The Demonized Jew in Medieval Christendom

Jessica De Luca

Much ink has been spilled over the term “antisemitism,” yet it still remains rather ambiguous. What one can say for certain is it has transformed from anti-Judaism, the “opposition to Jewish religious tenets and doctrines,”¹ into an “unusual kind of hostility” — one that is most often described as “irrational.”² Evidence of anti-Jewish thought can be traced back to Christianity’s earliest history, and is clearly indicated in the New Testament. Although modern scholars argue that the texts of the New Testament are not “anti-Jewish,” these texts have nonetheless have fostered anti-Jewish attitudes among many Christians over the centuries.³ As believers of Christ began to evolve from a Jewish-sect into their own distinct religion, the “parting of ways”⁴ between Christianity and Judaism often contained a “them versus us” mentality; a mentality that opposed Judaism on the grounds of faith. The enmity demonstrated by Christians⁵ toward Jews, however, began to shift in the Middle Ages. Many scholars argue that the first sign of the irrational hatred that is antisemitism is found in the Medieval conception of the Jew.

In this essay, I survey some of this scholarly literature, with the intent of showing that antisemitism, beginning in the Middle Ages, is grounded in the belief that the Jew is an evil creature, a faithful partner to the devil. The idea of the diabolic Jew began to invade Christian thought in the twelfth century. In his book The Devil and the Jews, historian Joshua Trachtenberg describes the Medieval notion of the Jew as a distinctly evil creature: “Not a human being but a

⁵ Please note, the use of the term “Christians” does not refer to all Christians throughout the Middle Ages. Opinions of Christians regarding the Jews varied throughout Europe and were influenced by geographical and circumstantial factors. The opinions also differed between all levels of the Christian hierarchy, including both clerical and lay persons.
demonic, a diabolic beast fighting the forces of truth and salvation with Satan’s weapons, was the Jew as Medieval Europe saw him.” The degradation of the Jews into a wretched species, unworthy of a human title, had serious implications for the Jewish people. The Jews of Medieval Europe were victims of groundless accusations and conspiracies including blood libel, host desecration, and poisoning. Many Christians accepted the irrational accusations on the belief that the Jew was an intimate of the devil, which had been instilled by a variety of forms including art, literature, drama, and sermons. The antisemitic claims were devastating for the Jewish people of Medieval Europe as Christian vengeance took the form of forced conversion, expulsion, imprisonment, and even death.

**From the Nonrational to the Irrational**

The apparent supersession of Judaism by Christianity left feelings of insecurity among Christians. Knowing the majority of Jews at the time of Jesus had rejected his resurrection and his messiahship altogether, some Christians began to doubt their own beliefs. “To protect their faith, Christians not only had to develop their own expression of it, they had to explain why most Jews had not believed.” The feelings of insecurity and doubt triggered the necessity for Christians to condemn Judaism. Arguments against Jewish disbelief in Christ can be found in some of the earliest Christian sources, including the four canonical gospels. Comparing the Gospel of Mark, the earliest gospel, to that of John, the latest, one can clearly see the change in tone and definition of the Jews as insecurity and doubt increased. In Mark’s Gospel, the enemies of Christ are the devil, the Romans, and distinct Jewish groups including the Pharisees, the Herodians, the Sadducees, chief priests, and Jewish scribes. In the gospel of John, there is no distinction made. Instead, “the Jews,” act collectively as the enemy of Christ. Moreover and most importantly, John’s Gospel describes “the Jews” and the devil as intimate partners: “You [the Jews] are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires.” (John 8:44)

---

7 Langmuir, 103.
Written over 30 years after Mark, the author of the Gospel of John is believed to have been writing for a community forced out of the synagogue. For this reason, the Jews in John’s Gospel are so severely described as “other.” With the detachment from Judaism, more and more Christians tried to persuade non-Jews to accept the faith and “had to explain why most Jews rejected it.” Thus, John’s “nonrational argument,” making the Jew a demonic figure, was a deliberate delegitimization of Judaism, suggesting the Jewish refusal of the call of Jesus “because they were immoral.” John’s anti-Jewish rhetoric speaks to the insecurities of his community and does not suggest this hatred is “truth for all time.” Yet, the negative and inhumane depictions of Jews in his Gospel and other New Testament sources acted as the foundation of Christian nonrational claims.

The nonrational arguments of the early Church, however, are not examples of antisemitism. Medieval historian Gavin I. Langmuir argues that nonrational anti-Judaism like that found in the Gospel of John, was not used to “condemn Jews for any conduct other than their disbelief in Christianity or maintenance of Judaism.” In the Middle Ages, however, the transformation from nonrational, focusing solely on Jewish disbelief, to irrational hatred occurred when new challenges were made against central Christian beliefs. Christian doubts were reinforced by the “normality and humanity of contemporary Jews, who lived in the midst of an apparently triumphant Christendom yet still did not believe.” Because uncertainties left them ill at ease, Christians were inclined to believe any charges that protected their faith, including irrational fantasies of the disbelieving Jews. “More and more people came to believe that Jews

---

10 Langmuir, 103.
11 Ibid, 104.
12 Tanzer, 115.
14 Ibid, 132.
15 Ibid, 133.
engaged in secret, though physically observable, conduct whose inhumanity demonstrated their cosmic evil and confirmed threatened Christian beliefs.”\(^{16}\)

The most prevalent and equally disturbing concept of the Jew in the Medieval period was the irrational association of the Jew to the devil. Beginning in the twelfth century, European intellectuals began to use philosophical reason to claim Christianity's supremacy. Since the Jews would not agree with Christianity's "obvious" claims, Jews were demonized; Christians were convinced they had to be stubborn intimates of the devil. An example of this is seen in what can be argued as the “richest polemical treatise against the Jews:” \textit{Against the Inveterate Stubbornness of the Jew} (ca. 1144). In this work, Peter the Venerable claims that Jewish disbelief in Christ is on account of their inability to reason. “[Peter] proclaimed that Jews were not rational human beings but animals who had lost the power of reasoning… Peter was impelled to assert that Jews were neither spiritual or rational, perhaps not human.”\(^{17}\) If the Jew was not human, what sort of creature was he? Through the depictions of Jews in popular media, one can argue that the Jews were conceived as “horrifying creatures of the Devil.”\(^{18}\)

\textbf{From Arts to Accusations}

During the Medieval period, the demonic dimension of antisemitism was first evident in the medium of art. This is best exemplified by the depiction of Christian supremacy over Judaism through the symbols of Ecclesia and Synagoga.\(^{19}\) Ecclesia, representing the Church, was “depicted as a proud victorious woman,”\(^{20}\) whereas Synagoga, a representation of Judaism, was “depicted as a blindfolded woman bearing a broken sceptre.” The images of the two women were widespread across Europe and “appear on ivory tablets, in stained-glass windows, on church

\(^{16}\) Ibid, 133.
\(^{17}\) Ibid, 132.
\(^{20}\) Ibid, 149.
implements, in manuscript miniatures, and in monumental statuary.”

The distinctiveness of the two women was grounded in anti-Judaic theology. In some cases, Synagoga was portrayed as the murdered of Christ, holding instruments of Christ’s death in her hand, or more explicitly, thrusting a spear through a sacrificial lamb (Figure 1). But even Synagoga could not escape the devil. From as early as 1197, artists began to depict her in association with Satan. In these portrayals, “the devil in the form of a serpent coils itself around Synagoga’s head, covering her eyes …[or] shoots an arrow into Synagoga’s eye” (Figure 2). In either case, the devil is the reason for her “blindness,” restraining her from seeing the truth of the Christian message, leaving her eternally damned. Furthermore, the association of Synagoga with the devil was emphasized by Biblical texts that highlight the Jew being a prisoner of Satan: “Thus, in the Lamentations of Jeremiah, which played such an important part in the origin of the figure Synagoga, the grieving Queen of Zion, the ancestress of Synagoga, appears and bewails the fact that her children have been seized by devils.” The representation of Judaism as a blind and damned faith, whose members have succumbed to the devil, triggered conspiracies of Jewish evil doings.

By the end of the twelfth century, the demonization of Judaism had made its way into literature. The best-known literary accounts of the Devil-Jew alliance are those in the legends of Theophilus. The legend of Theophilus can be found in every language and literary form, with all accounts agreeing on “the essential point: the intimate relations joining devil and Jews.” Medieval Spanish literature from the early thirteenth century maintains the legend in several works, including Berceo’s Milagros (miracle 25) and Alfonso’s Cantigas (song 3).

---

22 Ibid, 97-98.
23 Ibid, 99.
24 Ibid, 99-100.
25 Ibid, 130.
27 Trachtenberg, 23.
28 Mann, 65.
describes the Jew as knowledgeable in evil deeds and spells, schooled by none other than Beelzubub himself.²⁹

The depiction of Jews as intimates of the devil is also evident in Christian passion plays. In these plays, the Jew is often seen conspiring with the Devil to create a plan to kill Jesus. At times, these plays included a scene of Jesus hanging on the cross as “the Jews whirl in a dance of abandon and joy, mocking their victim and exulting in their achievement.”³⁰ The portrayal of the demonic Jew is also seen in other plays, including those depicting the lives of the saints. “Time and again, the Jews are described in these plays as, ‘devils from Hell, enemies of the human race’.”³¹ The carnival plays, a new dramatic form of entertainment in the 1430s and 1440s also contained pieces that attacked the Jews and themes of Jewish demonization.³² In the German plays of Hans Folz, including “The Play of the Duke of Burgandy,” “The Carnival of the Antichrist,” and “Emperor Constantine,” antisemitic innuendo is applied to depict the Jews as evil magicians, “children of the Antichrist and enemies of the Christians.”³³

In addition to popular religious conceptions of the Jew in literature, drama, and art, theological sermons magnified “unselfconscious cultural notions that, by their frequent hearing and retelling in narrative context, became imprinted on the Medieval mind.”³⁴ In her book Devils, Women, and Jews, Joan Young Gregg accounts for why several sermon stories depict both women and Jews as demonic figures in the Middle Ages. She places a heavy importance on sermon stories since they were “told on the authority of recognized spiritual leaders as ‘true’ events, either historical or contemporary, which supposedly took place as narrated.”³⁵ Their assumed authenticity would have influenced Christian notions of the Jewish people. Examples of the relationship between Jew and devil are evident in the following sermon stories: “The Jew at the

²⁹ “Los Milagros de Nuestra Senora” in ibid, 65.
³⁰ Trachtenberg, 22.
³¹ Ibid, 23.
³² Po-Chia Hsia, 62.
³³ Ibid, 64.
³⁵ Ibid, 4.
Devil’s Council,” and “The Jew Who Would Be a Bishop.” In the first sermon, a Jew is saved from being a vessel of the devil by signing himself with the cross. The sermon implies that Jews are filled by demonic spirits and act accordingly — a danger and warning to all Christians. It also implies that Jews can only be saved by accepting Christianity. The second sermon story is about a Jewish convert to Christianity who writes his own books in a monastery in Cologne. Prohibited from continuing by the monks, the converted Jew leaves the monastery and continues his work. In the original tale, the Jew keeps his work in a secret hiding place, “underscoring the Medieval belief that Jews hid their religious writings because they contained anti-Christian diatribes and prescriptions for sorcery.”

Many Medieval folk ‘knew’ only the Jew created by church art; by the liturgy, sermon, and exemplum; [and] by such secular literature or folk narratives as included Jewish characters.” It is no wonder then that the demonized, inhumane Jew ingrained on the Christian mind acted as verification for the many irrational accusations of the Medieval period. The first account of such accusations is that of the case of blood libel against the Jews. “The term blood libel refers to the accusation that Jews were guilty of various kinds of atrocities, most especially the killing of Christians to use their blood to make unleavened bread eaten during Passover and for other rituals.” Christian blood was also said to have miraculous effects; it was the cure to diseases, wounds of circumcision, and Jewish male menstruation. Unsurprisingly, with the belief that Jews needed Christian blood came the charge of ritual murder. In the case of both the blood libel and the ritual murder, many Christians were unaware of Jewish religious and dietary customs, most notably their kosher laws, which render the claims against them irrational. In 1144, the first of many of such accusations arose when the body of a boy, William of Norwich, was found in the woods. The Jews were believed to have tortured and hung William, in a reenactment of the death of Jesus. The account of William’s death was preserved in the writing of the monk

---

38 Ibid, 173.
39 Efron, 152.
40 Ibid, 152.
Thomas of Monmouth. Thomas’ report includes the testimony of Theobald, a Jew who converted to Christianity and became a monk. Theobald’s famous testimony is that of an annual assembly of Jews in Spain, where a lot is cast to choose a specific country which is obliged to sacrifice a Christian. The sacrifice was said to be out of revenge for Christ’s death who left them “slaves in exile,” in addition to the necessity of shedding blood to obtain their freedom and return to their fatherland. Even though the account “is so obviously false that scholars have wondered whether Theobald is a product of Thomas’ imagination,” it had serious effects on Medieval Christians. It sparked the conviction that all Jews were conspirators — dangerous plotters for the destruction of Christendom.

Another notorious case of ritual murder is that of the Endingen ritual trial in 1470, Germany. One of the most fantastical elements of this case is the opening sentence of the account of the Jewish confessions to murder. It states: “…one knows well, that nobody else but the Jews has committed the murder.” People immediately suspect the Jews when bodies of murdered victims were found. One reason for this was Christian viewed the Jew as the wicked ally of the devil. In one of the Jewish confessions at Endigen, Mercklin, the brother of the accused murder admits: “it is the devil’s work” that prevents conversion to Christianity. Furthermore, the “guilty” Jews died by burning, an exceptional death attributed only to heretics and black magicians. “The public execution itself served as a dramatic representation of the evil of Jews and the triumph of Christianity: the convicted were burnt as minions of the Devil, as black sorcerers, and only incidentally, as murderer.”

---

41 Langmuir, 225.
43 Langmuir, 225.
44 Po-Chia Hsia, 18.
46 Ibid, 30.
In addition to ritual murder, another major accusation ascribed to the Jews was host desecration. The belief that the Eucharist conveyed the flesh and blood of Christ was common among many Christians throughout Church history. This belief was eventually put into doctrine during the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, when the Catholic Church made transubstantiation an official policy. The doctrine of transubstantiation holds that the host and wine at the Catholic ceremony of the Eucharist become the body and blood of Christ. Maintaining that the host was the true body of Jesus, some Christians believed Jews would scheme to snatch the host and then “stabbed and mutilated the host in a kind of reenactment of the crucifixion of Christ, allegedly causing it to shed blood.”

The first accusation of host desecration occurred in 1243 in Belitz. The accusation ended in the burning of all the Jews of the city. The host desecration accusations quickly spread across Europe with results “of violence, of destruction and of annihilation of Jewish communities.” Although the primary purpose of host desecration has been attributed to the reenactment of Christ’s death, it was not the sole motive. Christians would have anticipated “a degree of devil-inspired Jewish skepticism… and an attempt to mock their faith.” Furthermore, the host was believed to have miraculous powers, much like the blood libel, it was thought that Jews, as “master magicians,” needed the host for their own sorceries.

Perhaps one the most devastating alleged conspiracies which encompassed the totality of the devil-Jew relationship was triggered by the onset of the Black Death. In 1348, Europe was hit with a devastating plague, known as the Black Death, which took the lives of twenty-five million people. Within months, Jews were accused of poisoning wells, causing the epidemic to spread. The reason for the poisoning was said to be the Jewish desire to destroy Christendom. The accounts tell of Jewish leaders in Toledo organizing the scheme to kill Christians. Moreover,

---

47 Efron, 152.
48 Trachtenberg, 114.
50 Trachtenberg, 114.
51 Ibid, 114.
52 Marcus, 49.
53 Ibid, 49.
leaders in the conspiracy, such as Rabbi Peyret, were thought to have sent out poisoners to France, Switzerland, and Italy. Under torture, many Jews confessed to these accusations, hoping their lives might be spared. “Records of their confessions were sent from one town to another… and as a result, thousands of Jews, in at least 200 towns and hamlets, were butchered and burnt.” Just like in the case of William of Norwich’s ritual murder, the notion that the Jews internationally conspired to destroy Christendom had implications for the demonized conception of the Jew. Their actions verified a type of homage paid to Satan, the greatest enemy of the Church.

Conclusion

Historian Norman Cohn has argued that at the heart of modern antisemitism lies the belief that all Jews “form a conspiratorial body set on ruining and then dominating the rest of mankind.” This belief, he insists, is “simply a modernized, secularized version of the popular Medieval view of the Jews as a league of sorcerers employed by Satan for the spiritual and physical ruination of Christendom.” The depictions of the Jew in literature, art, and drama from as early as the twelfth century, underscored and confirmed the Medieval conception of the demonic Jew. The devil-Jew partnership acted as the foundational claim for irrational conspiracies and accusations against the Jews. Whether he kidnapped, tortured, and killed Christian children, desecrated the host, or poisoned Christians, the Jew was only fulfilling his role in the devil’s work. To the Medieval Christian, the Jew was simply “a vessel of the devil,” sufficient verification for attempted genocide.

---

54 Ibid, 49.
55 Ibid, 49.
57 Ibid, 48.
Figure 1: Ecclesia and Synagoga

Figure 2: Ecclesia and Synangoga
Bibliography


