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978-0-521-86354-4 - The Jew in the Medieval Book: English Antisemitisms, 1350-1500

Anthony Bale

Excerpt

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## I

## Introduction

On the marvellous and celebrated thirteenth-century west front of the Cathedral of Nôtre Dame, Paris, stand two figures, Ecclesia and Synagoga. They are the focal statues at the base of the façade, flanking the central west door, the so-called Portal of the Last Judgement. They are conventional: Ecclesia looks up, towards heaven and towards Jesus, who sits at the centre of the decorative scheme; Synagoga is blinded by a round, pointed hat which has slipped over her eyes, her head turned towards the ground. She clutches a broken staff and, in her right hand, the tablets of the (Mosaic) Law. She is, like Ecclesia, a young and pretty woman, but, on the left of Jesus, she turns away from Him and towards the Left Bank of the Seine instead. The pairing is a common one in medieval ecclesiastical art; in medieval England the two women appeared together at Canterbury, Lincoln, Peterborough and Rochester cathedrals.<sup>1</sup> There is much to be said about these two figures, a supreme articulation of the dichotomous similarity which lies at the heart of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. As Sara Lipton has observed, Synagoga ‘frequently serves to complicate and even undermine [such] dichotomies’;<sup>2</sup> Ecclesia and Synagoga only gain meaning in relation to each other, and through their mutual unlike likeness. Each creates the space for the other, simultaneously circumscribing and closing this space.

Such iconography has attracted much critical attention, as scholars have examined the apparatus of exclusion at work in the medieval Church. What fascinated me about Ecclesia and Synagoga however was their ambiguous didactic function. At whom could these figures have been aimed? Were they just an admonition for the Christians of medieval Paris, warning them about what they might become? Or were

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they a 'slap on the back' for the worshippers at Nôtre Dame, showing them that which they had avoided and surpassed? Or were they for the 'good' of the Jews of Paris, to damn them, terrify them, or judge them, into conversion? What did the Jews of Paris think of this figure which supposedly represented them, symbolically and visually central in the public scheme of this massive Christian architectural project? And what, if anything, did Geoffrey Chaucer (to whom we shall return) make of Synagoga, as he made his way through Paris in 1377?<sup>3</sup> What did the English boy-king Henry VI, whom we shall meet in chapter four, think as Synagoga glanced down at him as he entered Nôtre Dame for his lavish coronation in 1431?<sup>4</sup>

I do not have an answer to such questions and in this work I will resist the judgmental, almost dualistic, certainties to which Ecclesia and Synagoga pretend. Synagoga, looking down with the pigeons onto the Ile de la Cité at the swarms of worshippers, soldiers, beggars, Jews, heretics, atheists, tourists and others who have wandered in front of the cathedral, has meant many different things to different people. Indeed, she may have meant nothing to many people; her fixed or coherent meaning is less important than her central yet ambiguous presence.

Christian culture, in the medieval Latin West, insistently discussed Judaism. We should not be surprised by this, given the fundamental role of Jewish theology and Jewish history within Christianity. In sermons, in poetry, in historiography, from misericords in provincial parish churches to the façade of Nôtre Dame, from marginal doodles to *contra Iudaeos* literature, the 'Jewish question' – which might be broadly defined as 'What is to be done with, or to, the Jews?' – appears regularly and pervasively. Questions, and less frequently answers, about Judaism mirror the central place of Synagoga at Nôtre Dame; Judaism as a faith and 'Jewishness' as a repository of fantasy projections were central to the self-definition of medieval Christianity and to the cultural artefacts Christianity spawned. It is with these fantasy projections, images separate from the sincere and rigorous Christian interpretation of the Old Testament, that this book is concerned. Old Testament Judaism remained doctrinally central within medieval Christianity (even if sidelined by the cult of the saints and Marian devotion) whereas Jewishness and the ongoing survival of the Jewish people and their disesteemed faith became the subject of comment and fantasy.

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My interest is in the place of the Jews in medieval textual productions, the Jew in culture rather than the Jew in the world.<sup>5</sup> In the famous anti-semitic drawings on the 1233 Norwich tallage-roll (plate 1) stereotypical fictions overlay the financial reality and lived lives of the Jews in the image; the Jew, Mosse-Mokke (a rendering of Moshe/משה) and his wife, Avegaye (Abigail), are pushed away from their own financial dealings and placed within, and subject to, their polemical role of hook-nosed, coin-clipping criminals.<sup>6</sup>

To argue against the usury practised by the historical Moshe is not antisemitic, it is just anti-usury. To argue against the usury practised by the Jews of Norwich on the grounds of Judaism as opposed to Christianity might be called 'anti-Judaism'. To represent Moshe as Mosse-Mokke in this fictive, grotesquely physical register, in which an imagined 'Jewish' body is the cynosure for a range of vices, is antisemitic. I do not object to the lack of verisimilitude in the picture of Moshe and Abigail (such criteria being modern, not medieval); rather, Moshe and Abigail are not represented as Moshe and Abigail, Norwich financiers of the thirteenth century, but primarily as 'Jews'. 'Antisemitic' will be my preferred term throughout; there are few 'real' Jews in the narratives I consider, only deprecatory non-Jewish ideas about Jews. Likewise, I have chosen not to hyphenate 'antisemitic' as, outside linguistics, there is no such thing as a Semite; it is only a negative category forced onto Jews, and others.<sup>7</sup> In the image from Norwich, the Jews' pseudo-racial difference is marked by the horned devil, Colbif, who lays his fingers on the noses of Mosse-Mokke and Avegaye, the nose marking the Jews' fallen physical, religious, financial, legal and pictorial status.<sup>8</sup> A further piquant element is added in the labelling of one of the devils as 'Dagon', referring to the biblical fish-god of the Philistine Ashdodites.<sup>9</sup> Moshe, the thirteenth-century Norwich Jew, is dispossessed of his (mono-theistic, Jewish) faith and is allied with philistinism, a praxis antipathetic to religious Judaism, in a striking disjunctive interplay between Old Testament Ashdod and medieval Norwich.

Medieval Christian representations of Judaism are manifestations of cultural power, and the frequent, diverse renderings of 'the Jew' allow us to locate the task of texts and images in articulations of dominance, affection and all that lies in between. Medieval antisemitic representations allow us to see that which medieval Christians were not, or did not want

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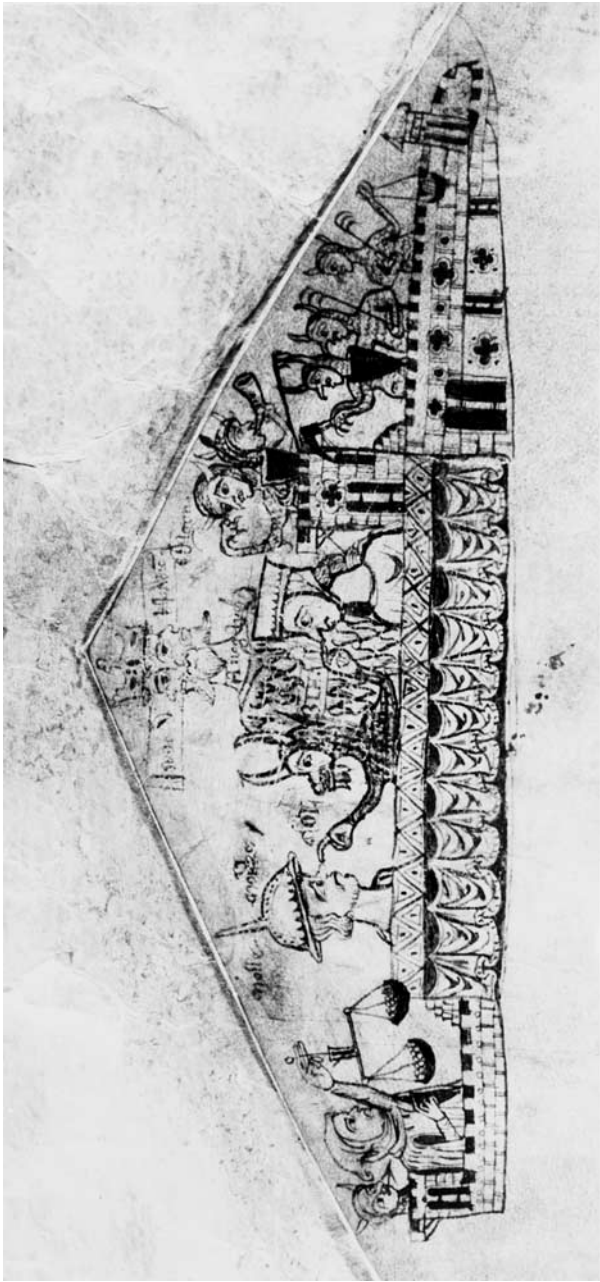


Plate 1. Caricature of the Norwich Jews, Mosse-Mokke and Avegaye, Rolls of the Issues of the Exchequers, Hilary Term 1233 (17 Henry III), National Archives E.401/1565. Reproduced by permission of The National Archives, Kew.

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to be; we can thus identify the processes of cultural authority through which difference and obedience were discussed and taught. However, it is crucial to foreground the fact that the Jewish *topos* is *not* the main concern of most of the texts we shall encounter in the following pages; the Jew can usually be found lingering at the margins or located deep within someone else's story, just as Mosse-Mokke and Avegaye linger at the end of the Norwich tallage-roll (a conventional administrative document). To quote Frederic Raphael, 'the Jews are the margin which runs down the middle of the page of European history'.<sup>10</sup> The Jewish image's marginal, non-canonical status is telling: the Jew is rarely given a subjective space in which to operate, but is dependent and contingent on the greater narrative in which he (or less frequently she) is placed. In the following pages I shall argue that the Jew is often a crucial, sometimes fundamental, reference point for the doctrine and interpretation of the greater ('non-Jewish') text. In this way this study requests that we no longer consider artefacts which discuss Judaism as separate from the Christian Middle Ages, but as integral to our understanding of this religious and cultural *milieu*.

This study is not then a minority history, even though it considers some texts which have been discarded as 'embarrassing' curiosities or as gruesome medievalia.<sup>11</sup> The task medievalists now face, having usefully directed their energies towards delineating the margins of medieval culture, is to integrate majority and minority, body-text and marginalia, Synagoga and Ecclesia, Jew and Christian, to uncover the ways in which these categories derive meaning from each other.<sup>12</sup> There can be no meaningful concept of 'us' without a notion of 'them'; there is no need for 'us' if 'them' is not like 'us'. Indeed, my project might be called a majority history, for in it I aim to understand how and why the majority insistently discussed, dispossessed, debated and defamed the (abject, invisible, absent) minority. In doing so I trace the margins of three canonical authors: Ranulph Higden, Geoffrey Chaucer and John Lydgate. I do not aim to enfranchise those 'hidden from history', a target implicit in much writing on historical Jewry.

The Jewish *topos* was not hidden but rather very publicly absorbed and reconfigured by history, religion and textuality, made both alien and central to texts and thus silenced by the cacophony of representations which spoke on the Jews' behalf. Medieval Anglo-Jewry is only

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now gaining its own history, as scholars sift through layers of representation and cultural domination to reconstruct the more mundane but important circumstances of Jewish finance, culture and everyday life in medieval England.<sup>13</sup> This study is not intended to be part of the restitution of the factual and sometimes positive circumstances of Jewish life in medieval England. Given the frequency and variety of antisemitic material in medieval English culture, a role remains for my task, which is the analysis of the polemical, textual babble which sometimes influenced Jewish lives (before 1290 in England and in Europe throughout the Middle Ages) and was everyday gentile reading-matter. For this study is also about cultural power, the frightening potency both of the imagination and of texts and images, what Slavoj Žižek has called the 'plague of fantasies', 'the *imaginary* screen of . . . myths' about Jews which enables the 'neutralisation' of horrific actions towards them.<sup>14</sup> It is a depressing fact that the texts we shall encounter (concerned with the Jews' secret language, the Jews' latrines, the Jews' homicidal appetites) are in a sense 'more real' than the documentary, material evidence identified by historical inquiry. Cornelius Castoriadis has drawn our attention to the way in which individual textual production embodies the significations of society and 'reality' even whilst imagination deals primarily with that which is absent;<sup>15</sup> likewise it is fantastical and figurative texts which constituted medieval English Christians' ideas of 'Judaism' and which, before the expulsion of the Jews, played a part in the horrifically real persecution and destruction of English Jewish communities. Correspondingly, Jewish lives were influenced, transformed, ended even, by the polemics circulating in texts and images. For instance, the ritual murder allegation probably played a part in fuelling (or facilitating, neutralising) the violence at Bury St Edmunds in 1190 (discussed in chapter four), or more famously at Lincoln in 1255 in which eighteen Jews were murdered.<sup>16</sup>

The extent to which medieval Christians 'believed' in the stories they told about Jews is, naturally, difficult to pin-point; certainly those in 'authoritative' social and cultural strata promulgated these ideas. Rather than thinking in terms of truth and falsehood, fact and fiction, a more useful way of thinking about these texts is as mythologies which can be half-believed, understood as 'half-true', as described by Paul Veyne.<sup>17</sup> Reinforced by religious polemic, 'universal' currency and



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ancient pedigree, antisemitic stories were implicitly ‘true’ even as their distinctive power resides in their fantastical, evanescent and unofficial elements. When ‘fantasy’ so proliferates and eclipses ‘truth’, the fantasy is more real, more true, than reality: to quote Veyne, ‘truth is the name we give to the choices to which we cling’.<sup>18</sup>

How do we determine and judge antisemitism? And are antisemitic utterances always intentionally antisemitic? These vexed questions have recently been given a renewed urgency through the troubled context of debates over the Middle East. To invoke modern antisemitism (the so-called New Antisemitism) is in many ways to go against one of this study’s central tenets, which is to insist on local and specific contexts and contingencies. I also insist that medieval English antisemitism gains its meanings in the distinctive context of medieval English Christian devotional culture. However, many of the discourses we shall encounter in these pages have had a remarkably long life and, in some cases, retain a currency today. This project’s remit does not stretch to modern media, but I would like briefly to suggest some instructive modern parallels, in order to refine my working assumptions and definitions of antisemitic media, medieval and modern.

The controversy surrounding a cartoon published during the 2003 Israeli election is a neat, if predictably problematic, case in point.<sup>19</sup> The cartoon shows a naked Ariel Sharon, then Israeli Prime Minister, devouring an infant’s torso; a ‘Vote Likud’ rosette covers Sharon’s genitals. In the background, tanks and helicopter gunships blitz a cityscape, broadcasting ‘Vote Sharon’ messages, whilst Sharon utters in a speech-bubble, ‘What’s wrong . . . you never seen a politician kissing babies before?’ The cartoon is titled ‘After Goya’, referring to Francisco de Goya’s famous eighteenth-century image, ‘Saturn devouring his children’. As the cartoon clearly shows Sharon eating a child, it resonates with libels which will be encountered in the following pages, although this depends on a recognition of the image’s currency by those familiar with Jewish history. The image makes an appalling sense within a vintage antisemitic ontology of Jewish child-murder. Yet, to those frustrated or dismayed by the dire situation in the Middle East, the image perfectly encapsulated Sharon’s part in the escalation of violence which threatened to sacrifice the very basis and renewal of the state of Israel, as this Israeli ‘Saturn’ eats his own (not his neighbours’ or enemies’) children. To invoke the

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blood-libel, we must wilfully ignore key elements in the image; the image does not explicitly show Sharon eating a Palestinian child. Conversely, the reference to Goya and the Saturn myth allowed some to claim that the child-murder allegation is absent from the image – implying that only those guilty of hypersensitive Zionism or (the antique charge of) Jewish literalism could find antisemitism in the picture. This image, like any other, is ambiguous and has multiple destinations and interpretations. If it is antisemitic (and the themes it calls to my mind are, albeit inexplicitly) then there is nothing ‘new’ about it, as the materials surveyed in the following pages show. Medieval antisemitic images were similarly the product of the ‘salon’, or its medieval equivalents, the monastery, the university and households aristocratic and pious. Then as now, neither authorial intention nor audience response was fixed or necessarily consistent.

Another instructive parallel is that of a group of Iranian Jews accused in 2000 of spying for Israel. Accompanying this political and realistic (in the sense that spies do exist) charge was the medieval allegation that the Jews had been plotting to poison the water in Shiraz (this was not, however, the charge on which the Jews were tried or convicted).<sup>20</sup> This case possesses some clear parallels with the medieval cases we shall encounter: a ‘standard’ received fictional charge of well-poisoning accompanies the temporally specific and geographically specific allegation (of Israeli espionage in Iran). The recapitulation of the medieval well-poisoning theme consigned the Jews to a fantasy of deadly opposition, of collective and timeless malevolence. Facts and fictions are juggled in a complementary interplay, glossing and perpetuating each other. As Sartre wittily but incisively wrote, ‘[I]f the Jew did not exist, the anti-Semite would invent him.’<sup>21</sup> The trial of the Iranian Jews was both an assertion and exploration of Iranian identities, as well as an espionage trial. An analogy to the case from Shiraz, from an earlier but no less politicised age, might be the case of the English Jewish financier Abraham of Berkhamsted. In the 1250s Abraham was accused by Simon de Montfort of financial misdeeds; at the same time, Montfort accused Abraham of shitting on an icon of the Virgin.<sup>22</sup> The former allegation is both political and plausible whilst the latter is capricious, seductively graphic, and antisemitic. I wish to make both a timely caveat and an interpretative point in stressing that texts and images are not simply converted into human



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acts or political policy, although they do sometimes have the potential to transform lives. We must step back from the massive, transhistorical narrative of gentile vilification and Jewish suffering and examine the specifics of why and how common ideas like child-murder and well-poisoning might be found meaningful and worthy of reiteration at divergent times and places.

With the development of global media, in particular the internet, such 'medieval' allegations against Jews and many other groups have undoubtedly prospered. A cursory internet search will produce a raft of allegations and counter-allegations, particularly concerning Jewish ritual murder. Recent political discussions, as touched upon above, have greatly extended the scope of this kind of material. The number of people producing such material has traditionally been small, and the number of those uncomplicatedly or uncritically accepting such material is surely very tiny indeed. However, as long as such material exists it is necessary for us to ask how and why words, images and religious devotion function as contributory agents of defamation, disharmony and conflict, both real and imagined. There are, to be sure, gradations of hostility but I take issue with Robert Chazan's argument that '[t]o transform every instance of social tension into an antisemitic event is ultimately to cheapen language that ought to conjure up unimaginable horror'.<sup>23</sup> For successive generations to repeat antisemitic allegations does not alone engender moments of violence: it is necessary for these allegations to have saturated a more general consciousness of the commonplace, the quotidian, the domestic, the normal, the ritual as well as the political, the military or the legal: to cite Goldhagen's reformulation of Arendt's memorable phrase, the 'evil of banality'.<sup>24</sup> It is such 'normal', often banal and small, articulations of an oppressive idea that this book tracks.

This study is about the reiteration, instability and changing valence of the Jewish image as inscribed in medieval English books. My study locates and contextualises four specific but generic narratives from medieval England which are concerned with Judaism. These four narratives are that of a Jew at Tewkesbury who falls into a privy on a Saturday and dies because, in adhering to his Sabbath, he refuses to extract himself; the miracle of a Christian boy who, though killed by Jews for singing a Marian hymn, continues to sing; the cult of Robert of Bury St Edmunds, a Christian child said to have been murdered by the Jews

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of Bury in 1181; the *Arma Christi* literary and decorative scheme, showing the instruments of Christ's Passion, including the 'spitting Jew'. Each narrative has a Christian background and none depicts Jews in isolation; they negotiate Jewish : Christian contact. In each of the four narratives we are fortunate in having extensive materials with which to construct detailed scribal, paratextual and historical contexts. Thus my analysis seeks to integrate these moments of the iteration of ideas about Judaism within both immediate and larger contexts: generic context; manuscript context; the religious, social, legal, political and literary contexts; European contexts; the epistemological context of antisemitic allegations; the narrative, intertextual field of stories about Jews. Thus I am asking what kinds of circumstances gave relevance and meaning to discussions of Judaism and what factors shaped the format these narratives took. This enterprise necessarily takes us deep into Christian religious and literary practices, focussing not only on moments of gory violence but also on the multiple, if sometimes mundane, ways in which Christians imagined Jews. The aim is to provide workable models by which medieval writing about Jews can be assessed, tracing trends, rewritings, audiences and their responses.

Moreover, I have been keen to avoid essentialising certain key pieces of antisemitic writing (as has tended to happen with Chaucer's 'Prioress's Tale', Langland's *Piers Plowman* and the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*); I wish to construct a sense of generic framing and literary history as well as the cultural embeddedness of antisemitic narrative. As such I focus on four categories, of 'history', 'miracle', 'cult' and 'Passion', through which I seek to expand our understanding of the genres of medieval writing in which the Jewish image appears. Texts like the 'Prioress's Tale', *Piers Plowman* and the Croxton *Play* are at once very unusual, finely wrought, and well known to modern scholarship, hardly representative of either antisemitic narratives or general literary *mores* in medieval England; the material considered in this study is generically representative, if perhaps less accessible and 'literary' in a vernacular sense. In particular, it is necessary to reconsider the responsibility of Christian cultural and intellectual institutions in promoting and extending literary antisemitism, to place antisemitic texts within medieval English culture.

Judaism is that from which Christianity proceeds; Jewish law is reinterpreted and reconfigured by Christianity into a new faith;