

Feeling Persecuted: Christians, Jews and Images of Violence in the Middle Ages

Review Number:

1093

Publish date:

Sunday, 1 May, 2011

Author:

Anthony Bale

ISBN:

9781861897619

Date of Publication:

2009

Price:

£29.00

Pages:

254pp.

Publisher:

Reaktion Books

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

David Biale

Ever since R. I. Moore published his *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* in 1987, we have increasingly come to understand medieval society in terms of its treatment of its 'others': Jews, lepers, heretics and so forth.⁽¹⁾ New bureaucratic structures starting in the 11th century established themselves by persecuting these minorities. David Nirenberg added importantly to this analysis by showing the role of violence, especially symbolic violence, in enacting and policing these boundaries.⁽²⁾ And Israel Jacob Yuval opened up another dimension of the historiography by showing how Jews and Christians shared a common language of violence and traded motifs back and forth over the religious barricades: Jews killed their families and themselves in the Crusades in imitation of Christian ideas of martyrdom.⁽³⁾ Yuval also demonstrated how the ritual murder accusation against Jews played a key role in the production of Christian saints. For the victim – typically a child – to die at the hands of the Jews was to imitate Christ's passion. Violence by Jews was a necessary component in the Christian economy of redemption.

Anthony Bale has productively built on these and other works in his brilliant study of the medieval iconography of violence. Drawing primarily – but not exclusively – on English materials, he significantly revises Moore by showing that images of violence were significant methods of inculcating Christian virtues of meekness and clemency. In a paradoxical way, to persecute the Jews was a way of enacting the Christian message of love, since the Jews had rejected that message with violence. Or, as Christopher Ocker has put it, a theology of love was just as responsible for the ritual murder accusation as a theology of hate.⁽⁴⁾ Despite appearances to the contrary, Jews were powerful, while Christians were weak, as befit those who imitated Christ. Images of violent Jews reinforced Christians' identities as victims and thus justified their own violent

attitudes toward the Jews. And in some cases, this emotional economy operated without actual Jews, such as in England after the Jews had been expelled in 1291.

Bale places emphasis on *feeling*, for he believes that ‘if we wish to uncover how medieval people thought, we must take seriously how they felt’ (p. 11). As opposed to the Enlightenment hierarchy of reason over the emotions, the Middle Ages sought to inculcate feeling in its iconography, the primary means of communication when literacy was restricted to tiny elites. Love and hate were inextricably intertwined so that images aroused both of these emotions simultaneously and dialectically. In addition, the feelings aroused by images of Jews tormenting Jesus were designed to make those viewing these images feel that the events represented were not in the distant past, but instead in the present. Just as Jews are commanded to experience the exodus from Egypt as if it happened to them, so medieval Christians wanted to experience the passion and resurrection as if they were happening today. This was the temporal import of seeing the Eucharist as the *real* presence of Christ and not a memorial of a distant savior. This was also the role played by saints martyred at the hands of Jews: their deaths reenacted the crucifixion, thus allowing those who participated in their cult to connect existentially with the events of the first century. Moreover, in order to identify with Christ, contemporary Jews had to be pressed into service to fulfill the role of the alleged ancient persecutors.

As in contemporary horror films, the role of violence in medieval iconography was to enact a symbolic universe of good versus extreme evil. To reinforce good required scenes of extraordinary violence. Bale quotes from Prudentius’s *Psychomachia*, a late Latin text that visualized the battles between the virtues and the vices and that would have been known, he says, to all medieval schoolboys. Here is how this text describes Soberness smashing the lips of Indulgence with a rock: ‘the teeth within are loosened, the gullet cut, and the mangled tongue fills it with bloody fragments; her gorge rises at the strange meal; gulping down the pulped bone she spews up again the lumps she has swallowed’ (p. 34). This is a discursive representation of violence, but medieval visual representations of violence were just as graphic. In both cases, explicit, gory violence served the salutary purpose of recruiting the loyalties of its readers/viewers on the side of good.

Bale demonstrates the intertwining of the virtuous Christian and the malevolent Jew by reading a wide variety of medieval images and texts. One of the most striking is an early 14th-century wooden statue of the enthroned Virgin with Child. Behind and below this maternal image is Herod’s Massacre of the Innocents. The drama, as Bale rightly calls it, of this statue thus juxtaposes the tenderness of the Madonna with the cruelty of the Jews, a prefiguration of their later cruelty against Christ himself. And we can assume that anyone who viewed this statue would also be impelled to think of more recent accusations of Jews killing Christian children.

The Jews perpetrating violence in many of the images Bale investigates are often depicted as ugly. He is quick to point out that the large noses and other grotesque features of these representations are not racial in nature, although modern racial anti-Semites certainly borrowed them from the Middle Ages. These features are supposed to signal inner moral qualities such as lack of compassion and a violent disposition. Like the modern cartoon strip, medieval iconography functions by extreme, grotesque contrast. Interestingly – and following Moshe Barasch (5) – Bale points out that these Jews are almost invariably depicted in profile, as opposed to Christians who appear either fully or partially in frontal poses. As a result of this juxtaposition, he concludes: ‘The Jewish profile acts – in style and in content – to bring conflict into the reader or viewer’s own religious, textual and visual experience’ (p. 75).

The presumed ‘ugliness’ of the Jew in these Christian images brings to mind a Jewish retort that Bale might have quoted. It appears in the *Sefer Nizzahon Vetus*, a 13th-century compendium from Germany of Jewish polemical arguments against Christians. Why, the text wonders, are Christians beautiful and Jews ugly? It is because Jews observe the menstrual prohibitions while Christians do not. Like fruit that starts white and then becomes red as it ripens, the Jews are pure when conceived and become ugly (red here equals ugly and may reflect darker Mediterranean complexion) when they are born. Christians are the opposite: red at conception (due to menstrual blood) and white when born. The Jews thus accept Christian conventions of beauty but invert their meaning: those who appear beautiful are really ugly – and immoral -- within, while those who

appear ugly are moral and therefore beautiful inside. What you see is not what you get.

In a fascinating chapter on 'The Jew's hand', Bale shows that *touching* by Jews aroused great anxiety, suggesting that, like the biblical leper or menstruant, physical contact with them would render the Christian impure. Jews thus became symbolic untouchables. This dimension of Jewish violence is to be found in representations of an extra-canonical story in which Jephonius the Jew appears at the funeral of the Virgin, touches her bier and, as a result, his hands either miraculously wither or are amputated. He only recovers from this deformity when he converts to Christianity. Bale insightfully traces the history of this story and its various representations in visual art as well as in several medieval pageants.

Bale might have looked to an early medieval Jewish text, the *Toledot Yeshu* for satirical confirmation that the touch of the Jew creates ritual impurity. This anonymous 'life of Jesus' mocks Jesus as the son of an adulterous menstruant. In a crucial scene, he steals the name of God and uses it to fly. The rabbis enlist Judas Iscariot – represented here as a hero – to go after him, also with the divine name. After some aerial combat, Judas brings Jesus back down to earth by urinating on him. Although urine is not a biblical pollutant, in this text, it has the power to contaminate Jesus and cause him to lose the power of the divine name.

The first four chapters of Bale's book consist of carefully constructed and interrelated readings. To the mind of this reader, chapters five and six are less satisfactory, primarily because they seem less related to Bale's major theme. In chapter five, he investigates pilgrimages to Jerusalem, either the real Jerusalem or 'virtual' Jerusalems, often represented by buildings in Europe created to look like the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. This is all very interesting material, but the question of violent Jews more or less vanishes.

In the next chapter 'Making Calvary,' Bale examines the traditions of Queen Helena who 'found' the true cross as well as various Christian holy sites in Jerusalem in the 4th century. According to one legend that circulated from the early Middle Ages, a Jew, conveniently named Judas, tries to throw Helena off the track, but after being tossed into a well, he shows her the true cross and converts to Christianity. Bale is quite right that the antagonism of the Jew here, as in Christianity generally, is essential to the founding myths of the religion. But while this point reinforces the Jewish role discussed in earlier chapters, antagonism here is not particularly connected to violence, the predominant theme of the earlier chapters in the book.

In a final chapter, Bale usefully turns to how Jews appropriated and transformed the language of medieval violence. He focuses in particular on the York massacre of 1190, contrasting the Christian account of William of Newburgh with the Jewish renditions of Ephraim of Bonn, Joseph of Chartres and Menachem of Worms. Drawing on biblical motifs, but reworking them, these medieval Jews created a culture of martyrdom (*kiddush ha-shem*). So, too, albeit in more cryptic form, did Jewish illuminated manuscripts, such as the Prato Haggadah (Passover liturgy) with its hunters chasing hares. However, Bale recognizes that the latter imagery represents cross-cultural borrowings as much as it does a specifically Jewish response to Christian persecution.

This discussion of Jewish responses to Christian iconographic violence might have been extended to give the Jewish side more of its due. The extraordinary violence that one finds in the Hebrew Chronicles of the Crusades as well as the *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) commemorating these events suggests that Jews, no less than Christians, found positive meaning for their own identities in the cruelty of the Other. Other texts could be mined profitably to show that the powerless minority harbored fantasies of violent revenge by projecting violence onto the Christian majority. Yet, even if Bale has not provided a full account of the Jewish appropriation of this theme, he has given other historians crucial road markers of how to think about the relationship of a minority to a hostile majority.

Bale concludes convincingly by arguing against reading back modern anti-Semitism into the Middle Ages, the kind of 'backshadowing' identified by Michael Andre Bernstein in his book *Foregone Conclusions*. One does have to wonder, however, whether the dynamics of representational violence in medieval sources don't teach us something about their modern counterparts (and vice-versa) after all. Many years ago, the folklorist, Alan Dundes, in discussing the medieval blood libel, used Freudian theory to argue that Christians engaged

in ‘projective inversion,’ that is, the attribution to the Jews of something that the Jews don’t actually do (consume blood) but that Christians do (drink Christ’s blood in the Eucharist).⁽⁶⁾ Guilt over consuming Christ found its target in those who were believed to have killed him. Bale is unimpressed by the ability of Freudian theory to explain the medieval dynamic, but without necessarily buying Dundes’ hypothesis entirely, it may be useful to think about why a dominant culture feels the need to portray itself as a powerless victim. Clearly, Christianity valorizes Christ as a meek sufferer, but it may be that the ‘cognitive dissonance’ involved in constructing a violent society (and medieval Europe was indeed exceedingly violent) on the basis of a religion of clemency and love required the projection of violence onto the powerless Jews.

In a similar way, the Nazis portrayed Germany as the victim of a world Jewish conspiracy and justified apocalyptic violence as the only way to defend against this enemy. To be sure, Nazis and medieval Christians differed from each other in countless ways, but they shared this particular dynamic: the majority projected their own urge toward violence onto those who were the weakest. Christianity provided the imagery for this projection in its formative texts and, as Bale has strikingly shown, medieval Christian representations further reinforced the fatal image of the violent Jew and the Christian victim. It was this 2,000-year iconographic tradition that modern anti-Semites secularized and infused with the new ‘scientific’ language of blood and race.

Notes

1. R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (Oxford, 1987).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence* (Princeton, 1996).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. Barbara Harshav and Jonathan Chipman (Berkeley, CA, 2006).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Christopher Ocker, ‘Ritual murder and the subjectivity of Christ: a choice in medieval Christianity’, *Harvard Theological Review*, 91, 2 (1998), 153–92.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Moshe Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 159–62.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Alan Dundes, ‘The ritual murder or blood libel legend: a study in anti-Semitic victimization through projective inversion’, in *The Blood Libel*, ed. Alan Dundes (Madison, 1992), pp. 336–78.[Back to \(6\)](#)

Other reviews:

History Today

<http://www.historytoday.com/blog/books-blog/miri-rubin/christians-jews-images-violence-middle-ages> [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1093>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/5528>

[2] <http://www.historytoday.com/blog/books-blog/miri-rubin/christians-jews-images-violence-middle-ages>