

**FEELING PERSECUTED: CHRISTIANS, JEWS AND IMAGES OF VIOLENCE
IN THE MIDDLE AGES BY ANTHONY BALE
London: Reaktion Books, 2010**

Review by Kathryn A. Piccard
Independent Scholar

“The subject in this book is those ways Medieval people made present, made immediate, violence between Christians and Jews through media—the books, images, churches, maps, and theme parks.” (p. 28)

This book focuses on the role that emotional reaction to art played in the persistent violent persecution of Jews by Christians in Western Europe in the Middle Ages. The ideas Christians held were certainly important, but there was a complex interplay of these ideas expressed in visual images in churches, in books, and in devotional prayers and the viewer’s consequent emotional reaction. Most historians have overemphasized ideas without examining how these ideas related to the emotional response. Bale’s study corrects that omission and shows how deeply integrated into Christian culture the ideas of dangerous Jews were—Jews supposedly threatening Christians, their religion and their way of life, even when all of the countries’ Jews had been expelled well over a century previously! The psychological defense mechanism of projection—projecting onto another person or group the trait or behavior which one does not like to recognize in oneself—is an integral theme of the book. It is a normal psychological mechanism, often relatively benign, but repeatedly and irregularly carried to deadly extremes.

Although most of his examples are from England, Bale examines Western Europe and the Roman Catholic Church, particularly in England, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the Low Countries. In addition he describes the Holy Land as pilgrims depicted it. His work is interdisciplinary, drawing upon literature, history and art, with an understanding of psychology. It is selective and illustrative in both senses, rather than exhaustive, and he is familiar with the extensive literature in the field of the history of Christian anti-Jewish theology, laws, behavior, customs, politics, etc. For example, Jews in Christian art can usually be identified by the special clothes they wear including certain hats, by the caricature of hooked noses, by the disruptive actions they are shown engaging in, by their profile depictions, by their facing in the opposite direction from Christians, and so on. Multiple clues make them fairly easy for the viewer to identify.

To begin with, the dust jacket has a color picture of Jews crucifying Jesus by nailing Him to the cross. The *Roman* soldiers who *actually* crucified Jesus are literally not in the picture, apart from Longinus, who does not even look like a Roman soldier! I have never before seen such a visual illustration of the Deicide accusation against the Jews, and it is stunning in its dishonesty. It was made, of course, in the Middle Ages when Christians—and *not* Jews—had the power to make Jews suffer and die in large numbers, which many Christians did from time to time, sometimes recreationally. Yet it pictures *Jews* causing Christ to suffer. Christians who identified with Jesus therefore identified

with his victimization at the hands of Roman soldiers. Of course, it is not Jews, but Christians who persistently blamed the Jews. The 39 pictures in the book make this point abundantly clear.

Bale uses close examination of different poems and works of art, mostly Christian but some Jewish, to demonstrate different points. Christians deliberately used images to manipulate the emotions of others, ostensibly for their benefit, both by writers for readers, and by writers as a rhetorical device for listeners. He mentions medieval theories of how vision evoked emotions and how one therefore ought to be selective in one's exposure to images. They also wrote about how to make images and use them as a standard part of education and schooling.

Supposedly, contemplation of the crucifixion was a routine and basic aspect of Christian life. The crucifix was interpreted as showing Jesus' **love** (that Jesus would die to offer humanity salvation), **life-giving** (in that Christ offered eternal life), **obedient** (as a dutiful son to God the Father, although a more nuanced interpretation of that is available today), **an experience of unjust suffering** (in regard to an unfair trial and unfair torture because Jesus was innocent but *not* because torture itself was wrong, or crucifixion itself, and because Jews caused it and/or did it), and a **torture-death** (evoking horror and gratitude in those who contemplated the crucifix). Bale discusses the routine attention to pain and torture themes in Christian devotions, which often juxtapose pain, torture and terror with babies, children, vulnerability and innocence. Mary's supposed awareness that her sweet baby Jesus faced a gruesome death is an example.

This juxtaposition was also exemplified in the Blood Libel, a common belief which claimed that Jews kidnapped and tortured Christian children to death to get their blood to use.¹ Some popes and others did speak or write *ex cathedra* denying that Jews killed Christian children. Such efforts had little effect, however, probably because those at the receiving end did not *feel* respected and listened to, did not experience the validation of their emotions, or the complex of their beliefs which they considered "well known facts" that *everybody* knew. Not feeling understood few, apparently, were able to listen to reason and facts, and to evaluate their veracity. Believing the Blood Libel was one way Christians as a community felt persecuted by Jews.²

Bale divides his work into seven chapters. The first has to do with pain, a sign that there is life, and the effort to evoke specific emotions in readers and viewers. The second examines violence and memory, and how these were integrated into school curricula for boys. The punishments that the Child Jesus supposedly meted out to naughty classmates are examples alternating cruelty and mercy—not that Jesus was *called* cruel. The third chapter looks at the Jewish profile in art, and the history of ugliness. He starts with a warning not to read these in the context of Nazi racism, since they did not emerge in it and had different meanings. Bale provides historic background to caricatures and stereotypes, and discusses how Judas was depicted red-haired. And the representations of pre- and post-incarnational Jews differed.

Chapter four deals with Dormition/Assumption imagery, where a Jewish leader is said to have tried to disrupt Mary's funeral procession by trying to overturn her bier. However his hands stuck to it. The archangel Michael cut his hands off, and/or they

1 These children were occasionally canonized as saints.

2 "[F]eeling persecuted in a spiritually edifying way" (p. 43).

withered, and he was blinded, as were his companions, but he and his companions were restored upon conversion, or so the story goes. I disagree with him that the associations with the biblical figure “Oza” (actually Uzzah) who touched the ark, described in 2 Samuel 6:1-12, and was struck dead are insignificant as a parallel for Mary’s bier being desecrated by Jephonias.³

Fig. 17 shows a complex three-tier fresco design making a parallel narrative of Christ’s Ascension on one side of the chancel of a Church near Oxford, and Mary’s Assumption on the other, completed on the east wall, in 41 segments, including windows. It was meant to be studied as one moved along, looking closely, and comparing the representations side to side. Fig. 19 shows a rare strip of multiple scenes of the Jew attacking the bier, and after being converted, ministering to the other Jews, as mentioned. In a similar vein, religious plays in England are also discussed—some solemn, some with laughable elements, where Jews are disruptive.

The fifth chapter examines the Holy Land, especially Jerusalem, as Christians saw it, and their efforts to remake it back home with copies adjusted to their taste. The sixth chapter looks at memorials of persecutions. St. Helena’s “archeological” dig, which unearthed what was touted as the True Cross, led to different Jerusalems with “the site of Calvary, the archaeologized Jerusalem (stones), the Jerusalem of biblical narrative, a liturgical Jerusalem (vestments, bell, Mass paraphernalia), a place at once of imagination, empathy and the hard facts of relics, measurements and fabric.” (p. 156.) Although the original places and Churches in the Holy Land and those “copies” in Europe were not identical, they were regarded as equal; and, of course, they were much easier for European pilgrims to reach!

The seventh chapter is about Cultures in Pain. It concludes with a useful discussion of the specific contexts in which different anti-Jewish writings, art, and actions must be interpreted, rather than interpreting them all from a post-Nazi view of racism.

Instead of concentrating just on the *ideas* of the educated few, a real strength of this book is the consideration of the *emotions* of Christians in general as motivating factors in their interpretation and production of images, and in their actions. Naturally these images fed their spiritual emotions and also validated the emotions, and helped to indoctrinate each new generation. Furthermore, for those who saw few images in their lives, and who saw them mostly in Churches and Christian books, the “halo effect” of sanctity (and presumed accuracy) was apt to be attributed to them. So the images they saw were much more authoritative than images seem to us today, and the authority they carried was that of the Church and God. Many Christians could not analyze them critically, although others could and did.

The bibliography is extensive, the footnotes are clear and informative, and the writing is noteworthy. Bale includes modern English translations of archaic English words,

3 Revel-Neher, Elisheva, *The Image of the Jew in Byzantine Art*. Oxford: Published for the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Anti-semitism, Hebrew University of Jerusalem by Pergamon Press, 1991, deals with this. Also, Michael Rear, *Walsingham: Pilgrims and Pilgrimage*. London: St. Pauls Publishing, 2011, pp. 99-102, 315, also discusses the ark, and the Temple curtains that appear on the priory seal, implicitly making the comparison that Mary’s agreement to the incarnation made her body the ark which held God incarnate. http://cosmiclog.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/05/08/11605245-3000-year-old-artifacts-reveal-history-behind-biblical-david-and-goliath?lite, accessed May 20, 2012, reports archeological findings, of stone or clay examples of Hebrew arks, a technical term for a box for keeping God symbols.

and translations of Latin and other words and phrases in the text, but he does not explain all the technical terms he uses, so some readers will want to have a dictionary handy while reading.

There are some very minor errors, such as occasional omission of letters or short words, or the use of the wrong word, (*crucifix* where *cross* is accurate, fig. 25), but they do not substantially detract from the book.

~~~~~  
Kathryn A. Piccard



MUSEUM OF RUSSIAN ICONS

---