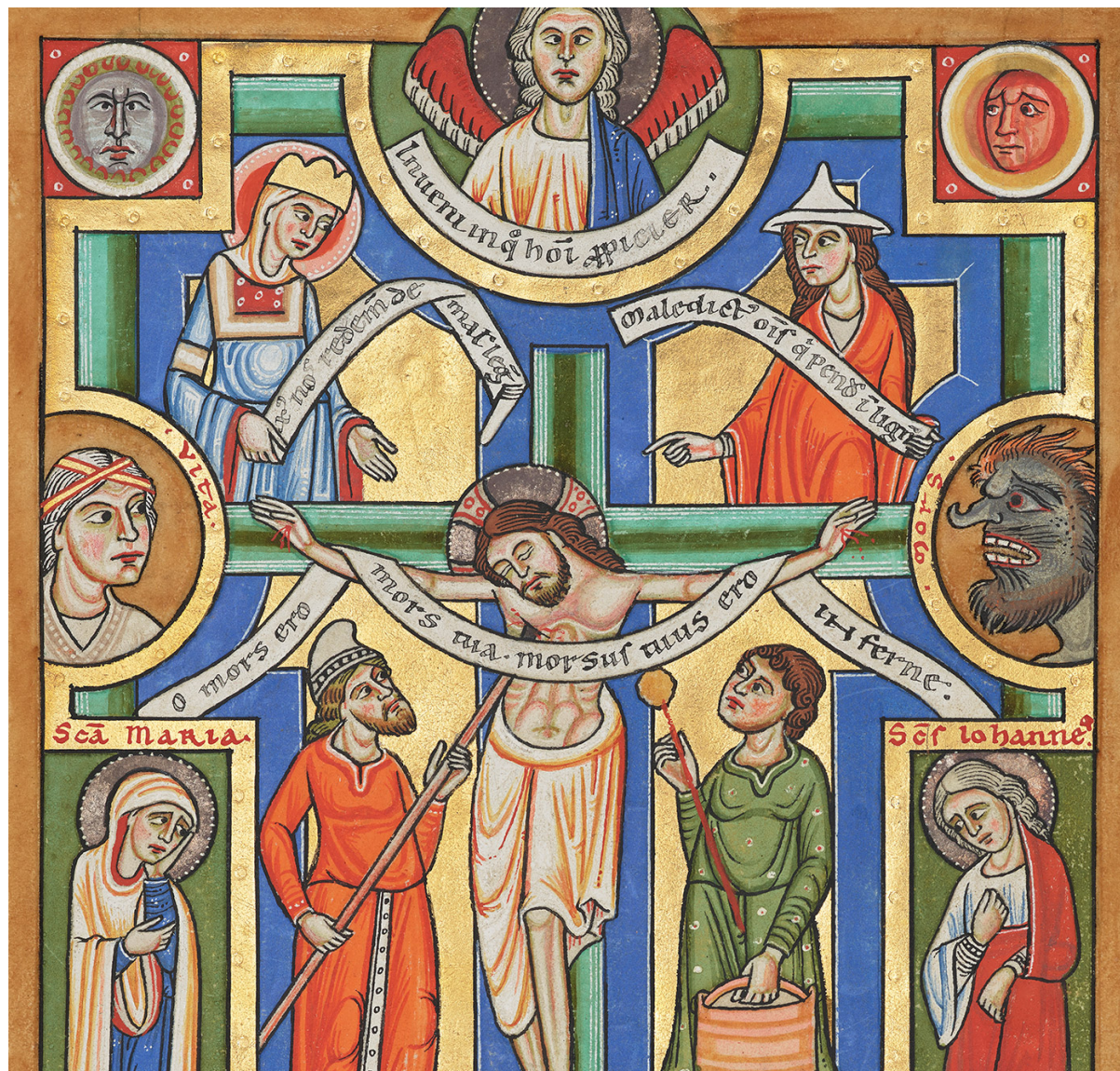


Representing and Misrepresenting Jews in Medieval Culture

Anthony Bale, University of London, Birkbeck



[The Crucifixion](#) (detail) in the Stammheim Missal, probably 1170s, unknown illuminator, made in Hildesheim, Lower Saxony, Germany. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. 64 (97.MG.21), fol. 86. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program

The exhibition [Outcasts: Prejudice and Persecution in the Medieval World](#) featured a memorable image of "Mors"—Death. In this image from the Stammheim Missal, produced in Germany in the later twelfth century, Death is a bearded male figure with dark skin and a hooked nose, who grimaces, in profile, across the page, over the Crucifixion of Christ at the image's center, and under the figures of Ecclesia (Church) and Synagoga (Synagogue), toward his opposite number: Vita (Life) a blushing young female figure in three-quarter view. The personifications of Death and Life here draw together some of the most enduring ways in which Jews were imagined, (mis)represented, and vilified in medieval

culture, in a number of key modes of representation:

- Making Jews present at the Crucifixion and at the heart of Christian devotional reading and ritual.
- Associating Jews with an identifiable physicality—that is, what we might now called a stereotype.
- Contrasting violence and death (Jewish) with meekness and life (Christian).
- Associating Jews with “bad art,” ugly representation, and dispossession from grace, beauty, and perspective.

Medieval art and culture were instrumental in defining, developing, and repeating a kind of cultural violence against Jews that returned repeatedly to the Jewish image in order to disesteem Judaism. In this article I use this page from the Stammheim Missal to think through some of these issues.

The entire page from the Stammheim Missal is designed to show Christianity's triumph over the Old Law of Judaism. Paradoxically, this triumph comes through Christ's redemptive death: his suffering death at the hands of the Jews in order to redeem Adam's sin and to give life. Christ hangs from the central cross, with a scroll draped across his body. The words on this scroll are themselves a citation from the Hebrew bible, from the prophecy of Hosea:

O mors ero mors tua / morsus tuus ero inferne
O death, I will be thy death, O hell, I will be thy bite

—Hosea 13:14

This text would have been read by its medieval Christian audience as a typological prefiguration—in other words, a Hebrew prediction—of Christ's victory over death at the Crucifixion and in the Resurrection. Moreover, in proving the Hebrew prophecy, the scene offers a new covenant: the process through which the Hebrew bible becomes an old testament to the Christian new. Above Christ's shoulders stand two figures who symbolize the relationship between the Old and New Laws: Ecclesia, the Church, crowned and dressed in blue, smiling gently to Christ with the scroll quoting an abbreviated version of St Paul's words “*Christus nos redemit de maledicto legis*” (Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, Galatians 3:13); meanwhile Synagoga, in red and with dark hair under a “Jew's cap,” bears a version of the vengeful words “*quia maledictus a Deo est qui pendet in lingo*” (for he is accursed of God that hangeth on a tree, Deuteronomy 21:23). In this way, the entire image is constructed to reiterate and reinforce the idea that Christ's crucifixion is a damning indictment, repudiation, and supersession of Jewish law.

We might note that the Romans who pierce Christ's side and offer him a sponge soaked in vinegar (Matthew 27:48) are represented in a neutral way and, like Synagoga, are recognizably human figures. Conversely, the figure of *Mors* or Death is quite different, and represents those who are wilfully hostile to Life and to Christ. So can we call this figure of Death “Jewish”? The answer is no, and yes.

In this image, Death is most instantly recognizable—or, to put it another way, made more memorable—by the crudely drawn features of his face (which is, in terms of size, out of scale with the faces of the other figures on the page). Perhaps the first thing we notice about him is his long, crooked nose, curling at the end. This puts Death into the company of the representation of other malevolent “Jewish” figures in medieval visual culture: the torturers of Christ at the Crucifixion.

In the [Winchester Psalter](#) (London, British Library Cotton MS Nero C. iv), made around the same time as the Stammheim Missal, the mockers of Christ at his arrest have a variety of crudely drawn faces with misshapen noses. In the [Crucifixion image in the De Quincy Apocalypse](#) (London: Lambeth Palace Library MS 209, fol. 51v), made in England around 1260, the figures who nail Christ's hands and feet to the Cross have similarly crude faces, drawn in profile, with misshapen noses.

In the [Tring Tiles](#), a ceramic narrative of the childhood of Jesus made in England around 1300, the “Jewish” detractors have a range of crooked noses. And in the famous Holkham Bible Picture Book (London, British Library Add. MS 47682) of about 1325, the Jewish face appears in a variety of profile forms, often with a bulbous, bent, or snub nose (as in [this example of Jesus debating with the Pharisees and Sadducees](#)). And yet, at the time the Stammheim Missal was produced, it would be hard to prove there was a stable idea or stereotype of the Jewish nose—it would be more accurate to say that the bent or misshapen nose was a sign of sin, violence, and ugliness. The crooked nose allies Death with demons or the devil, as in the [striking images from the St Alban's Psalter](#) (London, British Library Arundel Ms 157, [fol. 5v](#) and [fol. 6r](#)) of the Temptation of Christ. This devil has similar features to Death, but is not “Jewish.”

Similarly, the dark skin of Death is paralleled in a variety of medieval sources associated with the dark complexion of Jews and others.

The Rise of Physiognomy

Beginning around the time the Stammheim Missal was illuminated, physiognomic theory was spreading throughout Europe as a way of understanding character through facial features. Physiognomic theory circulated widely in the Middle Ages, much of it coming to Christianity via Arabic and Hebrew versions of Aristotelian traditions. The most widespread texts were the anonymous *De physiognomia libellus* and *Physiognomia Latina*, Michael Scot's *Liber phisionomie* (c. 1230), Pietro d'Abano's *Compilatio physionomiae* (c. 1295), the pseudo-Aristotelian *Physiognomonica* and *Secreta secretorum*, and sections of Albertus Magnus' *De animalibus*.

The fifteenth-century English translation of the *Secreta secretorum* by John Lydgate (?1370–1441) and Benedict Burgh (d. c. 1483) includes a section on “the Crafft of physionomie,” which argues that “loking in facys” (faces) allows one to judge “proporcioun” and thereby understand “disposicioun.” The text advises princes and kings to learn physiognomy in order to avoid men who are “feble of Colour,” those who have deformed faces, and those who have red, white, or black spots around the eyes. According to this text, a long hook-

nose is the sign of a "liere," "as Oold philisoffres clerly doth devise."

Methods for representing Christ's enemies are not just a question of iconography or physiognomy, however. They are also a question of aesthetics, and in the images cited here, we repeatedly see "Jewish," or anti-Christian, characters being disenfranchised from beauty, perspective, and artfulness. In this way, the Jew interrupts the imagery, intrudes on the decorative scheme of the book, and constantly pulls the viewer-reader's attention away from grace, goodness, and life. This imaginary but memorable Jew thus has the effect of creating a tension, or battle, between elegance and ugliness, soft lines versus hard, life against death, that is mirrored in the struggle between Christ and his detractors. Death, like the Jew, prevents an uninterrupted gaze on Christ; these figures interrupt the harmony and delicacy of the book. In this way, the reader-viewer undergoes what we might call an aesthetic Passion, oscillating between grace and ugliness, beauty and pain, good and evil, Christian and Jew.

Death and the Jew become objects of the medieval Christian viewer's antipathy not simply because they are ugly, but also because they create a tension in modes of looking ("scopic regimes"). In the [Fitzwarin Psalter](#) (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms. lat. 765, fol. 10r), made in England around 1350, the Jews who mock Christ have blackened faces, facial hair, and bent noses and are vigorously active, attacking the regal, static, blindfolded image of Christ at the center of the image: spiritual grace is contrasted with excessive, violent physicality.

Who were the Jews behind the image in the Stammheim Missal and similar images? In the Saxon town of Hildesheim, where the Stammheim Missal was made, there were possibly a very small number of Jews in the 1170s; however, the first clear evidence of a Jewish community in the town dates from 150 years later, in the 1340s. Moreover, the Stammheim Missal was made at [St Michael's Abbey in Hildesheim](#), a hugely impressive and important Benedictine establishment. The missal is a liturgical book, written and illustrated for the monks in the abbey and containing the texts and rituals for celebrating mass throughout the year. The page on which the Crucifixion appears, with Jewish Death, appears at the opening of the prayers for the Eucharist—Christ's body and blood, as offered up at Calvary, made present in the Mass. The living body of Christ, and his sacrifice, was therefore made more present, more urgent, through this image, for its Christian users.

In this way, the fantasy of the Jew here is a Christian fantasy: designed to deepen and extend Christian devotion. There is no evidence that such imagery was used against any Jews in Hildesheim at this time, but the memorable and moving fantasies of difference that we see here have had a long afterlife, as religious fantasy was repeated and extended, and in time an enduring stereotype was born.