumerable Masses, including those containing the latest version of any rites they had happened to hear about. They were no longer content to follow the methods of teaching that he had used all his life, such as looking in awe at rituals and learning to recite by heart. Now they had seemingly inexhaustible appetites for explanation and participation.<sup>7</sup>

This attempt at trying to understand God’s will and nature is a clear indication of how the plague changed people's image of God.

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<sup>5</sup> John Hatcher, *The Black Death A Personal History*, 192

<sup>6</sup> John Hatcher, *The Black Death A Personal History*, 193

<sup>7</sup> John Hatcher, *The Black Death A Personal History*, 292

Master John dies in a good manner, in the old way.

Mercifully, he was rewarded for his holy life with a good death. He lived long enough to be ably confessed by the two priests who rushed to his side, and he passed away surrounded by members of his devoted flock in the house of the Lord, while clutching the Lord's body and having drunk his blood. Master John's soul was protected and speeded to salvation by their prayers, on this day and for many years thereafter.<sup>8</sup>

Master John's life is represented by a way of life of piousness and with his death that way dies.

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<sup>8</sup> John Hatcher, *The Black Death A Personal History*, 294