

CHAPTER 2 THE PAN-EUROPEAN ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

IMAGERY OF JUDAISM AND THE JEWS

One more example of Church influence on Jewish life was the picture that was painted by leaders of the Church of Judaism and the Jews. Of the three ways that the Church impacted on the Jews, doctrine – as we saw before – was the least subject to change. Policy was somewhat more flexible, as it evolved with time. Imagery (the way Jews were perceived) was the most changeable of the three and the one that the Church had to least influence on. The image that Christians had of Jews was more different from place to place and from time to time than were the doctrine of the Church and the policy of rulers. Nonetheless, even though the Church authorities had only limited influence on what people thought about Jews, it is still relevant to look at what the imagery of Jews was that they presented.

The way Jews had been portrayed in older sources, was quite diverse. The Gospels and the writings of Paul offer intensely negative images besides here and there positive statements about Jews. Paul seemed to have been quite ambivalent about Jews and Judaism. As we saw before, this ambivalence came up again in the teachings of Augustine. As a result, both the leadership of the Church and the common Christian believers had a lot to draw upon when thinking about their Christian neighbors.

Judaism and Jews are themes that often showed up in the preaching of the medieval clergy. A feature of sermons is that it often tends towards exaggeration, in order to captivate the audience. So, if we study sermons about Jews, we often find a lot of extreme statements (such as how dangerous Jews are), and not much moderation. On the other hand, sources that come from the central agencies of the Church often inclined towards moderate and rational statements. When even sources relating to the pope are rich in statements on Jews that are unrestrained, we may conclude that these statements reflect widespread popular perceptions.

The most prominent image of Jews was that they denied Jesus as the Messiah. According to the Gospels, this had led to the Crucifixion. The Roman authority had wanted to release Jesus, but the Jews had insisted on his crucifixion and death. This idea of Jewish hostility was the most basic of Christians' perceptions of Jews throughout the ages. As we have seen, the explosion of anti-outsider sentiment unleashed by the call to the First Crusade brought out an urge for revenge in certain circles against the Jews.

We remember the opposition of these views by Bernard of Clairvaux at the beginning of the Second Crusade. The Crusade is essentially a military expedition taken by European Christians in order to recover control of the Holy Land from the Muslims. Even though Bernard criticized the popular crusader thinking, he did not challenge the views people had of Jews being enemies. In fact, he accepted these views and ideas, but also insisted that God had already punished the Jews by exiling them forever. Given this punishment of being exiled, crusaders had no right to seek revenge on Jews. Bernard notes in his statement that medieval Jews resigned themselves to living peacefully in Christian society, even though

the heirs of their ancestors opposed both Christ and Christianity. If the Muslims were willing to be this subservient, there would be no need for crusading. Peter the Venerable of Cluny, who was the same age as Bernard, did not share the same sense of Jewish docility, or obedience. On the eve of the Second Crusade, Peter had sent a letter to the King of France, suggesting that the Jews of the 12th century were just as hostile as their ancestors. Peter wrote in this letter that Jews were finding ways to be disrespectful towards sacred figures and objects of the Christian faith. While Peter deliberately avoided anti-Jewish violence as the appropriate response to the apparent Jewish opposition, he did urge that the Jews should be forced to pay the price of the crusade as a punishment for their ongoing hostility to Christianity and Christians.

While notions of historic Jewish opposition must be fully anticipated in writings by the pope and the government of the Roman Catholic Church, the growing sense of current Jewish hostility is shocking. We return once more to the powerful and innovative Pope Innocent III. We have noted his policy toward the Jews, and now we must discuss his contribution to the imagery of the Jews. We have already noted his addition of a new opening and closing to the traditional *Constitutio pro Judeis*, or the Constitution for the Jews: "Although the Jewish perfidy is in every way worthy of condemnation," an unusually harsh way of describing Judaism as a perfidy, or deceit. Also, the closing of the Constitution states the existence of Jews who plot against Christians and their faith, with the statement that Jewish plotters are not allowed to be enjoy the protection provided by the *Constitutio*.

Innocent's further letters included many anti-Jewish statements. In a 1205 letter to the King of France, Innocent begins by acknowledging the acceptability of Jewish life under Christian princes in Christian society. However, he states, "princes who prefer the sons of the crucifiers, against whom the blood cries to the Father's ears, to the heirs of the Crucified Christ." In this statement, he complained against royal and baronial favoritism towards Jews, depicting them as "sons of crucifiers." Innocent's letter reflects intense and hostile Jewish imagery which was likely to arouse anti-Jewish sentiment among Christians.

Innocent's sense of the Jews as present-day enemies to Christians and Christianity is reflected in another letter sent later to the archbishops of Sens and of Paris. In this letter, Innocent speaks poorly of Jews again, and specifically notes Jewish behaviors in northern France, along with the royal and baronial favoritism of Jews. He starts the letter by focusing on how certain Christians accept Jews, "who by their own guilt are consigned to perpetual servitude, because they crucified the Lord, although their own prophets had predicted that he would come in the flesh to redeem Israel." Muslims – according to Innocent – rebuked the Christian world for tolerating the Jews under these circumstances. Nonetheless, this is the nature of Christian saintliness. In the face of such saintliness, "the Jews should not be ungrateful to us and should not pay back Christian favor with insults..." However, Jews do in fact show that they are ungrateful. Innocent's letter reads, "While they are mercifully admitted into our intimacy, they threaten us with that retribution that they are accustomed to give to their hosts, in accordance with the proverb, 'like a mouse in a pocket, like the snake around one's loins, like the fire in one's bosom.'" This imagery of Jews changes them from historical enemies to acute, present-day dangers. This important change of imagery took place all across western Christendom, beginning during the 12th century. It seems that

during this transformation of the Jewish imagery, Pope Innocent III was not the actual innovator. In fact, he was the follower of an existing trend. Nonetheless, the pronouncement of these views on Jews by the Church and the Pope had an important impact.

Pope Innocent III brings several proofs for Jewish ingratitude and hatred. He mentions crimes such as blasphemy of Jesus, blasphemy against the host, and oppression of Christians through lending against interest. Innocent expresses the widespread idea that Jews grab every opportunity to kill Christians, merely out of hatred of the Christian faith. In his letter to the king of France he writes: "They take advantage of every wicked opportunity to kill in secret their Christian hosts."

Still, the leaders of the Church often protected the Jews against the worst accusations that reared their head during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The blood libel accusation – the claim that Jews killed Christians to use their blood for Jewish rituals – was often investigated by the Pope, and rejected. Other claims however were reinforced or justified by the popes. For instance, the claim of host desecration was often confirmed by the papacy when it endorsed the building of churches on the sites of these supposed desecration, which became sites of miracles as well. An influential example was the Pope's recognition of a such a shrine in Paris. In short, with respect to anti-Jewish allegations, the leadership of the Church was ambiguous.

The previously discussed investigation and condemnation of the Talmud contribute strongly towards the declining image of Jews in western Christendom. However, Pope Innocent IV did try to reverse the total prohibition of the Talmud of 1242. In general, the popes were in favor of censoring the Talmud, which meant taking out sections that were considered offensive. The harsh language with which the popes portrayed the Talmud, did support the idea of Jews being an alien and hostile part of society. Out of concern for Jewish blasphemy, the Church intensified the anti-Jewish perceptions that had developed across Western Christendom from the 12th century on.