

# The Ruling Powers and the Jews

It was during the central Middle Ages, between the First Crusade and the Black Death, that the Catholic Church defined its policy towards the Jews. Its attitude was based on the Augustinian doctrine which ascribed an historical mission to the Jews as witnesses to the truth of Christianity. Their existence within Christendom was portrayed as double testimony. As the original recipients of God's messianic prophecies, and despite having rejected them out of blind wickedness, the Jews indirectly attested to the authenticity of these same prophecies. At the same time, their status as a despised nation, living in ignominy and misery, was testimony to God's wrath and to the intervention of Providence, constantly penalizing them for having rejected Christ.

This theological approach implied an acceptance of the continued presence of Jews. Yet many tried to undermine this relatively tolerant leaning. Talmudic texts which stressed the supremacy of the *Halakha* as its decisions were not based on the dubious claim of supernatural inspiration were exploited by learned theologians. In the twelfth century, Peter of Cluny (the Venerable) and the instigators of the "trial" against the Talmud in the following century, fulminated against the pretensions of the Jewish Law, denouncing it as an illegitimate, even diabolical, addition to the Scriptures. Post-biblical Judaism, they said, could be defined as a form of heresy and therefore legitimately extirpated. But the

Papacy cut short such ideas. There was no way in which the Church could condemn the Jewish notion of Oral Law and Tradition without compromising its own claim of being the sole interpreter of the Holy Scriptures. Nevertheless, while it did adhere to the principle of toleration, the Church did not fully exercise its influence to ensure that tolerance was respected in practice. For example, although most popes during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries issued bulls prohibiting conversion by force, canon law, by distinguishing between absolute and conditional constraints, did not invalidate conversions obtained by threat. Furthermore, despite papal doubts concerning blood libels, the Church did not restrain the local clergy from spreading such accusations which resulted in the killing of many Jews.

Another aspect of Church doctrine concerned the social inferiority and subordination of the Jews. The rule of denying them power applied not only to public office but to every social relationship of an asymmetrical nature (master-servant, physician-patient), and to all daily-life situations which placed the Jew in a position of authority over a Christian. And since all contact between Christian and Jew posed the danger of undue influence, the Church recommended a policy of segregation. The obligation of wearing distinguishable garments or a special badge was imposed on Jews in order to prevent sexual relations between them and non-Jewish women. Popular fears of the Jew, although deriving from very different emotions than those guiding the theologians, were thus sanctioned by the official policy of the ecclesiastical authorities.

Throughout the High Middle Ages, Jews were considered to be the responsibility of the central secular authority in each country. The protection offered to the Jews by European monarchs while the crusading spirit was whipping up anti-Jewish propaganda and riots only increased their dependence. Emperor Frederick II, borrowing from the Church the notion of Jewish servitude, defined the condition of the Jews as that of slaves, or serfs, of the imperial treasury – a formula later used both in their defense as well as to justify the money exacted from Jews "belonging" to the sovereign. Some kings and princes, however, ultimately became scrupulous, fearing that revenue extracted from the Jews implicated them in the sin of usury. Hence the attempts at legislation intended to urge the Jews to forgo financial involvement in favor of "honest" manual labor or lawful trade. In 1230 Louis IX of France issued the Ordinance of Melun which forbade Jews to engage in moneylending. The King of England, Edward I, forbade the taking of interest in 1275. These anti-usury laws undoubtedly contributed to the impoverishment of the Jews, perhaps to the extent that they were no longer useful to the crown. The decisions to expel the Jews from England in 1290 and from France in 1306 (in circumstances which are still obscure), were the first steps in the process of purging Catholic Europe of Jews.



1. Recognizable by their garments, Jews are depicted at the bottom of the medieval social hierarchy. Illustration from a German book of laws, 12th century.

## Bernard of Clairvaux protects the Jews of the Rhine

1146–1147

- 1096:** Massacres during the First Crusade.  
**1097:** Emperor Henry IV allows Jews who were forcibly converted in the previous year to return to their faith.  
**c. 1120:** The first *Sicut Judaeis* bull – a comprehensive act of protection for Jews; later renewed by Innocent III (1205) stipulating that it applies only to those Jews who refrain from subversive activity against Christianity.  
**1146–1147:** Preparations for the Second Crusade. Peter of Cluny advises Louis VII to confiscate Jewish property to help finance the crusade. Bernard of Clairvaux goes to the Rhine Valley to stop the anti-Jewish campaign conducted by the monk Raoul.  
**1182:** Frederick Barbarossa stresses the duty of the emperor, prescribed by justice and reason, to defend the rights of his subjects, including non-Christians.  
**1198–1231:** Eighteen conventions between the King of France and his barons define their respective rights over "their" Jews.  
**1205:** Pope Innocent III denounces the

## The Fourth Lateran Council

1215

- ingratitude of the Jews who are "like a mouse in one's pocket, like a snake around one's loins."  
**1215:** Decisions of the Fourth Lateran Council: obligation to wear a distinctive garment or badge and a prohibition on "immoderate" usury (implying the right to take "moderate" interest).  
**1230:** Decree of Louis IX defining the subordination of the Jews to the king and to their lords "as if they were their serfs."  
**1236, July:** Frederick II of Hohenstaufen refutes an accusation of ritual murder.  
**1237, April:** Frederick II: "Imperial authority has from ancient times condemned the Jews to eternal servitude for their sins."  
**1239:** The apostate Nicholas Donin presents Pope Gregory IX with a list of thirty-five indictments against the Talmud.  
**June:** Letter from Pope Gregory IX to the bishops and to the kings of England, France, Castile, and Portugal, demanding the seizure of all copies of the Talmud for examination of their content; only Louis IX promptly

# 1096-1348



2. The Jewish troubador Susskind von Trimberg (c. 1200-1250) performing before a bishop. Miniature, Zurich, 14th century.



3. The Franciscan Berthold of Regensburg (c. 1210-1272). Although he condemned the Jewish practice of usury, Berthold preached against attacks on Jews and forced conversions. Miniature, 1447.

## Disputation of Paris

## Thomas Aquinas' *De regimine Judaeorum*

## Expulsion from England

## Expulsion from France

1240

1261

1290

1306



4. The king judges a Christian accused of murdering a Jew. Illustration from a 14th-century copy of the Dresden Sachsenspiegel manuscript, 1220-1235.



5. Trial and execution of a Jew accused of possessing Christian ritual objects. Detail from the copy of the Dresden Sachsenspiegel.

complies with the pope's request.  
**1240. June:** Disputation over the Talmud, in the form of a trial, between Nicholas Donin and four rabbis, the most famous among

them being Jehiel of Paris.  
**1242:** Burning of the Talmud in Paris.  
**1247. August:** Pope Innocent IV orders confiscated Talmud copies to be returned to

the Jews.  
**c. 1261:** Thomas Aquinas, *De regimine Judaeorum*. In his will the Duke of Brabant ordered the expulsion of the Jews unless

they renounced usury; his widow Aleyde, acting as regent, is reluctant to carry out the order and turns to Thomas for advice; the latter recommends mitigating the harsh fiscal policy towards the Jews and using the revenues obtained from their taxation on works for the common good.

**1263. July:** Disputation of Barcelona, in the presence of King James I, between the apostate Pablo Christiani and Moses ben Nahman (Nahmanides).

**1275:** Edward I's *Statutum de Judaismo*, prohibits Jewish moneylending.

**1281. January:** Alfonso X of Castile orders the wholesale arrest of Jews and demands an enormous ransom for their release.

**1290:** Expulsion of the Jews from England.

**1306:** Expulsion of the Jews from France.

**1315:** Louis X authorizes the return of the Jews to France under certain restrictive conditions. A new expulsion order is issued in 1322.

**1319-1321:** Renewed campaign against the Talmud.

# Christians and Jews



1. The Church Triumphant...

Historians usually regard the Crusades as a turning point in the persecution of Jews in Europe during the Middle Ages. Indeed, when the bands of crusaders passed through the Rhineland in 1096, they perpetrated massacres of Jews on an unprecedented scale. However, a chronological fact does not in itself constitute an explanation.

The first real "pogroms" occurred towards the end of the twelfth century. It is, of course, an anachronism to use the words "pogrom" and "antisemitism" in the context of the Middle Ages, but it helps to stress the radical novelty of the phenomenon. Hatred of the Jews was internalized, and had become part of a mental framework which was to last in different variations until the end of the Middle Ages. The impurity of the Jew, it was said, was a threat to the community and could contaminate its women, children, goods, and religion. Fear and disgust led to libels and imaginary tales: Jews poison wells, kill or devour children in their rituals, desecrate the Host, plot with the enemies of Christianity. Therefore, exclusion, expulsion, and massacres of Jews were seen as practical measures to safeguard public health. It was the co-existence of all these elements and their cumulative effect which determined the nature of medieval antisemitism after the end of the twelfth century.

The emergence of this new attitude could be attributed to a transition from a competition that had been resolved into a renewed process of acute rivalry. Before the twelfth century the Jew was perceived as an archaic representative of a religion which had been surpassed by Christianity. That perception engendered laws prohibiting proselytizing and led to social tension, riots, and sometimes even massacres against the "enemies of Christ." Actual rivalry, however, meant that the two populations were confronting one another and contending concurrently (and not in the distant past) with the same problems.

Two examples taken from the spheres of marriage laws and of biblical exegesis may serve to illustrate the transition from one conception to another. In the twelfth-century monasteries a new version of the Judas story emerged, grafted upon the Oedipal legend: before betraying Christ, Judas Iscariot killed his father and married his mother. The abundance of twelfth-century religious texts on incest reveal the obsession of European society at the time with marital and family problems. The Gregorian Reform of the eleventh century had prohibited marriage between cousins down to the seventh degree, calculated by a method more rigorous than ever before. In this manner the Church prevented all marriages of relatives, a practice which had been an important mainstay of feudal society. Only the Jews continued to practice endogamy (marriage within the extended family) since Church prohibitions did not apply to them and because their existence in closed and scattered communities limited their choice of spouses. Their Christian neighbors,



2. ...and the Synagogue blindfolded. Strasbourg Cathedral, c.1230.

## The first blood-libel case

1144

**Middle of 12th century:** The first Oedipal versions of the life of Judas appear in monastic circles.

**1144:** "Martyrdom" of young William of Norwich (East Anglia), supposedly killed by Jews. His remains were transferred to Norwich Cathedral in 1171. Although not officially canonized, the abundance of iconographic representations and the miracles recited by Thomas of Monmouth will perpetuate his memory. This is the first instance of the libel repeated until the 19th century: during Passover, the Jews have to kill a child, crucify him, and drink his blood as part of their ritual. The year 1144 also witnessed the first systematic attack on the Talmud (Peter the Venerable).

**1171:** The first pogrom caused by the new myth: the Jews of Blois are accused of killing a young Christian; thirty of them are burned at the stake.

**1179:** "Martyrdom" of young Richard of Pontoise or of Paris, recounted by Rigord and Guillaume of Breton; in the 15th century

Robert Gaguin will write the Passion of this Richard.

**1180:** "Martyrdom" of Herbert of Huntingdon (central England).

**1182:** Philip Augustus expels the Jews from the royal domain.

**1215:** The Fourth Lateran Council imposes a series of severe restrictions on the Jews.

**1242:** Burning of the Talmud in Paris by order of King Louis IX.

**1247:** Innocent IV's bull, *Lacrimabilem Judaeorum*, refutes the allegation that Jewish law prescribes the ritual consumption of a Christian child's heart; the same condemnation of the blood-libel will be reiterated in 1255 by Pope Alexander IV and again in 1272 by Gregory X.

**1250:** "Martyrdom" of Domingo of Val (Aragon); a Passion will be written about him in the 14th century, and a confraternity in Saragossa will be dedicated to him in the 15th century.

**1255:** "Martyrdom" of Hugh of Lincoln, recorded by Matthew Paris.

## Burning of the Talmud in Paris

1242

**1265:** The Oedipal version of the life of Judas is included in the *Legende dorée* of Jacques de Voragine.

**1287:** "Martyrdom" of young Werner of Oberwesel (the Rhineland); his cult was very popular at the end of the Middle Ages and in the 16th century. Throughout the 13th century accusations of the desecration of the Host by Jews are included in the *exempla* literature of the preachers.

**1290:** Edward I expels the Jews from England.

**14th century:** The ritual murder libel becomes more complex: the Jews kill Christian children in order to obtain the Host and desecrate it.

**1303:** "Martyrdom" of Conrade of Weisensee in Erfurt, central Germany.

**1306:** Expulsion of the Jews from France by Philip IV.

**1321:** Popular stories accuse the lepers of poisoning the wells in southeast France by the orders of Jews and Muslims from Spain.

**1348:** In southeast France the Black Death

## The ritual-murder allegation in Trent

1475

epidemic is attributed to a Jewish plot.

**1429:** "Martyrdom" of Louis of Ravensburg (southern Germany).

**1462:** "Martyrdom" of André of Rinn (Tyrol).

**1475:** "Martyrdom" of Simon of Trent; a few days after the sermons of the Franciscan Bernardino da Feltre, the body of a young boy is found near the house of the leader of the Jewish community; after interrogation 17 Jews "confess" and are executed; despite the opposition of an emissary of Sixtus IV, the executions continue and a year later a papal bull confirms the verdict. Until the 18th century Jews were not admitted to Trent; Simon will be beatified and worshiped until 1965. It is undoubtedly the blood-libel case which exercised the greatest influence on Western collective memory, both Jewish and Christian.

**1485:** "Martyrdom" of Lorenzino de Sossio (northern Italy).

**1491:** "Martyrdom" of the holy child of La Guardia (Castille).

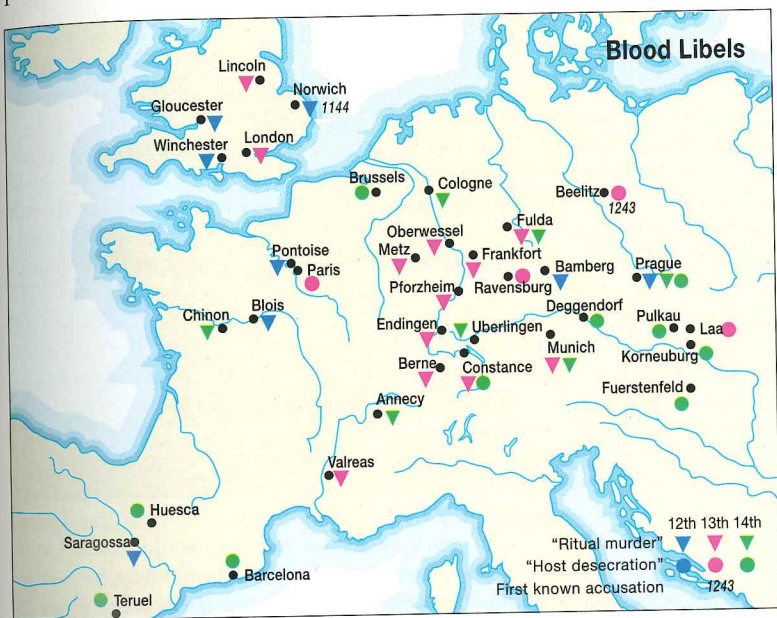
**1492:** Expulsion of the Jews from Spain.

# 12th–14th Centuries

shackled by ecclesiastical discipline, viewed Jewish customs as a mirror-image of their own social and individual frustrations.

At the same time, about 1144, the Abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable, composed a treatise against the Jews, quite traditional on the whole except for the last section which constituted the first explicit and comprehensive attack on the Talmud. A century later, in 1242, King Louis IX

would order the burning of twenty cart-loads of Talmuds in Paris. In this matter sibling rivalry also seems to have been a crucial element: at the precise moment when Scholastic theology was reaching its greatest achievements, the Church also discovered the living traditions of Judaism. Medieval antisemitism was born when a distant contempt for the Jews was replaced by intimate hatred.



3. The Jewish sacrifice. Master of the Manna, Haarlem (?), c. 1470.

4. The Italian John of Capistran preaches against the Jews, Bamberg, c. 1470.