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as an Absent-Presence
in Late Medieval England

THE SEVENTEENTH SACKS LECTURE

OXFORD CENTRE FOR
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For my Grandparents

אברהם, אלטע, שלמה, רחל

The Jew as an Absent-Presence in Late Medieval England

When Abba Eban delivered the second Sacks Lecture in 1975, he paid moving tribute to the piety, humanity and devotion to science of Dr Elsie Sacks, who had died during the previous year. On that occasion, too, he celebrated the values and the spirit of Dr Sammy Sacks, with the hope that his vigour would continue undiminished for many years to come. It did so, indeed, for another fifteen years. But it falls to me now to open with tribute and with regret: tribute for the life of Sammy Sacks, and regret for his death last June, at the age of 95. He missed only one of these lectures that carry his family's name. I dedicate this seventeenth Sacks Lecture to his memory, and to the memory of my grandparents.

My interest here today is in the experience of medieval English Jews, by which I mean not so much what they experienced as how they were experienced by others. Documented evidence from the medieval period is sparse and selective, with vast gaps. Even if it were more complete, less lopsided, less distorting, it would have to be supplemented by imaginative and reasoned conjecture. Our task is to try, somehow, to straddle information and speculation.

The essence of any culture based on a single religion is that the belief embraced is the unquestioned norm and that anyone outside of it is perceived as a perversion. Medieval Christianity was no exception. This is not to say that there was no discord, no conflicting claims as to who were the true interpreters of the faith - but the faith in question was one and the same.

It is against this background that we must see the Jews of medieval England, who rejected the received faith and adhered instead to their own beliefs and customs. It was as if, in so doing, they released their neighbours from the constraints of compassion and decency and ceased to be protected by the moral code governing conduct between man and man in human society. This is, of course, repellent, but by no means incomprehensible, given the intensity of the Christian faith that the Jews rejected so totally, and the emotive nature of religious instruction at the time. The Jews were not alone in being reviled and dehumanised.¹ They were firmly linked in the popular imagination with heathens and infidels; but the difference between the Jews and the Muslims was that the Crusaders had to go out and find Islam, while the Jews were here.

Or were they? The answer is 'yes and no'. Or, more accurately, 'yes then no'. And, eventually, as my paradoxical title suggests, 'no but yes'.

If I seem to be talking in riddles, it is because the situation that we are looking at is itself very puzzling. Throughout the 12th and 13th centuries, there are many communities of Jews in England. Then, in 1290, the Jews are expelled and not allowed back for over three hundred and sixty years.² In spite of this, the Jew is a persistent phenomenon in late medieval England, a presence tenaciously preserved despite his absence, a figure who is here despite not being here.

Just why is this absent-presence cultivated so assiduously? Before we can even begin to consider that question, we must be sure that we are giving what we are looking at its right name. The term 'anti-Semitism' was not coined until the late 19th-century.³ It is a euphemism devised, like all euphemisms, as a cushion against the shock of facing up to an embarrassing or otherwise perturbing truth. In this instance, the real name of the truth is 'Jew-hatred'. The relative recentness of the coining of the term 'anti-Semitism' has a further significance, in my view: it acknowledges as an aberration the hatred of the Jews that had, for many centuries, been seen as rationally and objectively justifiable. In fact, it is no more appropriate to call Medieval English Jews Semitic than to call Medieval English Christians Teutonic. I would go further and say that when we use the term 'anti-Semitic' we collude with the view that the Jew is an outsider, an alien, a foreigner.

Bearing this in mind, then, I go back to my question: why does late medieval English society cultivate so assiduously an ever-present hatred of the absent Jew?

Let us consider what was inherited from the two centuries before the 1290 expulsion. We have very little evidence about English Jews before 1100, but the Crusades, which began in 1096, are seen as accounting for the flaring up of an intense hatred of the Jews. Although the zeal of the Crusaders was initially directed towards Islam, conviction about the rightness of their cause rapidly intensified religious fanaticism.⁴ The violence to which Jews were subjected and the inadequacy of the protection provided under even the most benign of the English monarchs led to the repeated movement and resettlement of entire Jewish communities in many parts of England. We can imagine how these sudden influxes of people with strange names and appearance, a different language, odd customs and, above all, an alien religion, would have aroused the resentment of established communities.

The Jew, who was later to become such a vibrant absent-presence, was always an ambiguous figure: an outsider-insider, whose duality was partly voluntary, partly thrust upon him. He was needed but rejected, used but despised, feared but ridiculed. Medieval Jews were commonly described by their detractors as 'stubborn', but when these detractors found comparable firmness among their own correligionists, they admired it and called it 'steadfast'.

Of particular importance to our understanding of the place of the Jew at this time

is the fact that he was actively encouraged to engage in the one activity that was vital to the economic and political life of the state, but was prohibited to all Christians on theological grounds: that is, the lending of money at interest. The church, which looked the other way when merchants made a profit on goods bought and sold, condemned as a sin the use of money itself as a profit-making commodity. Some Jews, then, were money-lenders and bankers and, sometimes, tax-assessors and tax-collectors. Such Jews became indispensable to the financial viability of powerful sections of society, from merchants to nobles to the king himself. Their wealth and their financial know-how made them at one and the same time the economic life-blood of a developing mercantile society and pariahs beyond the moral boundaries of that same society.

The anti-Judaism of the Church is evident in utterances and incitement to hostile action emanating from all levels of the clergy, including some popes and many friars.⁵ Secular authority reinforced these attitudes by means of legal, economic and social constraints and hardships.⁶ Public opinion, swept along on a wave of hatred, found many forms of expression. This hatred was not simply a response to the facts of the material situation: although most Jews were very poor, resentment of the few who were rich extended to them all.

In the last decades of their life in England, the Jews, like their correlative across Europe, were required by Papal decree to wear a distinguishing badge. This and other identifying details were introduced into illustrations which depict the Devil and the Jew as alike. What was to become the most conspicuous feature of caricatures of the Jew is increasingly in evidence: the large hooked nose which, given the probable Northern French origins of medieval Anglo-Jewry, is not a physical characteristic that we would expect to be very prevalent.⁷ Indeed, the very notion of forcing Jews to wear hats and badges to distinguish them from their Christian neighbours is difficult to reconcile with the big-nose caricature. After all, if the Jews were so physically different, why would any distinctive head-wear or badges be necessary?

I spoke, at the start, of the lop-sided, distorting nature of medieval historical evidence. Printing had not yet been invented. The production and circulation of written documents tended to be controlled by the 'establishment'; writings expressing dissent or alternative belief were often destroyed, leaving posterity with information composed and disseminated in the service of particular interests, secular or ecclesiastical.

How much, then, can we know about what medieval English Jews were really like? As a non-historian, I am constantly frustrated by the absence of the kind of primary evidence about people that I think only literature can give us. For example,

just how distinctive were these Jews? Were Jews from different European countries more like each other than like their fellow-citizens in each country? The view has been expressed that they were not. One historian⁸ believes that 'the contagion of national example' was more powerful than the influence of Jewish preachers and moralists, but you may share my unease at his curious choice of the word 'contagion.'

To what extent did medieval English Jews take on the alienating characteristics of the stereotypes created by those who ostracised them? Just how did they respond to the way they were treated? It has been suggested that a 'well-behaved Jew' could reasonably count on being treated well, but that there were 'doubtless some ill-mannered Jews.'⁹ I find such namby-pamby drawing-room language absurdly inappropriate in the context of medieval Jew-hatred.

There is some evidence¹⁰ of amicable relations between Jews and their Christian neighbours in medieval England, but all the indications are that there was unlikely to have been any general goodwill of an intensity remotely comparable with that of the widespread hostility directed at these outsiders in the midst of society.¹¹ This being so, it would be astonishing if there were no spirit of angry retaliation among medieval Anglo-Jewry and if contempt and prejudice did not breed contempt and prejudice.¹² Whether this was reflected in Jewish violence against Christians we do not know; there are allegations, certainly, but such firm evidence as we have relates only to recorded acts of violence against Jews.

Try to imagine these medieval Jews: bound together by their religion, by persecution and disadvantage, by exclusion from certain forms of employment, by confinement to certain residential areas, by the fact that even when they keep to their allotted districts, their houses are burned down with increasing frequency. (I wonder, in passing, whether this is why the Jews started to build private residences of stone earlier than other citizens did?) They are further alienated by their aspirations to literacy and the acquisition of practical and intellectual skills that follows naturally from this. And, in addition to all these factors, their engagement in the sinful activity of lending money at interest corroborates the perception of their religion as contemptuously inimical to Christianity.

The communal expression of religious belief is a required practice in both Christian and Jewish life at this time. Worship and instruction, prayer and preaching, are disseminated by priest and rabbi. But my guess is that the neglect of piety and practice that was so severely reprimanded in the utterances of the church from the 13th century onward may well not have been found in the Jewish community. I would expect the hostility of their Christian neighbours to have heightened the closeness of belief and observance of the Jews. If I am right, communal worship

would have been strengthened by domestic piety; domestic piety itself would have been intensified by the physical proximity into which Jews were forced for mutual protection;¹³ the many rituals in the home would have given expression to a continually self-renewing affirmation of Jewishness - as it still does.

The remarkably small number of Jews who opted for conversion seems to confirm the hypothesis that persecution consolidated rather than undermined religious conviction. Jews have often been charged with passivity in the face of persecution, but we would do well to see the tenacity of belief of medieval Jews as a form of active resistance, and the voluntary adoption by men of different modes of attire and styles of beard and hair as a form of wilful defiance, in a situation where it would have been immeasurably more 'comfortable' to convert and conform. This becomes particularly so in the period from 1232, when numerous material enticements were offered to Jews who converted.¹⁴

The precept of mercy is often cited as evidence of the superiority of Christian morality over that of the vengeful Jews: the 'turning of the other cheek', preached by Christ, is contrasted with the 'eye-for-an-eye' of the Old Testament.¹⁵ But hardening of Christian doctrine on the Jews had set in by the 5th century. From then on, history testifies to a preference for retribution rather than forgiveness - authorised by a Church which saw Christians as instruments of revenge against those who were held responsible for the killing of Christ.¹⁶

Even so, the attitude to the Jews in the Middle Ages was by no means without ambivalence and inconsistency. Alongside the hatred, there was a strong belief that the Jews could and should be brought to see that they were wrong. Ostensibly, two impulses prompted this: on the one hand, a declared desire to save the soul of the Jew; on the other, a conviction that the second coming of Christ and the redemption of mankind would not happen until the Jews had been converted to Christianity. I shall come back to this.

The 13th century, which culminated in the Expulsion of the Jews, also saw the papacy coming forward to condemn the widespread harsh treatment of them¹⁷ - though without much effect, unless it could be argued that even worse atrocities and injustices might otherwise have taken place in the decades that led up to the Expulsion. Be that as it may, by the time they left England, the Jews had become a source of resentment, anxiety and fear: because huge sums of money were owed to them and because it was widely believed that they murdered Christian children as part of their own religious rituals. Their very existence was regarded as an insult to the Christians, whose rancour was fuelled by the accounts of the crucifixion of Christ - particularly, surely, by the chilling prophecy in Matthew's gospel, where the Jews themselves say 'his blood be on us and on our children.'¹⁸

I am certain that this notion of eternal and undiminishing responsibility must be taken into account in our thinking about the kind of hatred that we are considering here. When we contemplate the appalling recurrent manifestations of vengeance against the Jews, we should not lose sight of the fact that Judeo-Christian culture has continuity of personal identity at its very heart. It is not confined to Matthew's gospel narrative: in the Old Testament, God threatens to punish three or four generations of children for the sins of their fathers;¹⁹ at Christmas and Easter, Christians celebrate rebirth and resurrection; at the Passover feast, generation after generation of Jews celebrate their escape from slavery so many thousands of years ago. 'We were slaves unto Pharaoh in Egypt and the Lord God brought us out from there,' says the Haggadah.

These festivals are not merely ossified rituals; they are testimony to a belief in the undying continuity of the participants. There seems to me to be an inescapable, logical correlation between continuity of celebration, continuity of responsibility and continuity of guilt.

All this is not as digressive as it may appear. My intention is to urge you to consider whether the hideous Jew-hatred of the Middle Ages and beyond may have its source in the biblical perception of guilt and punishment that pervades Judeo-Christian culture; or whether, conversely, the bible is a record of our human predisposition to attribute guilt in perpetuity, starting with the story of the Fall of Man.

To return to my specific theme: we can be absolutely certain that, by the time of the Expulsion, vilification of the Jews had become an established habit of thought and that Jewish willingness to be conspicuously identifiable and to assert their separateness had become equally firmly established. The banished Jews left behind an image as powerful and menacing, and as feared and loathed, as that of the Devil. And, like the Devil, their visible presence was not at all a necessary precondition of belief in them as active evil.²⁰ But their absence did mean that there were no direct outlets for the violence engendered by hostility, as there had been in the open brutality towards Jews in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Instead, violence was inventively channelled into imaginative expression, graphic and verbal.

If we are to begin to understand the nature of the Jew-hatred of the post-Expulsion period in England, it is important to take into account the characteristic medieval ways of interpreting and evaluating human experience. The dominant predisposition of the medieval mind is towards extremes: good and evil; saints and sinners, hope and fear, miraculous wonders and grotesque horrors, joy and pain, reward and punishment. These and many other polarities are given concrete imaginative expression in the painting, sculpture, literature and devotional writings

that we now call Art, but that were perceived then as an encyclopaedia of objective truths. It is in the particular context of a sensibility moved by vivid representations of hell-fire and a cruelly crucified deity that we must see the image of the Jew that emerges from the 11th-century onward. As the actual Jew fades from living memory with every decade that passes after the Expulsion, he is replaced by an imagination that runs riot, unrestrained by reality. The Jew becomes a mythological monster; invisible, like the devil of Christian folklore and the giants of pagan culture, but with the semblance of a rational existence generated by fantasy allied to rhetoric.

The absent English Jew has a continuing and firmly-rooted place in the society that he has been banished from. He is perpetuated by the scholar-theologians and the three exponents of Christian oral culture: the poet, the playwright and the preacher. He is to be found too in the illustrations that adorn places of Christian worship and manuscripts.²¹

A few real, live Jews may well have been encountered from time to time, perhaps in the course of travel at home or - more likely - abroad, but something other than acquaintanceship or even memory is sustaining the existence of the detested being. Any goodwill that may have existed alongside the animosity that Jews experienced in daily life when they were here disappears entirely once they are gone. With the passing of time, the Jew becomes more and more 'remote from reality'; more and more the product of 'increasing ignorance and organised irrationality.'²²

I have not forgotten my initial question: 'why does late medieval England cultivate so assiduously an ever-present hatred of the absent Jew?' The rest of my time today will be taken up with looking at some examples of this continuing presence and my conviction that there are two quite distinct and unrelated reasons for it.

It may be that some Jews remained in England after 1290, or trickled back from Northern France after the 1306 Expulsion there; but what evidence there is suggests the presence of no more than a handful of Jews, too few and too unobtrusive to begin to explain the virulent Jew-hatred that continues to renew itself throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.²³

The question of where the English Jews went after the 1290 Expulsion is beyond the scope of this lecture, but we are bound to wonder about them. Probably, many of them went to Northern France, only to be expelled from there a mere sixteen years later. Certainly, some of them and their descendents would have been massacred in the large-scale exterminations of Jews that took place right across Europe in the middle of the 14th century, during the raging of the bubonic plague, the so-called Black Death.

The Jews were blamed for causing and spreading the plague. The charges against them were horrible. It was said that they poisoned wells, that they devised means of polluting the air, that they passed infected clothes around the wider community as well as smearing the walls with a potion made from the swollen glands of plague victims.²⁴ Despite papal edicts condemning the ensuing violence and urging Christians to treat Jews with tolerance and restraint, over two hundred Jewish communities - sixty of them large - were exterminated during this period, and some three hundred and fifty other massacres took place.²⁵ I have mentioned all this because there can be little doubt that the Jewish communities of England would have met with similar treatment during the plague if they had been here. Instead, they were denigrated in their absence.

Jews are portrayed in the comic short stories of the dominant languages of medieval Europe as cunning and devious.²⁶ They are commonly linked with the prevailing evil connotations of the colour red: they are given red hair and red beards, a stereotype that is found as close to our own time as Dickens's Fagin; the Devil too is seen as red, like hell-fire; late 14th-century heretics wore reddish garments; the traitor Judas has red hair. In some plays, Judas wears the red wig that is also used for the Devil, and the two share the same false nose. I wonder whether these red wigs and large noses were also used for Jews depicted in the plays? It seems likely.

The popular religious drama of 14th- and 15th-century England may well have been the most ebullient and persuasive vehicle for the dissemination of the motif of the culpability of the Jews. By repeatedly re-enacting the reviling and deriding of Christ, the plays reinforce and justify the reviling and deriding of the Jews. In one, for example, a dignified Christ figure declares at the Last Judgement that 'the Jews spat on me contemptuously; they dealt with me no more leniently than a thief. But when they struck me, I stood motionless and did them no harm in retaliation.' This, certainly, is a turning of the other cheek; but such gentleness is not reflected in what follows: the virtuous Christians who are to go to heaven are addressed by Christ as 'my chosen children', while the descendants of the chosen people of the Old Testament²⁷ are punitively condemned to everlasting hell.

This Judgement play is from a York cycle of forty-seven plays, depicting episodes from the Fall of Lucifer and the Creation of Man to the Day of Judgement. The only manuscript that has survived has been dated in the second half of the 15th century.²⁸ Of special interest to our discussion of the image of the absent Jew is a Latin inventory of 1415, i.e. antedating the surviving manuscript by some fifty years. This inventory, which lists the characters who appear in each of the plays, is clearly based on an earlier, lost version of the cycle. It makes repeated references to a Jewish presence that not found in the manuscript that we have. For example,

the interrogation and scorning of Christ is enacted in the later version by *high priests and four soldiers*,²⁹ but the entry in the inventory records that 'four Jews persecute and torment Christ.'

Particularly striking is the Crucifixion play,³⁰ in which the sadistic humiliation and pain inflicted on Christ is expressed through callous and explicit dialogue, clearly incorporating detailed stage directions for mimed gestures. In the surviving manuscript text of the play, the tormentors are *four soldiers (or knights)*,³¹ but this what the inventory says about these same characters:

The cross, with Jesus stretched out on it is on the ground. *Four Jews* are beating him and dragging him on a rope; then they raise up the cross, and the body of Christ nailed to the cross, on the hill of Calvary.³²

[My emphasis, GC]

Drama thus becomes documentary. If these figures were indeed played as Jews - as seems probable - it is not difficult to imagine the loathing that they would have aroused in the spectators.

We must remember that in the popular imagination of medieval Europe there is no distinction between the Jews of Christ's time and their own, and little or no sense of history in the perception of time and place. It is therefore not surprising that the Jews of Christ's time are depicted as post-12th-century medieval Jews. The figure of Joseph in nativity scenes is sometimes to be found wearing the pointed hat that distinguishes the medieval Jew from other citizens. On the other hand, the Jewishness of Christ is tacitly denied. Some scenes depicting his arrival in Jerusalem a few days before his crucifixion there show him being welcomed by Jews in distinctive medieval attire. Christ himself is not dressed in the same way; he often carries a cross and almost invariably has the distinguishing halo with intersections representing three of the four points of the cross and symbolising the concept of the Trinity.³³ One most interesting exception to this blurring of Christ's Jewish identity has been found in a miniature depicting gospel accounts of three events following the crucifixion and resurrection.³⁴ In two of these, the figure of Christ conforms to traditional iconography, with cross and halo; in the third, Christ is seated at dinner with two friends, all three wearing the pointed hats that distinguished Jews in medieval Europe.

The one disciple who is recognised as a Jew is Judas, the despicable figure who betrays his friend and master for thirty pieces of silver.³⁵ This is a truly versatile figure in the propaganda of hatred. He is implanted in the medieval imagination as one facet of a tripartite figure of evil: the Devil-Judas-Jew.³⁶

The story of the betrayal of Christ by Judas must surely be one of the most painful and repugnant instances of human treachery in Western culture. Not only does this

man take payment for betraying the friend whom he purports to love, but he identifies that friend to his enemies by singling him out of the crowd with a kiss.³⁷ Little wonder that the imagination of some great painters of the later medieval period was fired by the moment of this terrible kiss.³⁸ How convenient that the name, Judas, resembles so closely the word 'Jew', in Latin and Middle English, as well as in Modern English; and how convenient that he conforms to the hated stereotype by committing his act of treachery for money. The York play of the betrayal of Christ³⁹ depicts Judas in the company of three Jews: Judeus I, II, III.⁴⁰

Although several Old Testament personages are vital elements in medieval religious drama, they are almost never acknowledged as Jews. Examples can be found of plays with stage directions in the margins indicating that some Old Testament characters should be attired as Jews, but this is rare.⁴¹ Such figures as Isaiah and Abraham⁴² are depicted as venerable and authoritative, but not as Jews. Indeed, key Old Testament figures are often annexed by the playwrights for Christian doctrinal purposes. For example, they all appear in a pageant which comprises a dramatised genealogy of Christ.⁴³ In another play, Christ and three of his disciples appear on the stage with Moses and Elijah. 'I come,' says Elijah, 'to glorify Christ's name... I am called into this company to testify that this is God's son and equal.' Moses urges spectators to give their allegiance to Christ, 'This,' he says, echoing Elijah's words, 'is the son of God.'⁴⁴ And one of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims, the Prioress, cites the Old Testament figure of Rachel as an idealised image of Christian maternal love.⁴⁵

It is as if the Jews have forfeited all claims to their Old Testament ancestry because of their crass obstinacy and error in refusing to recognise the Old Testament as prophetic confirmation that Christ is the Messiah. Synagogue is personified in later medieval manuscript illustration and elsewhere as blindfold or depraved.⁴⁶ The New Testament affirms the superiority of Christianity. Baptism replaces circumcision; mercy and forgiveness replace unrelenting retribution - except, it seems, when the offenders are Jews.

Later 14th-century preaching and teaching repeatedly holds the Jew up as a negative model: a being who is so wilfully misguided and vicious that he denies the truth of the Christian faith and is dedicated to the continuing torment of Christ. In the everyday, profane language of the 14th century, it was commonplace to swear by different parts of Christ's body: for example, by the bones, the nails, the blood. People who are guilty of this are castigated as being worse than 'the cursed Jews or else the devil.' Two of Chaucer's pilgrims reproach those who swear in this way. It is 'as if the cursed Jews had not savaged him sufficiently,' says one. 'They tear our blessed Lord's body apart,' says the other, 'it seems to them that the Jews hadn't

wounded him brutally enough'.⁴⁷

In spite of all this, the absent Jew remains a figure of considerable spiritual force. One reason, as I have suggested, is the prevailing belief that the redemption of sinners would only be attained at the second coming of Christ which, in turn, could only happen after the Jews had been converted to Christianity.

This motivation is very apparent in an English play of some two centuries after the Expulsion, known now as the Croxton Play.⁴⁸ Here, the Jew appears as an instrument of propaganda rather than a primary object of hatred. Like Shakespeare's Shylock, more than another century later, the Jews in this 15th-century play are converted to Christianity. They are portrayed as unbelieving and bewildered, rather than vicious; they strive in every way that they can think of to destroy the sacramental bread that is an essential part of Christian worship. Everything they do brings forth divine intervention in the form of several theatrically spectacular miracles. Eventually, this evidence of their own eyes convinces the Jews that their religion is wrong and they willingly submit to baptism as Christians. The contrast with Shylock is very striking. His conversion comes about through coercion, not conviction; the alternative that he is offered is death. Difficult though it may be for Jews now to understand this, the conversions in the Croxton Play are not meant to be offensive; they are presented as a magnanimous and benign event.

The hope of converting the Jews, then, may have been one reason why they were not subjected to an obvious and more rational form of rejection: the simple ignoring of their existence after they had been banished. The baptism of the Croxton Jews misrepresents the reality of a society that had had conspicuously little success in converting Jews. But, despite the Croxton Play, I am not entirely convinced that this image was kept alive to remind Christians to forgive and to strive to convert. How can we reconcile forgiveness of the Jew with the pervasive loathing, fear and revulsion that were always associated with him? How might the banishers have hoped to bring about the conversion of an absent people? These questions point to an altogether different reason why the resources of prejudice were directed so strenuously against people who were not there to refute, by either argument or example, the falseness of the image that was being propagated. I shall conclude by saying what I think this different reason was; before I do so, though, I'd like to look at one more aspect of how the medieval English Jews were experienced by others.

The most pernicious calumny against the Jews was what came to be known as the 'blood libel': the belief that Jews crucified, mutilated and murdered Christian children and used their blood in religious rituals.⁴⁹ Although no evidence was ever produced to support such charges, when a Christian child disappeared, Jews would often be attacked both in the vicinity and further afield.

In this context, one sinister pre-Expulsion event stands out particularly insistently: it is the death of Hugh of Lincoln, a small boy who disappeared during the summer of 1255 and whose body was found about a month later. Around these frugal certainties there grew up a plethora of fantasies and versions of what had taken place, all purporting to be accurate historical accounts.⁵⁰ These accounts, which contradict each other at numerous points, are a triumph of imagination over information. What they all have in common is the conviction that this was a ritual murder by Jews of a Christian child. The details vary, but it is always said that the child was cruelly tortured and murdered and that many miracles happened at the site of the discovered body. This site is sometimes a cess-pit and sometimes a well, but it is always allegedly attached to the house of a named Jew. Despite the absence of any concrete evidence against him, the accused Jew was dragged through the streets and then hanged, as were a further eighteen, while some ninety were taken to the Tower. Many of the victimised Jews just happened to be in Lincoln briefly, at the time of the arrests, to attend a wedding; they were not in Lincoln when Hugh died.

The allegations, distortions of conflicting circumstantial evidence, and wilful miscarriages of justice that inflated and perpetuated the story of Hugh were nourished by the well-entrenched hatred of the Jews. The events enhanced the fame of Lincoln as a centre of Christian faith by bringing into being a new local saint: the child martyr, St Hugh of Lincoln.

Such use of Jew-hatred to reinforce Christian faith is effectively demonstrated in a tale told by one of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims, over a century after the events at Lincoln, and at least three generations after the expulsion of the Jews from England. I will summarise the story briefly:⁵¹

It is set in a nameless 'great city' in Asia, where there is a Jewish ghetto in the midst of a Christian community. The ruler of this city, we are told, allows the Jews to live there so that they can practise 'wicked' but necessary money-lending.

A devout little Christian boy is in the habit of passing through the ghetto each day on his way to school, always singing a Latin song of praise to the Virgin Mary. This incenses the Jews so much that, egged on by Satan, they pay one of their community to cut the child's throat and throw his body into a cess-pit.

The tearful, distraught mother searches everywhere for her missing child. His whereabouts are revealed when the whole area rings with the sound of his voice, singing his customary song of praise to the Virgin Mary, loud and clear. The body is retrieved, the throat still cut, the child still singing. The child discloses that his uninterrupted singing is because of the miraculous intervention of Mary. Eventually, poignantly, the child is allowed to die in peace. At the end of the tale, the audience is reminded of Hugh of Lincoln who was, they are told, 'also slain by the cursed

Jews.⁵²

The setting is geographically remote, but the hatred is powerfully immediate. Good and evil confront each other through emotive key words: the pious child is 'little', 'young', 'innocent'. The word 'Jews' is repeated over and over again: they are 'cursed' and 'loathsome to Christ and his followers.' Not only the murderer, but all the Jews who knew of this murder are subsequently tortured and put to death in a degrading manner.

Debate about whether this tale can be seen as evidence of Chaucer's personal hatred of the Jews is understandable, but misdirected. Certainly, it transmits a set of strongly-held attitudes, but Chaucer distances himself from all of his tales by inventing individual narrators. In this instance, his invented tale-teller is a nun, a Prioress. She is a superficial and shallow woman, preoccupied with the trivial and the insignificant, but she is by no means an unattractive figure. If we had only Chaucer's benignly satirical introductory portrait of her, we would find her engagingly human; whereas, if we had only her tale, we would find its hatred and violence singularly harsh and would assume that its narrator was stern and vicious. To suggest that the author who has so skilfully depicted the Prioress's affectations and frothiness would choose her as a mouthpiece for his own views seems to me to be quite wrong. The gulf between the Prioress's approach and the profound issues that her tale encompasses is as vast as that between a soap opera and a great novel: both purport to depict life and experience, but the resemblance ends there.

As with every rich vein of ideas in our cultural history, that relating to Jews and Christians modifies and changes as it filters through to popular thinking, which is the level where Chaucer's Prioress picks it up. She reflects the prevailing views of her time: that Jews are disgusting, non-human, and evil; that they are the breeding-place of the Devil, quite beyond any claim to compassion;⁵³ that they merit hatred for their savage treatment of the pious child whom they brutally murder and so offensively throw into a cess-pit.

Two centuries later, Shakespeare was to dramatize the hatred between Christians and Jews as entirely reciprocal. Shylock says, 'I hate him for he is a Christian... He hates our sacred nation...' ⁵⁴ There is no such symmetry in the Prioress's perception of the Jews: she depicts them as the initiators of the Christian hatred that brings what she sees as deserved retribution on them.

The Prioress's tale is of particular interest because it shows how skilfully the imagination can harness prejudice in the service of religious belief. I am certain that her hatred of the Jews is secondary to the central purpose of this tale, which is to use the persuasive rhetoric of the miraculous to show the power of Christianity to vanquish evil.

I have now reached the culminating point of this lecture: my conclusions about the true impetus of the ever-present hatred of the long-absent Jew in late medieval England.

When Chaucer is writing in the later 14th-century, the church is increasingly assailed by dissent, which it responds to by heresy-hunting. It is also having to grapple with the inertia of clergy and laity alike and with what it sees as pervasive moral degeneration. Unrecanted heresy is punished by burning here and now; unrepented sin is punished by hell-fire throughout eternity. I am convinced that it is no coincidence that at this very time a monstrous and hugely convenient enemy is cultivated with all the resources that the imagination can muster. The Jews have become an essential component in the religious instruction of the culture that banished them. Hatred of the malignant outsider is calculated to regenerate a faith that has become weakened by inertia and undermined by corruption.

Epilogue.

In the course of my thinking about this topic, there was one question that came back and back into my mind and that I'd like to leave you with today. Times change, beliefs change, and the objects of hatred change, but it seems that the uses of hatred are timeless and universal. We know very well the extent to which, in our own century, hatred goes on serving to distract attention, to displace blame and to distort judgement. What we don't yet understand is why it is that human beings can so easily be persuaded to despise and destroy each other.

NOTES

¹ See, for example, the hyperbole in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* (960-65), where the Christian Emperor orders his men to take vengeance on the Muslims, who are subsequently subjected to affliction, burned and murdered.

² 1290-1656.

³ The word is not in the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1933), but it is in the second (1989), where the earliest citation is 1881. It is recorded in France in 1886. In 1896, Gladstone is reported in the *Daily News* as saying 'Of course, I am strongly anti anti-Semitism.'

⁴ See Jacob R. Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World* (Cincinnati, 1938), pp.131-2; and James Parkes, *The Jew in the Medieval Community* (London, 1938), Chapter 3, pp.59-89.

⁵ See Gavin Langmuir, 'The Jews and the Archives of Angevin England: reflections on Medieval anti-Semitism.' *Traditio* 19 (1963), pp.183-244, esp. 230-36. Hereafter Langmuir, *Traditio*; Zefira Entin Rokeah, 'The State, the Church and the Jews in Medieval England,' in Shmuel Almog (Ed.), *Antisemitism through the Ages* (Oxford, etc. 1988), pp.99-125. Hereafter Almog; Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: the evolution of Medieval anti-Judaism* (Cornell, 1982). A rigorous study, with excellent notes and bibliography.

⁵ Langmuir, *Traditio*, p.225.

⁷ See Bernhard Blumencrantz, *Le juif médiéval au miroir de l'art chrétien* (Etudes Augustiniennes, Paris, 1966), p.32, plates 23, and 24, caricatures of Jews in two English documents, 1271/2 and 1289; see also Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews* (Yale, 1943), pp.26-7: 'Aaron fil[ius] diaboli'; Cecil Roth, *Essays and Portraits in Anglo-Jewish History* (Philadelphia, 1962) p.24, figs 6, 7, 8 (pp.82-3). Hereafter Roth, *Essays*.

⁸ Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, 2nd Edition, revised by Cecil Roth, (London, 1932), p.314.

⁹ H.G. Richardson, *The English Jewry under Angevin Kings* (London, 1960) pp.21-22 and vii.

¹⁰ See Michael Adler, *Jews of Mediæval England* (London, 1939) pp.52, 65; and Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the end of the Middle Ages* (New York, 1961), Chapter IV, 'Contacts between Jews and Gentiles,' pp.29-42.

¹¹ Langmuir, *Traditio* pp.222-3.

¹² *Ibid*, p.225.

¹³ See Roth, *Essays*, Chapter 4, 'A Day in the life of a Medieval English Jew,' pp.26-45.

¹⁴ See Adler (op. cit.), Chapter VI, on the Domus Conversorum.

¹⁵ Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21; and see Matthew 5:38-39, Luke 6:29.

¹⁶ Langmuir, *Traditio*, p.234; see also Kenneth E. Stow, 'Hatred of the Jews or Love of the Church: Papal Policy towards the Jews in the Middle Ages,' in *Almog*, pp.71-89.

¹⁷ Langmuir, *Traditio* p.238-9; and see the primary documents (with English translations) in Solomon Grayzel, *The Church and the Jews in the XIII century* (New York, 1966).

¹⁸ Matthew 27:25; see also Mark 15, Luke 22-23, John 18-19.

¹⁹ Exodus 20:5, 34:7.

²⁰ See Frank Felsenstein, 'Jews and Devils: anti-Semitic Stereotypes of Late Medieval and Renaissance England.' *Literature and Theology* 4, 1990, pp.15-28.

²¹ The catalogue of Medieval and Renaissance manuscripts in the Huntington Library (by C.W. Dutschke, published California, 1989) records some examples of graphic representations of Jews. Of particular interest here are miniatures in two 15th-century English manuscripts (pp.195 and 649): MS 142, f.8v, 'Jew spitting at Christ' and MS 26054, illustration 22, 'the face of Christ in the center, with a Jew spitting at him from either side.'

²² Langmuir, *Traditio*, p.191.

²³ See Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death*, (London, 1982) p.110.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.102.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 108 and 111.

²⁶ See, for example, *Medieval Comic Tales*, translated from French, Spanish, Italian, German, Dutch, Latin and Middle English, by Derek Brewer et al. (Cambridge, 1972); especially 'The False Messiah', pp.95-97; 'The Jew's Daughter', p.133.

²⁷ 1 Kings 3:8; Psalms 89:3 and 105:6; Isaiah 43:20 and 65:15.

²⁸ British Library MS Additional 35290. The plays are known to have been in existence in some form, now lost, in the late fourteenth century. The later manuscript text has been edited by Richard Beadle: *The York Plays* (London, 1982), hereafter *York*. The quotation of the words spoken by Christ is from Play XLVII, 'The Last Judgement', lines 261-4 p.412.

²⁹ *York*, Play XXIX, 'Christ before Annas and Caiaphas', pp.242-53.

³⁰ *York*, Play XXXV, 'The Crucifixion,' pp.315-23.

³¹ *Latin Miles*; see Notes, *York*, p.451.

³² J. Purvis, (Ed.), *The York Cycle of Mystery Plays*, (London, 1957), p.282.

³³ See Blumencrantz (op. cit.), plate 141, p.123, Germany 1360/70; plate 130,

p.156, Germany, 1233/36; plate 157, p.131; probably French, 14th/15th century.

³⁴ See *ibid.*, plate 159, p.133; from an English Psalter, late 12th/early 13th century. The gospel episodes here are John 20:14-17 (Mary Magdalen); John 20:26-27 (Thomas); Luke 24:13-31 (Emmaus).

³⁵ See *ibid.*, plate 98, p.90; from a 14th-century Austrian bible.

³⁶ Harold Fisch, *The Dual Image: A Study of the Figure of the Jew in English Literature* (London, 1971).

³⁷ Matthew 26:14-15, 47; Mark 14:10-11, 43-44; Luke 22:4-6, 47.

³⁸ See especially the frescoes of Duccio, in Siena (Museo del Duomo), and Giotto, in Padua (the Arena Chapel).

³⁹ *York, Play XXVIII*, 'The Agony in the Garden and the Betrayal,' pp.234-42.

⁴⁰ See the caricature of three Jews in *Blumencrantz* (op. cit., plate 25, p.33): decorating the initial I, introducing an encyclopaedia entry 'Iudei', English manuscript, c. 1350.

⁴¹ Fisch (op. cit., page 18) cites a 12th-century Latin play from Austria featuring Isaac, and a 16th-century English play featuring Rebecca, Jacob and Esau.

⁴² E.g. *The Shearmen and Tailors' Play* in *English Mystery Plays* Ed. Peter Happé, Penguin Books, 1975; *York, Play X*; Northampton, *Play IV* in *Non-Cycle Plays* (op. cit., Note 48 below), and see the next Note.

⁴³ *The Ludus Coventriae*, Ed. K.S. Block, Early English Text Society E.S. CXX (Oxford, 1922), 'The Prophets', pp.57-62.

⁴⁴ *York, Play XXIII*, 'The Transfiguration,' lines 67...114-16, 121-132, pp.194-5.

⁴⁵ *The Prioress's Tale*, line 627.

⁴⁶ See *Blumenkrantz* (op. cit.), plate 123, p.108, and plate 58, p.55.

⁴⁷ See the Host's words to the Parish Priest, in the Epilogue to the tale told by the Man of Law (line 1166) and to the Physician and the Pardoner, before the Pardoner's Prologue (line 288); and see *The Parson's Tale*, (line 590) and *The Pardoner's Tale*, (line 474-5).

⁴⁸ *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, Norman Davis (Ed.). Early English Text Society (S.1) (Oxford, 1970): 'The Play of the Sacrament,' pp.58-89.

⁴⁹ For example, the making of unleavened bread for Passover. This is a wilful inversion of the practices and taboos of a religion which has a marked aversion to contact with blood. Other inversions are evident, such as the distortion of the Judaic taboo against intercourse with animals, which the Church turns against the Jews themselves by declaring that intercourse with a Jew is to be regarded as bestiality.

⁵⁰ There are some twenty-seven versions, ten of which are in 13th-century manuscripts. See Frank Montagu Modder, *The Jew in the Literature of England*,

(Philadelphia, 1939; reprinted Cleveland and New York 1960), pp.11-12; some contemporary chronicles and annals are summarised with admirable clarity by Gavin Langmuir, 'The Knight's Tale of young Hugh of Lincoln,' *Speculum* 47 (1972), pp.459-82.

⁵¹ *The Prioress's Tale*, Riverside Chaucer (Boston, 1987), pp.209-213. There are several versions of this tale, some of which set it in Carcassone, in the South of France.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 684-5.

⁵³ Her harshness towards the Jews is all the more chilling in the light of her sentimentality towards animals: 'She wept if she saw a mouse in a trap, if it were dead, or bleeding. She fed her little dogs on delicacies and shed anguished tears if one of them died or if someone beat it smartly with a stick.' General Prologue, *Canterbury Tales*, 144-149.

⁵⁴ *Merchant of Venice*, I.iii.37...43; see also III.i.61-64.

