Antisemitism
Through the Ages

Edited by
SHMUEL ALMOG

Translated by
NATHAN H. REISNER

Published for the
Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

by
PERGAMON PRESS
OXFORD · NEW YORK · BEIJING · FRANKFURT
SÃO PAULO · SYDNEY · TOKYO · TORONTO
6

The Devil and the Jews in the Christian Consciousness of the Middle Ages*

ROBERT BONFIL

Of the many elements characteristic of antisemitism, one of the most widespread and persistent is the motif connecting the Jews with the Devil. An example of this motif appeared in a 1941 issue of Julius Streicher's Nazi journal Der Stürmer which speaks of "the annihilation of this people, whose father is the Devil." Streicher certainly was employing an existing stereotype, one which had deep roots in the past. As such it had accumulated through the ages a substantial number of meanings and associations, both ideological and emotional, in the Christian consciousness.

Discovering the origins of stereotypes is a difficult task at best. Seeking the roots of the Jew-Devil stereotype presents some special problems. For example, one must first try to ascertain whether the medieval patterns of thought which associated the Jews with the Devil were of a basically rational or irrational nature. One must also ask whether they were an outgrowth of popular fears and superstitions or were they, perhaps, the product of a systematic ideology formulated by the Church. These are but a few of the questions which must be confronted when considering the role of the Devil motif in the long history of Christian antisemitism.

1. Characteristics of the Devil

Who is the Devil in Christian belief? In the New Testament the Devil is depicted as the enemy of God and of Jesus, His son (Matthew 13:39). He puts

* This article appeared in English in an adapted version as part of the Jewish Studies University Series of the International Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization (Jerusalem, 1983).
believers to the test and tempts them to sin (Matthew 4:1; John 3:8). He disrupts people's relationship with God, appearing in His Old Testament role as adversary and accuser. In the New Testament and in the writings of the Church Fathers he also appears as the leader of a group of angels who have fallen from grace for rebelling against God. As Jesus described it to His disciples, "I watched how Satan fell, like lightning, out of the sky" (Luke 10:18). And why did Satan fall? Because he "is not rooted in the truth; there is no truth in him" (John 8:44). The Devil embodies all the forces of heresy and rebellion against God. He poses a constant challenge to believers, threatening their faith with doubt and temptation. Until the end of time, it is the Devil's role to trick the faithful into straying from the path of truth, so that he may gain power over the world.

An examination of the basic characteristics that Christianity attributed to the Devil will reveal that they bear more than a passing resemblance to those attributed to the Jews. This resemblance derives from the Christian perception of the Jewish people as those who rejected Jesus and brought about his death on the cross. The Jews, therefore, were the enemies of God - first they rejected Him, and then they murdered Him. As punishment for this crime, the Chosen People lost their birthright and were superseded by the "true" Israel (Verus Israel), that is, the Church of the Christian faithful. But Christianity still reserved an important role in history for the Jewish people. By means of their very degradation the Jews were to bear eternal witness to the truth of Christianity.

The link between the Jews and the Devil appears explicitly in the New Testament. This is illustrated in the following passage from the Gospel according to John (8:43-44):

Jesus said (to the Jews), "If God were your father, you would love me, for God is the source of my being, and from Him I come... Your father is the devil and you choose to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and is not rooted in the truth; there is no truth in him."

Here we are but a short step away from identifying all Jews with "Satan's synagogue" (Revelation of John 2:9; 3:9), that is to say, the Church of Satan, as opposed to the true Church. This concept was to serve as a model for the antagonism between the Church and its enemies. In the Middle Ages this antagonism found potent expression in the antithetical concepts Ecclesia and Synagoga. During the course of time the tendency to connect the Jews with the Devil became a fundamental and persistent aspect of Christian attitudes toward Jews and Judaism. It received considerable and varied expression in both the written and spoken word and served as a motif in painting and sculpture for hundreds of years.
2. Changes in Concepts and Attitudes

During the Middle Ages, the Christian conception of Satan underwent substantial changes. Many of these changes were matched by similar developments in the Christian perception of the Jew. While superficial comparisons should be avoided, it nevertheless seems clear that there is a basic, structural similarity between the image assigned by Christianity to the Devil and that assigned to the Jews. It should also be pointed out that this similarity encompasses a wide range of different motifs.

As a case in point, let us begin by examining the changes in attitude toward the Jews of Christian Europe during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, changes which became particularly noticeable following the First Crusade (1095). While the Christian attitude toward Jews before the Crusades was not a very positive one, anti-Jewish outbursts were generally sporadic, like the symptoms of a disease in its early stages. Ghettos, Jewish badges, blood libels, and accusations of well-poisoning had not yet appeared. Jews had not yet been pushed out of their livelihoods and forced into money-lending. For the time being the Jew was considered to be like a rebellious brother who, under certain circumstances, could be made to reform his ways. In other words, the basic humanity of the Jews was not in question.

This began to change from the twelfth century. During this period the Church was gaining strength, but social antagonisms and heretical sects were also spreading. Against this background, Christian attitudes toward Jews became more negative. The image of the Jew as the brother who had lost his birthright was supplanted by the stereotype of the fratricidal brother, sentenced to wandering with the mark of Cain on his forehead. More and more, the Jews were viewed in the master-slave relationship—a fact which had important ramifications on their legal and political status. Greater emphasis was now placed on the alien nature of the Jews in a homogeneous Christian world. This was expressed in dramatic performances, especially the Passion Plays, in which the actors portraying Jews would stammer incoherent Hebrew or even utter nonsense syllables. In the plastic arts, as well, the Jew became increasingly caricatured and even repulsive.

By the twelfth century, if not earlier, the Christian portrayal of the Devil was also undergoing a radical change. No longer did the Devil appear in works of art with the attributes of an angel. Now his features were designed to cause revulsion. He was portrayed as a dwarf or as a giant, with an oversized head and bulging eyes. To these were added long, flame-like hair (a symbol of the fires of hell), long fingernails, horns, a tail, and the like. Those attributes of the Devil which most sharply contrasted with the Divine, those which inspired fear, were the ones which were emphasized. During the thirteenth, and especially during the fourteenth century, the emphasis was transferred from the frightening to the hideous and grotesque.
On the surface, it would seem that the changing attitude toward the Jews and the new portrayal of the Devil were unrelated. The deterioration of the Jews’ status in Christian Europe may be attributed to a number of factors. For one thing, the Jews often became pawns in power struggles between the Church and the temporal rulers. Whichever side could enforce its authority over the Jews could feel that it had made a tangible gain in the quest for power. The Church even employed theological arguments to justify their progressive subjugation. To make matters worse, the emerging stereotype of the Jew as the exploiter of the poor was reinforced by the fact that more and more Jews were being forced to turn to moneylending for their livelihood. All of these trends helped make it convenient for Christian society to exploit the Jews as scapegoats.

Entirely different factors were responsible for the changes in the Christian conception of the Devil. First of all, the Church wished to stress the negative aspects of the Devil in order to teach its followers to beware of his temptations. Here, Church art fulfilled an important function since it could convey its messages to the illiterate masses messages unavailable to them through books. In addition, a major portion of the scholastic philosophy in vogue at the time was devoted to investigating the nature and source of evil in the world. Exhaustive study and debate were dedicated to the ancient traditions which told of the angels who fell from grace after having disobeyed God at the time of Creation. This preoccupation with evil was often reflected in the socio-religious issues of the time. For example, the temptation to join a heretical sect was portrayed as one of Satan’s stratagems. It was not easy to resist Satan because his arguments were clever, yet it was imperative not to succumb to him for he could lead one to hell.

As mentioned above, there is no obvious connection between the change in attitude towards the Jews and the development which changed the Christian conception of the Devil. Nevertheless, the Devil’s new image would henceforth be inextricably tied up with the stereotype of the Jew along the lines set down in the New Testament. The Devil would be depicted both in painting and sculpture as riding on the back of a Jew or the back of Synagoga, the maiden whose blindfolded eyes are incapable of perceiving the true light of Christianity. In Christian thought and folklore, in sermons and in art, the Devil’s new attributes would also be assigned to the “Church of Satan,” that is, the Jews.

The writings of the thirteenth-century monk Caesarius of Heisterbach may provide an illuminating example. He tells of a Jewish woman who wished to bring her daughter back to Judaism after she had been baptized. The woman tried to negate the effect of the holy waters by “baptizing” her daughter in excrement. Scholars agree that there is an unmistakable parallel here between the Devil motif and the Jewish stereotype. A folk legend tells about how the Devil, after having fallen into the holy waters, tried to free himself of their influence by means of a similar “baptism” in excrement. There is also a clear connection between the motif in these legends and the idea of the “Jewish stench” which can only be washed away by the baptismal waters.

In the Christian of Devil motifs ap familiar dark, bulg (Horns were also Goatees and tails tion of the Jew as addition to these stract and mythic appeared in conji half-bird, the bas cient to kill. The fatal powers – a the Devil. That absolute purity the basilisk in the latin.

There were a stian thought, rx the Devil and a dangerous call. First of all, the their degradati Christianity – a hearts of Chris For both of the logic (a skill, ac selves with the leds in the cha people conside overwhelm be them to death.

The Devil’s self-love was as the angels wh ideas are refi and in the wr letter even as also accused as much as a stantinople. (Church of Sa the Jews wa.

One may connection b are deep ui Christian co
In the Christian art and folklore of the Middle Ages, a considerable number of Devil motifs appeared as symbols of Jews and Judaism. These included the familiar dark, bulging eyes. Occasionally horns appeared on the heads of Jews. (Horns were also employed to indicate “bad Christians,” especially heretics.) Goat's ears and tails were appended to the portrayals of Jews. The insistent depiction of the Jew as a nonhuman creature tended to reinforce the stench motif. In addition to these concrete symbols, the Jew was often tied in with more abstract and mythical symbols. One example is the mythical basilisk who often appeared in conjunction with the Devil in Christian literature. Half-serpent and half-bird, the basilisk exuded a death odor, and one glance from him was sufficient to kill. There was only one way to protect oneself from the creature’s fatal powers—a pure crystal ball. Similarly, there was only one defense against the Devil. That was to call out the name of the Virgin Mary, the symbol of absolute purity. One can find both the Jews and the blind Synagoga compared to the basilisk in the anti-Jewish literature of the Middle Ages.

There were additional seemingly unrelated motifs which converged in Christian thought, reinforcing the link between the transmuted new perceptions of the Devil and of the Jews. For one thing, Judaism was perceived as posing a dangerous challenge to Christianity. What was the nature of this challenge? First of all, the Jews were stubbornly and uncompromisingly proud, despite their degradation. Second, there was a logic to the Jewish arguments about Christianity—a logic so powerful that it produced fear and helplessness in the hearts of Christians. At times it even seemed that Truth itself was in danger. For both of the stereotypes described above—that of the Jews as masters of logic (a skill, acquired, no doubt, as a result of their constantly occupying themselves with the Talmud), and that of the Jews as arrogant—we can find parallels in the characteristics attributed to the Devil. In the Middle Ages many people considered logic to be ars diaboli, the art of the Devil. Satan would overwhelm believers with “logical” arguments in order to entrap and frighten them to death. See, for example, Dante’s Divine Comedy—Inferno 27, 123.

The Devil was also portrayed in the Middle Ages as a proud figure whose self-love was boundless, following the notion of the scholastic philosophers that the angels who fell from grace were banished for the sin of arrogance. These ideas are reflected in the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), and in the writings of the Scottish theologian Duns Scotus (1265-1308). The latter even ascribed the sin of lechery (luxuria) to the Devil. The Jews were also accused of unbridled lechery. This was a stereotype which had appeared as much as a millennium earlier, in the preachings of John Chrysostom of Constantinople (347-407) who interpreted the New Testament phrase, “the Church of Satan,” as referring to the Jews, and claimed that the synagogue of the Jews was really a brothel and a dwelling place for demons.

One may argue that this is merely a coincidence, that there really is no connection between the two phenomena. It seems clear, however, that there are deep underlying factors which connect the Jew and the Devil in the Christian consciousness of medieval Europe.
3. Pugio Fidei

In order to substantiate this thesis it may be useful to examine one of the outstanding anti-Jewish tracts of the Middle Ages—Pugio Fidei (The Dagger of Faith) by Raymond Martini (1220-1285). Written toward the end of the thirteenth century, it in time became one of the foremost weapons in the Christian polemic against Judaism. The book was produced following intensive research undertaken in Spain in order to discover and delete anti-Christian references in Jewish books. Martini's "researchers," most of them former Jews, knew Hebrew and provided him with a compilation of sources from the Talmud and the Midrash. Pugio Fidei belongs to the type of literature which was tendentious and often arbitrary. Basically Martini seems to be asking the ancient question: "If even the Jewish tradition testifies to the truth of Christianity, why do the Jews not accept it?" His answer is simple: "The Jews do not accept Christianity because of their ancient pact with the Devil, to which even the Talmud attests." One of the examples which Martini brings is from the Tractate Me'ilá, 17a-b:

The Roman Government once issued a decree prohibiting the Jews from observing the Sabbath and circumcising their children, and requiring that they have intercourse with menstruating women... The Jews then pondered: "Who shall go [to Rome] to work for the annulment of the decree? Let R. Simeon b. Yohai go, for he is experienced with miracles"... Then Ben Temalyon came to meet him. "Is it your wish that I accompany you?" he asked. Thereupon R. Simeon wept and said: "My forefather's handmaid [Hagar] was found worthy of meeting an angel three times, yet I—not even once! Nevertheless, let the miracle be performed no matter how." Then Ben Temalyon possessed the Emperor's daughter. When R. Simeon arrived there he called out: "Ben Temalyon—leave her! Ben Temalyon—leave her!" When he proclaimed this, Ben Temalyon left her. Then [the Emperor] said to them [R. Simeon and R. Jose]: "You may request whatever you desire." They were led into the treasure house to take whatever they chose. They found the decree, took it, and tore it to pieces.

If that is the case, Martini concludes, the writings of the Jews prove that:

God employed the Romans [who were considered both by the Jews and the Christians to be the progenitors of Christianity] to keep the Jews from observing the Sabbath, performing the rite of circumcision, and keeping all of the other ritual commandments. Ben Temalyon, i.e., Satan, restored circumcision, the Sabbath, and the other rites by some demonic miracle, in order that the Jews might pray and study Torah.

This becomes the pretest of the ritual corn Satan, observe them Jews, Satan blinded the truth of the Christian Jesus with such arco reduced to an inhuman toward Christianity. is, therefore, really Jews who chose to die "martyred" for the g

In Martini's tract, longer appears as a tation with a compelling the theoretical basis Jews. Stated simply religious community demonic poison they enge which Judaism challenge of the De' impact, not only on logical debate over porary research has of the Middle Ages

4. Conclusions

What has just been stated is a number of v: being able to unrva history of Christian reason, however, far beyond the integral to the dev

A basic concept Satan. From here serve God ve step further, their even able to sup unbridled freedor dichotomy between which found expr and enjoyment as
This becomes the basis for an entire doctrine: Whereas Christians interpreted the ritual commandments of the Bible allegorically, the Jews, misled by Satan, observe them literally. By restoring the ritual commandments to the Jews, Satan blinded them to the true meaning of Scripture, which points to the truth of the Christian faith. Thus it is the Devil who inspired the Jews to reject Jesus with such arrogance and stubbornness. They, as a result, have been reduced to an inhuman state, and that is the reason for their unnatural attitude toward Christianity. Everything believed by the Jews to be Divine revelation is, therefore, really nothing other than the revelation of Satan. Even those Jews who chose to die to sanctify the Holy Name (kiddush hashem) were really “martyred” for the glory of the Devil.

In Martini’s tract, the ancient motif connecting the Jews with the Devil no longer appears as a metaphor. For him the matter is one of ideological conviction with a compelling inner logic of its own. It is this ideology which provided the theoretical basis for the tendency, described above, to dehumanize the Jews. Stated simply, the Jews, who lived among the Christians as a distinct religious community, were perceived as embodying the will of Satan. With their demonic poison they endangered the very well-being of Christianity. The challenge which Judaism represented for Christianity was nothing less than the challenge of the Devil. Pugio Fidei was widely circulated and had a significant impact, not only on the Christian polemic with the Jews, but also on the theological debate over the place of the Pentateuch within Christianity. Contemporary research has found that Martini’s book was influential through the end of the Middle Ages and even into the Renaissance.

4. Conclusions

What has just been described may be considered a central theme around which numerous variations evolved. It would seem that we are still far from being able to unravel the many ramifications of the Jew-Devil motif in the history of Christian behavior towards the Jews in the Middle Ages. It stands to reason, however, that a careful examination of this complex issue will take us far beyond the theological confrontation with the Jews and will reveal motifs integral to the development of Christian culture and consciousness.

A basic concept inherent in Christian thought is the dichotomy of God versus Satan. From here it is only a short distance to the formula: the human race as servant of God versus the human race as rebels against God. Taken yet one step further, there emerges a world in which God is supreme, limiting, and even able to suppress human desires versus a world in which people have unbridled freedom and power. What we have here is essentially the age-old dichotomy between God and sorcery, between the Divine and the satanic, which found expression in the contradictory conceptions of worldly success and enjoyment as both desirable and sinful. This basic contradiction creates
ideological tension in every system of religious thought (including Judaism) – yet it is especially marked in Christianity.

Beginning with the New Testament itself, the Jew was perceived within the context of that tension. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Jew-Devil motif appeared repeatedly in Christian culture in subsequent generations, undergoing metamorphoses with the passage of time. For example, in the literary version of the story of Doctor Faustus, dating from the Renaissance, the drawing of circles and the chanting of cabalistic formulas are employed in an attempt to arouse the Devil. A man enters into a covenant with the Devil in order to gain control over the world and exploit it for his own pleasures. The Jew appears in the story not only through the obvious symbolism of the cabalistic formulas, but also through the deeper symbolism of the circles. In addition to representing the Devil who encircles and overpowers human beings, the circle symbolizes the Jews who, since the thirteenth century, could be recognized throughout the Christian world by the round patch they were forced to wear on their breasts.

The Devil also appears in Christian literature and sermons as a seductive woman. Symbols drawn from the recesses of human sexuality were applied to the Jews as well. In this regard, the writings of John Chrysostom have already been mentioned, as well as the fact that unrestrained sexual desires were also attributed to the Jews. Another symbol fraught with sexual connotation was the yellow badge which Jews had to wear since, in many places, yellow was the color associated with prostitution.

The themes discussed above have found expression in various forms until our own day. On the socio-economic plane, the Jews have been portrayed as symbols of the ambition to succeed in business at any cost, even to the destruction of the ideological foundations upon which the continued existence of society depends. In the political sphere, the Jew has become the symbol of revolution: one whose behavior contradicts the very principles of morality and justice. Antisemitism has thus equated the Jew with all those forces which undermine human society and disrupt the course of history.

In any event, the Jew seems to symbolize something which simultaneously attracts and repels the Christian spirit. The Jews must be oppressed but not annihilated, for they possess something which is both attractive and repugnant, human and bestial, beautiful and ugly, a source of pleasure and a source of misery. The Jew symbolizes the existential dialectic of the Christian culture which has not succeeded in linking the human and the Divine yet still strives to attain that goal.