The disease began, it is said, in Ethiopia beyond

**Plague in Athens by Thucydides**

**Thucydides, an Athenian historian, fought in the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. After being exiled by the Athenians following a particularly costly defeat, Thucydides spent the next 20 years writing a history of the war. This excerpt from his History describes an outbreak of an unidentified disease that caused a deadly plague in Athens in 430 B.C., at the beginning of the war.**

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| **Annotations** |
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Egypt, and then descended into Egypt and

Libya and spread over the greater part of the King’s

territory. Then it suddenly fell upon the city of

Athens, and attacked first the inhabitants.

For I had the disease myself and saw others sick of it.

Suddenly and while in good health, men were seized first with intense heat of the head, and redness and inflammation of the eyes, and the parts inside the mouth, both the throat and the tongue, immediately became blood-red and exhaled an unnatural and fetid breath. In the next stage sneezing and hoarseness came on, and in a short time the disorder descended to the chest, attended by severe coughing. And when it settled in the stomach, that was upset, and vomits of bile of every kind named by physicians ensued, these also attended by great distress; and in most cases ineffectual retching followed producing violent convulsions, which sometimes abated [lessened] directly, sometimes not until long afterwards. . . .

They were also beset by restlessness and sleeplessness which never abated. And the body was not wasted while the disease was at its height, but resisted surprisingly the ravages of the disease, so that when the patients died, as most of them did on the seventh or ninth day from the internal heat, they still had some strength left; or, if they passed the crisis, the disease went down into the bowels, producing there a violent ulceration, and at the

same time an acute diarrhea set in, so that in this

later stage most of them perished through weakness

caused by it. . . . And the most dreadful thing about

the whole malady was not only the despondency of

the victims, when they once became aware that they

were sick, for their minds straightway yielded to

despair and they gave themselves up for lost instead

of resisting, but also the fact that they became infected by nursing one another and died like sheep. .

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| **Annotations** |
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Bodies of dying men lay one upon another, and

half-dead people rolled about in the streets and, in

their longing for water, near all the fountains. The

temples, too, in which they had housed themselves

were full of the corpses of those who had

died in them; for the calamity which weighed upon

them was so overpowering that men, not knowing

what was to become of them, became careless of all

law, sacred as well as profane. . . . And many resorted

to shameless modes of burial because so many

members of their households had already died that

they lacked the proper funeral materials. Resorting

to other people’s pyres, some, anticipating those

who had raised them, would put on their own dead

and kindle the fire; others would throw the body

they were carrying upon one which was already

burning and go away.

And the great promiscuity, which also in other kinds was used in the city, began at first from this disease. For that which a man before would dissemble and not acknowledge voluptuousness [sexual attraction] , he dare now do freely, seeing before his eyes such quick revolution, of the rich dying and men worth nothing inheriting their estates. They they justified a speedy fruition of their goods even for their pleasure, as men that thought they held their lives but by the day. As for pains, no man was forward in any action of honor to take any be cause they thought it uncertain whether they should die or not before they achieved it. But what any man knew to be delightful and to be profitable to pleasure, that was made both profit able and honorable. Neither the fear of the gods nor laws of men awed any man, not the former because they concluded it was alike to worship or not worship from seeing that alike they all perished, nor the latter because no man expected that lives would last till he received punishment of his crimes by judgment. But they thought there was now over their heads some far greater judgment decreed against them before which fell, they thought to enjoy some little part of their lives.