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# The Spread of Anti-Judaism in Sixteenth Century Germany and Italy as a Result of Intolerance of Deviance

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# The Spread of Anti-Judaism in Sixteenth Century Germany and Italy as a Result of Intolerance of Deviance

## **Abstract**

This paper explores why anti-Judaism became more prevalent in sixteenth century Germany and Italy than it had been in prior centuries. Each chapter discusses a specific event or person of the 1500's and explains why each of these contributed to the spread of anti-Judaism. The focuses of the paper include Martin Luther and the Reformation, Pope Paul IV and the Roman Ghetto, the ritual murder myth, and the witchcraze of the sixteenth century. The chapters consist of separate smaller theses which serve to answer the problem of the study from varying angles. The paper culminates with the common thread of intolerance of deviance from Christianity that is found in each of the chapters. This commonality is then used to explain why Germany and Italy during the 1500's were so vulnerable to the spread of anti-Judaism.

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THE SPREAD OF ANTI-JUDAISM IN SIXTEENTH CENTURY GERMANY AND ITALY  
AS A RESULT OF INTOLERANCE OF DEVIANCE

By

Kara Elise Hoffert

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

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With Honors in History

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## Senior Honors Thesis

### ABSTRACT

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## Introduction

The sixteenth century in Germany and Italy was a time of heretics, the witchcraze, and accusations of ritual murder. It was a time of turmoil caused by the Reformation. And it was a time when anti-Jewish sentiments were spreading across Europe, resulting in a new wave of violence toward Jews. Why was this century different than any other for the Jewish people? There can be no single answer to such a question. However, the presence of some dynamic yet opposing individuals, their interactions with each other, conflicting views of Christianity, the overwhelming desire to overcome doubts that arose from this conflict, and the drive to unite everyone under a single religion because of a biblical prophecy all form part of the answer.

By examining the writings of Martin Luther, the first part of this study will illustrate how he presented two very different stances on the Jewish people in an attempt to garner more followers for Lutheranism. This will be followed by an analysis of how the Counter Reformation pope, Paul IV, utilized the Jewish Ghetto in Rome to assuage the doubts Catholics had about their faith during a time of religious upheaval. Next, a glimpse into the ritual murder accusations that swept Germany during the Reformation era will provide a better idea of the strife that Christians faced within their religion in the early sixteenth century. This discussion will also explain how propaganda aided in the proliferation of anti-Jewish sentiments. Finally, a brief examination of the witchcraze that swept Europe at this time will illustrate that it was not just anti-Jewish sentiments that were consuming Italy and Germany, but also anti-deviance feelings. The striking parallels between the accusations brought against supposed witches and those brought against Jews will prove that any deviance from the norms of society created grounds for persecution during this tumultuous time. The subject of intolerance for any deviancy brought about by the instability and uncertainty of the Reformation will wrap up this discussion

on anti-Judaism in the sixteenth century. One argument will assert that it was the growing deviances within Christianity itself that resulted in the intolerance of the outgroups in European society at this time, that created the anti-Jewish sentiments that led to the discrimination and persecution of the Jewish people in early modern Europe.

Chapter 1  
**Martin Luther: His Changing Views on the Jewish People**

“What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews? Since they live among us, we dare not tolerate their conduct, now that we are aware of their lying and reviling and blaspheming.”<sup>1</sup> Such were the words of Martin Luther (1483-1546)<sup>2</sup> in his 1543 work, *On the Jews and Their Lies*. In the years between 1523 and 1543 this monk, who broke away from the Catholic Church and began the Protestant Reformation in 1517, underwent a drastic change in his opinion on how the Jewish people should be treated. His 1523 treatise, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew*, had called for benevolent treatment of the Jews and expressed the belief that this would result in a higher rate of conversion to the Christian faith. However, twenty years later, Luther called for the burning of Jewish synagogues and homes, claiming that such actions were the proper ways to deal with Jews. Why did Luther’s attitude concerning the Christian treatment of Jews change from benevolence to cruelty in this twenty-year span? Many scholars have suggested that Luther simply became vehement when the Jews would not convert to his purified form of Christianity. It would, however, be safe to argue that it was his unsettling discovery of parallels between the Jewish and Catholic religions, his need to unite the young Protestant religion, and a desire to prove the validity of Christian views of the Messiah that caused Luther to change his opinion on the treatment of Jews.

It is first necessary to become acquainted with Luther’s two contradictory works on the treatment of the Jewish people in order to draw conclusions about the cause of his change of mind. His first piece, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew*, was written for the specific purpose of defending himself against the accusations of some Catholics who argued that he did not believe Jesus was the product of a virgin birth. This stemmed from a rumor, created shortly after



Luther's German translation of the Bible was published, that Luther believed Jesus was the son of Mary and Joseph. Luther scoffed at this accusation and viewed it as "such a poor miserable lie that I despise it and would rather not reply to it."<sup>3</sup> However, Luther could not ignore these accusations because to do so would add further fuel to the claims against him. Therefore, "[he] thought [he] would also write something useful in addition, so that [he did] not vainly steal the reader's time with such dirty rotten business."<sup>4</sup> Luther determined to write about his opinion on how to convince the Jewish people to convert to Christianity.

He began by attacking the Catholic Church and declaring that it did not teach the gospel to Jews who converted to Christianity. Instead, it exposed Jews only to "popishness and monkery."<sup>5</sup> Luther continued his argument by claiming that if Christians used the pure gospel in the attempt to convert the Jews, the results would be much more effective than relying on Catholic rites, as the Jewish faith itself was based on doctrine, not on ceremony. Then, as an example of how this could be practiced, Luther proceeded to explain the virgin birth of Jesus in such a manner that not only supported the birth from a Christian view, but also served to refute any arguments that the Jews used to claim that the conception had been carnal. Along with this argument, Luther called for the kind and tolerant treatment of Jews by Christians. "They will only be frightened further away from [Christianity] if their Judaism is so utterly rejected that nothing is allowed to remain and they are treated only with arrogance and scorn," Luther proclaimed.<sup>6</sup> This view, however, was not to be Luther's final opinion on the matter.

Twenty years later in 1543, Luther composed his treatise entitled *On the Jews and Their Lies*.<sup>7</sup> Unlike his 1523 work, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew*, this document was not written in response to any specific accusations against Luther. Indeed, it appears to exist merely for the sake of expressing Luther's opinion and has been viewed by some as one of the most anti-

Semitic works ever written. The change in Luther's tone toward the Jewish people is impossible to ignore. He repeatedly stated the hopelessness of the prospect of Jewish conversion and referred to the Jews as agents of the devil.<sup>8</sup> Although Luther had always pushed for the conversion of the Jewish people to Christianity, he had previously called for this to be done with kindness and patience; he now called for the destruction of their homes and synagogues. While *On the Jews and Their Lies* first appears to be a work of anger and hatred, further examination of this treatise and other works by Luther in the years between 1523 and 1543 points to several events and growing perceptions that can account for the change of Luther's attitude concerning the treatment of the Jewish people.

A close reading of Luther's works reveals that he had discovered a number of parallels between the Jewish religion and the Catholic Church that disturbed him greatly. The first of these similarities was the focus of each religion on good works and deeds. Luther believed that a person received salvation solely through God's grace, which could only be obtained through faith. However his adversary, the Catholic Church, believed that a person received redemption not just through faith, but also through good deeds. In fact, it was these good deeds that would lessen a person's time in purgatory; a place Catholics believed the soul of the deceased went to endure punishment from God before ascending to heaven. Luther disagreed with this belief and pointed out that there was a parallel between the Catholic Church's focus on good works, deeds, and ceremony, and the Jews' claim to be God's chosen people based on their fulfillment of certain ceremonies, deeds, and works they believed were prescribed by God in the Old Testament.<sup>9</sup>

Only four years earlier in 1539, Martin Bucer had made the same argument in a letter, stating that the focus on works of both groups was exactly the same.<sup>10</sup> In his *On the Jews and*

*Their Lies*, Luther took up this opinion, saying of the Jews: “They claim to be God’s people by reason of their deeds, works, and external show, and not because of sheer grace and mercy, as all prophets and all true children of God have to be, as was said. Therefore, they are beyond counsel and help.”<sup>11</sup> Luther continued to compare the Jews to the Catholics, as he pointed out that Catholics “...believe that God should esteem them because they are baptized, because they have the name, and because they rule the roost. There they stand like a rock.”<sup>12</sup> Then, in reference to both groups, Luther exclaimed, “As for...abandoning their own devices, of this there is no hope; it will not happen.”<sup>13</sup> To Luther, it was not Catholic baptisms or Jewish circumcisions that determined whether or not a religion was comprised of God’s chosen people—it was faith alone, and neither Judaism nor Catholicism adhered to this belief.

It was not only the focus on good works, deeds, and ceremonies by the two religions that troubled Luther. Aside from these similarities, Luther had also discovered what was, in his mind, a troubling parallel between the rabbis and the popes. In *On the Jews and Their Lies*, Luther pointed out that both the rabbis and the popes garnered their power from declarations of Moses and Paul in the Bible respectively, but that both parties manipulated those declarations so that the people would follow them aimlessly. Luther stated that the rabbis

...forfeited the right to such an office by holding the poor Jews captive with the saying of Moses (Deuteronomy 17[10 ff.]) in which he commands them to obey their teachers to penalty of death...They wantonly employ the poor people’s obedience contrary to the law of the Lord and infuse them with this poison, cursing, and blasphemy. In the same way the pope also held us captive with the declaration in Matthew 16[:18]...inducing us to believe all the lies and deceptions that issued from his devilish mind. He did not teach in accord with the word of God, and therefore he forfeited the right to teach.<sup>14</sup>

Luther was of the opinion that each individual’s salvation would be determined by God and that relationships with the divine should be personal, with no intermediary. Since he believed that a person’s relationship with God was personal, he also felt that it was necessary for the faithful to

have access to the scripture so they could read it for themselves. Therefore, the idea that one person was more fit to preach holy texts than another did not set well with him. The popes and rabbis, who taught good deeds, works, and ceremonies, were not teaching as Luther believed God had intended. He therefore saw them as blasphemers and believed that these religious leaders had no right to teach the word of God.

Another complaint Luther raised was that by laying claim to a relationship with a Biblical figure the popes and rabbis had generated a large degree of religious power for themselves. Luther was quick to point out that the pope drew his power from the passage at Matthew 16:18-19 that stated, “You are Peter, and on this rock I shall build My church...And I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.” Similarly, the rabbis drew their power from a quotation of Moses in Deuteronomy 17:8-11 in the Old Testament that remarked, “...and you shall come to the priests, the Levites, and to the judge *there* in those days, and inquire of *them*; they shall pronounce upon you the sentence of judgment...you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left from the sentence which they pronounce upon you.” However, in addition to these claims, Luther also discussed the declaration of the Jewish people of their ancestry—that is, their direct relationship to Abraham. He stated, “There is one thing about which they boast and pride themselves beyond measure, and that is their descent from the foremost people on earth, from Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and from the twelve patriarchs, and thus from the holy people of Israel.”<sup>15</sup> Luther not only disagreed with the alleged Jewish belief that the relationship of their people to Abraham made them noble,<sup>16</sup> he also disagreed with the declaration that the pope was a more holy man than others because of an assumed descent from Peter.

This was not the only objection Luther had to the power of the pope. He was also vehemently opposed to the expenditures of the head of the Catholic Church, and he would later

complain of monetary issues with the Jewish people. However, it is first necessary to understand Luther's stance on the spending of the papacy. One of the primary reasons for Luther's break with the Church was the practice of indulgences. This was the act of a layperson purchasing good works from the Treasury of Merits that had been built up by the saints, who had obtained a larger quota of good works on earth than was necessary for them to enter heaven. According to Catholic belief, those works could be given away or sold by the pope because he possessed the key to the Treasury. The purchasing of these indulgences would enable the soul of an individual to spend less time in purgatory. Since Luther believed that salvation came only through God's grace and that this grace could be obtained through faith alone, he did not believe in indulgences.

Over the years, indulgences had been a good way for the Church to make money. Consequently, in his 1520 work, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, Luther called on the German nobility to help him form his new church and used indulgences as an argument against the Catholic faith. He pointed out that, "Now that Italy is sucked dry, the Romanists are coming into Germany."<sup>17</sup> By this, Luther meant that the papacy had failed to properly curtail its spending and was now looking to Germany to help fund papal projects. His irritation at this was evident in his treatise *To the Christian Nobility* as he raved,

There are so many offices that one could scarcely count them. These are all the people lying in wait for the endowments and benefices of Germany as wolves lie in wait for the sheep. I believe that Germany now gives much more to the pope at Rome than it used to give to the emperors in ancient times. In fact, some have estimated that more than three hundred thousand gulden a year find their way from Germany to Rome. The money serves no use or purpose. We get nothing for it except scorn and contempt. . . . We ought to marvel we have anything left to eat!<sup>18</sup>

From this passage it is evident that Luther not only disapproved of the way this money was earned, but also of the way it was being spent. A great deal of Luther's disapproval of papal spending stemmed from the frivolousness of Pope Leo X (1475-1521). A member of the rich

and powerful Medici family of Florence, Leo immensely enjoyed spending the papal money and “it has been claimed that within a year he had got through not only all the savings of his parsimonious predecessor, but the entire revenues of himself and his successor.”<sup>19</sup> He enjoyed hunting, pageantries, and fine foods while he was pope—and he obtained indulgences from Germany to help pay for the restoration of St. Peter’s Basilica at the Vatican. These flagrant expenditures along with the dependency on German funding for St. Peter’s did not set well with Martin Luther. He felt that Germany was being cheated out of its hard-earned money by a pope in Rome who had unwisely spent the money of his native Italy.

The pope, however, was not the only person Martin Luther decried as taking money from the hard-working German people. Luther also claimed that the Jews were robbing the German Christian peasantry of their money as well. He argued that the Jews were a people in exile from their own country who had taken refuge in Germany. Even though Germany was not their homeland, the Jews were treating it as such and, in Luther’s opinion, taking money that was not lawfully theirs. Luther exclaimed in his *On the Jews and Their Lies* that, “They do not work, and they do not earn anything from us, nor do we give or present it to them, and yet they are in possession of our money and goods and are our masters in our own country and in their exile.”<sup>20</sup> This statement about the Jews bears a striking resemblance to Luther’s earlier condemnation about the papacy and its use of the funds of Germany. Both groups were outsiders and depended on the German people for financial support, and both were allegedly doing so without working to earn the money. Luther also complained that, “when a Jew steals and robs ten tons of gold through his usury, he is more highly esteemed than God himself.”<sup>21</sup> Presumably, the pope also would have been highly esteemed for the money he was taking from Germany because that money was being used to improve the condition of Saint Peter’s, which would serve to glorify

God. However, since Luther did not support the notion of good works, there was to him no point in renovating the church. Therefore, the papacy was merely taking money from the Germans, just as the Jews, who supposedly did no work, were also taking money from the Germans.

There was one other significant similarity between the Catholic and Jewish religions that struck Luther and worked to harden his attitude toward the Jews. Among the Catholics and Jews, only a few were found who would convert to Lutheranism, while the majority were staunch in their beliefs. These similarities are evident when examining Luther's relationship with each religion. Although Luther eventually created a new church because of his protests, he had not originally set out to do so. He had merely wanted to debate some of his disagreements about Catholic practices to see if he could possibly reform a few aspects of the religion. However, the ecclesiastical hierarchy was so steadfast in holding to traditional Catholic practices and beliefs that it viewed Luther's critiques as blasphemous; and when he refused to recant his beliefs, he was excommunicated (1521). In response, Luther broke from the Church and founded his own reformed religion, and while many people had converted to Lutheranism, the majority of Europe had remained Catholic. This state of affairs was difficult for Luther to understand, since he believed his religion to be based on the beliefs and practices of the early apostolic church.

Luther had experienced much the same frustration with the Jews. He attempted to convert the Jews to Christianity by teaching them about the gospel and faith, but his efforts proved fruitless. The Jews, much like the Catholics, were too staunch in their beliefs to be swayed by the preaching of Martin Luther. Unfortunately, in both cases Luther was willing to turn to bloodshed in an attempt to get his message across. He even stated in his *Table Talk* that, "It is impossible for the Christian and true church to subsist without the shedding of blood, for her adversary, the devil, is a liar and a murderer."<sup>22</sup>

The focus of both religions on good deeds, works, and ceremonies, along with the parallels between the popes and rabbis, and the emphasis of both groups on their religious importance because of relationships to Biblical figures would have been enough to create suspicion of the Jews in Luther's mind. However, these irritants were capped off by the draining of money from his homeland and his failure to gain large numbers of converts from either camp, and ultimately caused Martin Luther to re-think his views on the Jewish people. Luther stubbornly disagreed with many aspects of the Catholic Church and between the years of 1523 and 1543, he increasingly made note of the many parallels between the Jews and the Church. Since Catholicism was Luther's main adversary (in fact, he had declared that the Catholic Church was the anti-Christ), it is not at all surprising that anything that seemed to have so many similarities to this misguided religion would become his adversary as well. At times it appeared as though any anger Luther had toward the Jews was in direct correlation with his anger toward the Catholic Church as he himself exclaimed, "...I am no longer amazed by either the Turks' or the Jews' blindness, obduracy, and malice, since I have to witness the same thing in the most holy fathers of the church, in pope, cardinals, and bishops."<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, if Luther could not convert Catholics to the purified form of Christianity by teaching the gospel, then why should he be able to convert Jews in a similar manner? It was this very predicament of the unwillingness of the Jews to convert that seemed to ultimately drive Luther to violence against the Jews. Just as the Catholics would not conform to Lutheranism, nor would the Jews. This was frustrating for Luther because he, along with other Christians, believed that the conversion of the Jews to Christianity would be the signal of the blessings of God on the Christian faith. If the Jews had converted to Lutheranism, it would have proven to the Catholics that Lutheranism was the divinely chosen religion. He postulated on the similarity



and his anger with both Catholics and Jews in *On the Jews and Their Lies* when he stated, “If I had not had the experience with my papists, it would have seemed incredible to me that the earth should harbor such base people who knowingly fly in the face of open and manifest truth, that is, of God himself.”<sup>24</sup> In the end, this was the conclusion that Luther reached: it was useless to “propose to convert the Jews, for that is impossible....it is reasonable to assume that our talking and explaining will help even less.”<sup>25</sup> Teaching and explaining the supposedly purified ways of Lutheranism did not help with the Catholics, nor did it help with the Jews.

Oddly enough, creating an enemy out of the Jews would help Lutheranism because Luther began to use Jewish beliefs to support Christian views. Luther even stated in *On the Jews and Their Lies* that,

...although we perhaps labor in vain on the Jews for I said earlier I don't want to dispute with them we nonetheless want to discuss their senseless folly among ourselves, for the strengthening of our faith and as a warning to weak Christians against the Jews, and, in honor of God, in order to prove that our faith is true and that they are entirely mistaken on the question of the Messiah.<sup>26</sup>

Luther's main avenue in achieving this task was to point out that the Jewish conception of the Messiah actually backed up the Christian view of Jesus as the Messiah. In his *On the Jews and Their Lies* Luther argued that the Jews were waiting for a Messiah of their choice, instead of one who had been chosen by God. He proceeded to make a case that it had been foretold in chapter 53 of Isaiah that the Jews would not accept the Messiah and that the evidence of their mistake lie in the exile and hardships they had been forced to endure for centuries. “For they have, as we said, prayed, cried, and suffered almost fifteen hundred years already, and yet God refuses to listen to them.”<sup>27</sup> According to Luther, God would not listen to the Jews because despite the

possession of knowledge to the contrary, they continued to disbelieve in the Messiah. He claimed that the Jews had become a people who had fallen out of grace with God, stating,

So it became apparent that they were a defiled bride, yes, an incorrigible whore and an evil slut with whom God ever had to wrangle, scuffle, and fight. If he chastised and struck them with his word through the prophets, they contradicted him, killed his prophets, or, like a mad dog, bit the stick with which they were struck.<sup>28</sup>

By illustrating how the Jews had supposedly fallen out of God's grace because they had denied the veracity of Christ as the Messiah, Luther had found a way to support the Christian view of the Messiah. He had discovered a means of emphasizing salvation through faith, not through good works, thus supporting his views of salvation. After all, it was the Jews' lack of faith in Christ that had caused them to be punished, not their lack of good works.

While this argument supported Luther's views, it is also important to note that he came to this conclusion about the Jewish people and their beliefs only after lengthy discussions with several Jewish rabbis. By gaining an understanding of how the Jewish people viewed the events surrounding the life of Jesus as well as familiarizing himself with the Old Testament, Luther garnered the knowledge that he believed could help him convert the Jewish people. This was evident in his work from 1523, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew*. In that writing, he proclaimed that Jews would come to accept the Christian views of the Messiah if they were taught directly from the gospel.<sup>29</sup> Twenty years later, he still claimed that the Jews were capable of seeing this view, but that they were stubborn and chose not to. He angrily noted,

What do you hope to accomplish by engaging an obstinate Jew on this? It is just as though you were to talk to an insane person and prove to him that God created heaven and earth, according to Genesis 1, pointing out heaven and earth to him with your hands, and he would prattle that these are not the heaven and earth mentioned in Genesis 1...<sup>30</sup>

According to Luther, the Jews were therefore a people in league with the devil who deserved to be punished by God and by men as well. Of course, this argument would not have set well with the Jews, since many believed that “Christianity practiced...the minimum standard of civil human behavior...,”<sup>31</sup> and still others thought that the Reformation hailed the coming of their Messiah.<sup>32</sup> However, Luther was steadfast in his opinion and stated in *On the Jews and Their Lies* that “The devil with all his angels has taken possession of this people...”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, Luther came to believe that in order to rid themselves of this devil in their midst it was necessary for Christians to rid themselves of anything Jewish—such as their homes, shops, synagogues, and Talmudic writings. In order to rid themselves of the devil, and this pollution which was a danger to their very salvation, he argued that Christians must discard anything related to Judaism because surely it was associated with the devil.

Interestingly, Luther’s determination to protect Christians from the devil influenced a choice he made that would cause his young religion to be closely tied up in German political affairs. This fateful decision came in 1525 and was the result of the Great Peasants’ War in Germany. This event was an uprising of the peasantry of Germany against their feudal and ecclesiastical lords and was fueled, the rebels claimed, by the teachings of Martin Luther. The German peasants felt that they had long been oppressed by the nobles and clergy who ran the country. Overworked and overtaxed, they sought a reason to rise up against their oppressors. When Martin Luther began preaching against the hierarchy of the Church, the peasants correlated the tyranny of the pope and Church officials with that of the nobles of their country.

Along with his outspoken denunciations of the Church hierarchy, Luther was also viewed as a great ally of peasants. He had, at one point, stated to the nobles “The people neither can nor will endure your tyranny any longer, God will not endure it; the world is not what it once

was when you drove and hunted men like wild beasts.”<sup>34</sup> Believing that Luther would be on their side in such a rebellion, the peasants of Germany drew up the *Twelve Articles of the Peasants* (1525). This document demanded rights the peasants felt they were being denied by their rulers with the primary call being for the “entire assimilation of civil and divine law.”<sup>35</sup> Throughout this work they used quotations from Luther’s works as well as from the Bible for support of their complaints.<sup>36</sup> One document they cited was Luther’s *On Christian Freedom*, which stated “neither has [a Christian] the need of the law; and if he has no need of the law, he is certainly free from the law...every Christian is by faith so exalted above all things that, in spiritual power, he is completely lord of all things...”<sup>37</sup> Luther went on in this work to claim that all Christians were as good as kings.

What the peasants failed to realize however, was that much of Luther’s support also came from the German nobility. He could not afford to lose the favor of people such as Duke Frederick of Saxony, because one of the strengths of Lutheranism was the backing of a number of territorial princes, and the growing sense of German nationalism, which endorsed the religion. Luther was therefore a torn man in the situation. Both sides looked to him for support and for him to give it to either would take away many followers from his fledgling religion. In an attempt to mollify the situation, Luther composed his *Admonition to Peace* (1525), a work that he wrote with the intention of convincing both nobles and peasants to lay down their arms and put aside their harsh words in order to work out some form of agreement.<sup>38</sup>

Sadly, his work accomplished quite the opposite of his goal. Part of his writing further encouraged the peasants and made them believe that he had determined to support them in their endeavors against the powerful men who were oppressing them. In a section of his *Admonition to Peace*, Luther said to the nobles,

The sword is at your throat, and yet you still think you sit so firm in the saddle that no one can hoist you out. You will find out that by such hardened presumption you will break your necks....If these peasants don't do it, others will; God will appoint others, for he intends to smite you and will smite you.<sup>39</sup>

Although Luther had written words to the peasants admonishing them to put down their swords because "those who live by the sword die by the sword," this peaceful statement was ignored. Instead, the peasants focused on his threatening words to the nobles and took those as an indication of Luther's backing. They were, however, gravely mistaken. For, while Luther had been careful not to oppose the peasants outright, this did not mean that he would condone the actions that soon after ensued at the risk of losing noble favor.

Following Luther's *Admonition to Peace*, the peasants began their rebellion with wild abandon. In 1525 they terrorized the countryside, spilling enormous amounts of blood as they convinced people to join their cause and killed people if they refused. Luther was horrified by these actions and soon began to worry that the devil was working through the peasants and that this would prevent other people from reaching salvation by entangling them in this web of rebellion.<sup>40</sup> Luther hoped for a short time that his words might calm the peasants and convince them to disarm, but upon discovering the robbing, pillaging, and plundering that the peasants were carrying out, he determined that action must be taken against them. Not only would stopping the peasants be for the good of innocent people who were being harmed not just in this world, but who were also losing chances of gaining God's grace for a good life in the next one. If the peasants were stopped before they went further, there was still a chance that they could receive God's grace, and therefore, salvation.

In response to these concerns, in May of 1525 Luther wrote *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*. In this work he called for the nobles of Germany to halt the rebellion by any means necessary. Luther stated,

I will not oppose a ruler who....will smite and punish these peasants....for he is within his rights, since the peasants are not contending any longer for the Gospel but have become faithless, perjured, disobedient, rebellious murderers, robbers, and blasphemers, whom even heathen rulers have the right and power to punish; nay, it is their duty to punish them...<sup>41</sup>

With these words, the nobles felt justified in crushing the peasant rebellion, and they did so with ferocity. In the end, it was the most disastrous peasant rebellion of the time. The massive bloodshed that followed Luther's blessing to the nobles wiped out 100,000 of the peasants living in Germany. The results, however, were likely devastating to more than the peasants.

Given the circumstances, Luther and his movement suffered greatly as a result of the Peasant War. Not only did the church lose many of its peasant followers, Luther himself suffered from a loss of popularity among the peasants and lower classes. His support of the German nobles and the words he had written about the peasants, calling them "mad dogs" and "blasphemers" could conceivably have caused many people to lose respect for him. In losing respect for Luther, people would also have lost respect for his ideas and views concerning religion and began to return to the Catholic Church. After all, why would someone want to stay in a religion whose leader supported the slaughter of thousands of peasants? And who could trust the judgment of such a man? Those who were staunch in their Lutheran faith would surely remain loyal, as would those with a great sense of German nationalism, but there were other people who did not fall into either of those categories. What then, could Luther do to smooth over the tension he had created and bring more Christians to Lutheranism?

The answer to this burning question lay with the Jews. By now viewing the Jews as evil, as opposed to his previous view of them being simply a misguided people, Luther created another foe for Lutherans besides the Catholic Church. In his *On the Jews and Their Lies* Luther stated “Therefore, dear Christian, be advised and do not doubt that next to the devil, you have no more bitter, venomous, and vehement a foe than a real Jew who earnestly seeks to be a Jew.”<sup>42</sup> The only foe of the Lutheran before this had been the Catholic Church, with its “blasphemous” beliefs and ceremonies. However, with the cry that Jews were the enemy of Christians, it gave the Lutherans a cause to rally behind. Luther informed his followers that the Jews were agents of the devil and as such, their presence had to be eliminated. Therefore, he suggested that Christians burn Synagogues and Jewish houses so that the Jews could not practice their faith even at home. He also called for the end of teaching by rabbis and of Talmudic writings. Since it was impossible to convert the Jews, it was best to destroy their forms of worship, as such things were of the devil and meant to keep Christians from salvation. Not only did such actions unite Lutherans, this also removed the spotlight from the Great Peasants’ War. Looking back, it is evident that Luther was clearly capable of adopting an attitude of cruelty toward the Jews—after all, he dealt in a very cruel way with those Christians who had supported him prior to the Peasants’ War. Those peasants who had believed they were doing God’s work as Luther described it, had been shocked when he turned on them. It should not therefore be surprising that just as Luther turned on some of his own Christian followers, so too could he turn on the Jews. His turn against the Jews certainly made sense, as persecuting the Jewish people and claiming them as enemies of God allowed Luther to coalesce his young, vulnerable movement.

While Luther's opinions on how the Jewish people should be treated appear to have changed drastically in the twenty years between 1523 and 1543, a careful examination shows that these changes were most likely a gradual process and the result of specific events and growing perceptions in Luther's life. The striking similarities between the Jews and his nemesis, the Catholic Church, did not go unnoticed by Luther, as is evident by his many comparisons between the two in his *On the Jews and Their Lies*. For one of these two entities to be his enemy and the other not to have been would have made little sense.

Aside from this realization, Luther also had to solve the problem of uniting the Lutheran religion under something besides opposition to the Catholic Church and a growing sense of German nationalism. This was especially important after his unpopular actions in the Great Peasants' War in Germany. He achieved greater unity by declaring that the Jewish people were the enemy of Christianity. Not only did he declare the Jews to be the enemy of Christianity, but he also used their very beliefs to support the Christian view of the Messiah, so that Christians could look at the supposed punishment of the Jews and learn to trust in their faith in Jesus. Therefore, while Luther may indeed have been frustrated when the Jews did not convert to Lutheranism, it is impossible to ignore these events and ideas that Luther himself described in his writings as plausible reasons for his change of mind concerning the treatment of the Jewish people.

Fortunately for the Jews, they had an ally in Emperor Charles V of Germany (1500-1558) who remained a staunch Catholic opponent to Luther. Rabbi Joseph of Rosheim, Germany was well aware of this fact, and as the leading Jewish figure in the area at that time, he immediately sought the help of the Catholic emperor because he believed that the "hopes of the Jews depended on him."<sup>43</sup> When Charles V heard of Luther's call to persecute the Jews, burn their



homes and synagogues, and drive them from Germany, he took action by placing the Jews under his protection. This prevented Luther's followers from actually carrying out the suggestions he set forth in his *On the Jews and Their Lies*. It was indeed, fortunate for the Jews of Germany that Charles V would fight Luther on this issue, because there was a growing sense of anti-semitism spreading throughout Europe. Luther's movement and that of other reformers had created opposition among the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and its members toward any deviation from their religion. The resulting lack of tolerance for Jews among Catholics had managed to affect Charles to a lesser degree because of his opposition to Luther, but it had not missed the hub of Catholicism in Rome, which had long served as a safe-haven for Jews.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, On the Jews and Their Lies, trans. Martin H. Bertram (Internet Medieval Source Book, 2001), 1.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix, Image A.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, Faith and Freedom: An Invitation to the Writings of Martin Luther, ed. John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 258-259.

<sup>4</sup> An Invitation, 259.

<sup>5</sup> An Invitation, 259.

<sup>6</sup> An Invitation, 260.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix, Image B.

<sup>8</sup> On the Jews, 18.

<sup>9</sup> On the Jews, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Steven Rowan, "Luther, Bucer, and Eck on the Jews," Sixteenth Century Journal 16, no.1 (1985): 85.

<sup>11</sup> On the Jews, 22.

<sup>12</sup> On the Jews, 22-23.

<sup>13</sup> On the Jews, 23.

<sup>14</sup> On the Jews, 20.

<sup>15</sup> On the Jews, 8.

<sup>16</sup> On the Jews, 8.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther, Three Treatises (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 28.

<sup>18</sup> Three Treatises, 30.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Hibbert, The House of the Medici: Its Rise and Fall (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1975), 224.

<sup>20</sup> On the Jews, 45.

<sup>21</sup> On the Jews, 45.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Luther, Table Talk (London: George Bell and Sons, 1878), 170.

<sup>23</sup> On the Jews, 23.

<sup>24</sup> On the Jews, 27.

<sup>25</sup> On the Jews, 24.

<sup>26</sup> On the Jews, 24.

<sup>27</sup> On the Jews, 18.

<sup>28</sup> On the Jews, 18.

<sup>29</sup> An Invitation, 259.

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<sup>30</sup> On the Jews, 27.

<sup>31</sup> Jerome Friedman, "The Reformation in Alien Eyes: Jewish Perceptions of Christian Troubles," Sixteenth Century Journal 14, no.1 (1983): 25.

<sup>32</sup> Friedman, 31.

<sup>33</sup> On the Jews, 22.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Luther, Documents of Modern History: Martin Luther, ed. E.G. Rupp and Benjamin Dewery (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970), 121.

<sup>35</sup> Preserved Smith, The Life and Letters of Martin Luther (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968) 157.

<sup>36</sup> Atwood, 90.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Luther, "On Christian Freedom," 1999, <<http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/REFORM/FREEDOM.HTM>> (10 March 2005), 3.

<sup>38</sup> Smith, 166.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, 158.

<sup>40</sup> Documents of Modern History, 119.

<sup>41</sup> Documents of Modern History, 123.

<sup>42</sup> On the Jews, 44.

<sup>43</sup> H.H. Ben-Sasson, A History of the Jewish People (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 688.

## Chapter 2 **The Window**

Until 1555 the Jews of Rome lived freely in the city, mixing and mingling with Christians during their daily lives. Rome even served as a safe haven for Jews who were fleeing and being expelled from Spain because of the Inquisition that was taking place in that country in this period. The popes themselves offered this protection and had done so for almost 200 years. Then in 1555, the papacy changed its attitude towards the Jews and created what has come to be called the Roman Ghetto—one square mile of land on the banks of the Tiber River located merely one mile from the Vatican—where all of the Jews of Rome were forced to live. Why was this monstrosity created after centuries of civil coexistence between Jews and Christians in Rome? This chapter will argue that Pope Paul IV (1476-1559) created the Roman Ghetto with the intention of converting Jews to Christianity and using them as witnesses to the credibility of the Christian religion.

In 1542, thirteen years before the formation of the Roman Ghetto, Pope Paul III determined that Italy, like Spain at that time, needed an Inquisition to rid the country of heretics and non-Christians. He placed Gian Pietro Caraffa at the helm of this project as head of the Roman Inquisition. Caraffa was a harsh individual who went so far as to state, “Were even my father a heretic, I would gather the wood to burn him.”<sup>44</sup> Based on this statement, it may easily be deduced that Caraffa’s attitude toward the Jewish community would be anything but friendly. He quickly moved from hunting down heretics to persecuting Jews as well. As head of the Inquisition, he began to subject Roman Jews to actions that were uniquely cruel. Caraffa invaded Jewish homes and synagogues and in 1553 even collected all copies of the Talmud that he could round up, placed them in a pile in the Campo dei Fiori in Rome, and set them on fire.<sup>45</sup>

The implications this held for the Jews were anything but promising because the Talmud, which is a collection of Jewish interpretations of the Old Testament and its laws, was one of the most holy books of Judaism. By burning this work, Caraffa was illustrating utter disrespect and hatred for Jewish religion and culture. This was a devastating blow for the Roman Jews, but the worst was yet to come.

In 1555, the head of the Roman Inquisition stepped into the most powerful position in the Catholic Church—Gian Pietro Caraffa became Pope Paul IV<sup>46</sup>. Throughout his reign, he would be anything but kind to the Jewish community. At the time of his ascension to the papal seat there was an ever-growing need to emphasize that Catholicism was credible because of the Protestant Reformation. The reform movement had “gravely shaken the confidence the Church felt in itself as the inherent Body of Christ.”<sup>47</sup> To begin with, the Reformation was taking people away from the Catholic Church and converting them to Protestantism. This created a need for the Church to demonstrate that it had been established and sanctioned by God. The thinking here was that if the Jews acknowledged the Catholic church as the guardian of God’s chosen religion, then this would cause all Christians to realize that the Church was indeed the instrument of God and the Catholic faith divinely established.

This type of revitalization of the Catholic faith parallels the effects of the conversion of Constantine in the year 312 c.e. Perhaps if the Catholic Church could bring about the conversion of the Jews, then it would also win back those people it had lost to the teachings of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and other Reformation leaders, much as Constantine’s conversion united a large portion of the Roman Empire in Christianity.<sup>48</sup>

Almost as soon as he came to power, Paul IV took action to convert the Jewish population of Rome to Catholicism and thus reassure all Christians that Catholicism was the

chosen faith of God. His goal was to purify the Church by, “oppos[ing] Protestants outside the Church, [and] impos[ing] discipline within the Church.”<sup>49</sup> At the time of Paul IV’s reign, the lines of animosity were firmly drawn between Catholics and Protestants. Paul IV was determined to return Protestant converts back to the Church. But for those Protestants who would not convert and who were considered heretics, he would do away with them by any means necessary. The religious wars of this time helped to create these intolerances as well as a new type of hard-line Catholic who desired a unified Catholicism that could fight the evils of Protestantism. This was due, in part, to a growing intolerance among Catholics for any deviation from their religion, which was made evident in the Counter-Reformation movement that Paul IV had headed even before his appointment to the papacy. The intolerance for deviation also spread to the Jews.<sup>50</sup> While Martin Luther’s lack of tolerance in Germany had turned into a desire to violently crush the Jewish people, Paul IV expressed his feelings by making every effort to convert them.

The pope, who set the precedent for this new era of hard-line popes and Catholics, strongly desired everyone to be of the same faith, especially the Jews, because of a prophecy in the New Testament. This prophecy was in Paul’s Epistle to the Romans (11:25-27), and stated that the conversion of the Jews would signal the completion of salvation history, which was the ultimate goal of both Paul IV and the Church. Not only that, but the Jews were supposed to convert to the religion that was to receive the grace of God. If the Jews converted to Catholicism it would be proof to the Protestant deviants that Catholicism was the chosen religion of God, and everyone would then return to Catholicism, once again creating a unified Christianity. However, as foretold by the prophecy, this was all dependent on the conversion of the Jews.

Paul IV's first step in achieving Jewish conversion was the ratification of the blood purity Statute of Toledo, which had been created by the archbishop of Toledo. The law, promulgated in 1449, forbade anyone with Jewish blood from holding office in the Church. This eventually extended to include public offices such as university and public service positions as well.<sup>51</sup> The statute, which had only been effective in Spain until this time, now spread to Rome and took away many of the liberties that the Jews there had enjoyed. This was the beginning of a string of legislation that would pressure the Jews economically, culturally, and socially.

Paul IV also took the step, after his bonfire display in the Campo dei Fiori, of placing the Talmud on the list of forbidden books for the city of Rome. This meant that the Talmud was outlawed—it could not be printed, distributed or owned by Jews or anyone else in Rome. However, the Talmud was not the only book that was outlawed. The Torah (the Hebrew Old Testament) was also placed on the 1559 Index of Forbidden books, as were works by Protestant leaders such as Calvin and Luther, and theological works by people such as Erasmus and Machiavelli.<sup>52</sup> From that point on, Jews and Christians were only to read the Catholic Bible since much of the other literature available was banned because it was considered heretical and did not aid in unifying Christianity.<sup>53</sup> Paul IV reinforced this law doubly on the Jews by abolishing the printing of Hebrew works in Rome, which was one of the few places in the world that printed books in the Hebrew language.<sup>54</sup> By destroying and outlawing Jewish holy books and printing presses, Paul IV caused the Jewish community to lose a vital aspect of its religious and cultural life.

However, Paul's most repressing act was the creation of the Bull *Cum Nimis Absurdum* in 1555, which promulgated a series of laws directed solely toward Jews.<sup>55</sup> Under this legislation, the Jewish community in Rome could no longer own land, attend Christian

universities, or have Christian servants in their homes or places of work. Up until this time, the Jews of Rome had been able to own real estate in any part of town they deemed worthy, but this new legislation now placed them in a lower economic position in Roman society than even the poorest Christians. By not allowing Jews to attend Christian universities, they could not be on equal footing with Christians in education. This was yet another way to keep the Jewish community oppressed because it denied the Jews eventual access to professional jobs, political office, or economic betterment. Being unable to employ Christian servants also worked toward establishing a lower social status for Jews, because this meant that even if a Jewish family was wealthier than a Christian family, it could not pay Christians to work for them. With no one to employ, the Jews could not be in charge or in control of any business endeavors and thus were automatically placed on the lowest rung of the Roman economic ladder. In addition to these restrictions, the Jews had to pay higher taxes and suffer more strictly regulated mercantilism than the rest of Rome.<sup>56</sup> This last law would eventually become so absurd that the only items Jews were allowed to sell were rags.<sup>57</sup> Through the lack of higher education and oppressive economic laws set forth by *Cum Nimis Absurdum*, Roman Jewry was thrown into a downward economic and social spiral, which would encompass several centuries.

As if these actions did not already provide enough embarrassment and disheartenment to the Jewish community, Pope Paul IV added yet more anti-Jewish laws to his ever growing list. One of the articles of *Cum Nimis Absurdum* called for Jews to wear distinctive clothing.<sup>58</sup> Women were to wear yellow veils on their heads and the men were to wear yellow patches on their clothing.<sup>59</sup> These identifying symbols would force the Jews of Rome to stand out in stark distinction from the Christians in the city.

This clothing not only made the Roman Jewish community distinguishable, it also allowed Christians in Rome to know how to address the various people they walked past on a daily basis, as Jews were forbidden to be addressed as “sir” by Christians. Even if a Christian did address a Jew with this title, the Jew was supposed to refuse its use.<sup>60</sup> So, the distinctive clothing prevented Christians from having to guess as to whom, among the people they passed, may or may not have been Jewish and worthy of the title “sir.”

Pope Paul IV was attacking the Jews socially by forcing them to wear distinctive clothing and decline titles of respect. These actions worked to destroy the self-respect and self-worth of the Jews of Rome among themselves and their Christian peers in Roman society. The message was clear: in order to regain social respect and economic well being, a Jew would have to convert to Christianity. Thus, Paul IV changed the allure of Christianity from one of purely religious nature to include strong social and economic incentives for conversion, making Judaism extremely unattractive for the Jews living in Rome.

For Pope Paul IV, however, it was not enough to take away Jewish property, holy books, and basic freedoms. For there was a section of *Cum Nimis Absurdum* that would truly separate the Jews of Rome from the rest of the city. This was the section that called for the creation of the Roman Ghetto. This piece of legislation forced the Jews to live in a distinct part of town.

Located along the Tiber River, the ghetto was one square mile of land on which all of the Jews of Rome were to live. However, before they moved into this area, the Jews had to build a wall along the premises of their new home; a wall that would only have five gates to serve as entrances and exits for the enclosed area. In front of the main gate stood the Church of San Gregorio alla Divina Pieta, with a quotation from the Bible that read “I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good.”<sup>61</sup> Perhaps this church, more



than anything inside the ghetto itself, exemplified Pope Paul IV's purpose behind the creation of his restrictions on the Jewish community—especially the creation of the Roman Ghetto.

The Roman Ghetto was the perfect instrument for attempting to convert Jews to Christianity. Inside the ghetto, all of the laws that Paul IV passed after he became pope were applicable. Since Jews could not own real estate and could sell nothing but rags, they became extremely poor, resulting in the eventual impoverishment of the entire ghetto. The Christians of Rome would often give food and clothing to the Jews, thus standing out as a shining example of “charitable” Christians. The hope of Paul IV was that the Jews might realize how kind all of the Christians were and that they would want to become part of a religion that reached out to the poorest members of its society. While the Christian laity may indeed have harbored good intentions for the Jews, they were nonetheless serving as tools for Pope Paul IV's strategy to convert the Jewish community of Rome. As Professor Brian Pullan has observed, “Christian charity would be the visible demonstration of the providence of God.”<sup>62</sup>

The charity of the Christians was not the only thing that was supposed to demonstrate God's providence to the Jews. Along with this, the materialistic world was supposed to serve as an example of God's favoritism toward Christians.<sup>63</sup> Inside the ghetto, there was very little in the way of material comfort because of the poverty that consumed the area. However, outside of the ghetto, life carried on in a normal fashion and the Christians of Rome had everyday material comforts and sometimes even more elaborate belongings. For the Jews the answer to escaping the enforced poverty of the ghetto was simple: become Christian. By entering the Christian community, a Jew was capable of owning any material goods or property that Christians could possess and also had the privilege of moving outside of the ghetto.

In order to escape from the economic burden of the ghetto, a Jew could not simply state that he or she had decided to become Christian. Instead, Jews had to go to the House of Catechumens. Professor David Kertzer explained this when he wrote,

The ghetto was necessarily a grim place, reflecting the Jews' degraded position as the people who had rejected and killed Christ and then been cast out by God. In contrast, the House of Catechumens was a holy place, reflecting God's mercy and His saving power. Each conversion of a Jew there reflected the glory and the divinely ordained supremacy of the Roman Catholic Church. The conversion of the Jews was, indeed, one of the centerpieces of the Church's millenarian vision, for according to Christian belief, at the end of time, with the Second Coming, the Jews would be converted.<sup>64</sup>

In the House of Catechumens, Jews were prepared for baptism. They were taught lessons out of the Bible and would usually study Christianity for several months before the day of their baptism arrived. These lessons would take them away from their Jewish heritage and prepare them to enter the Christian world through baptism in St. John in the Lateran.<sup>65</sup> Throughout the centuries, the baptism of Jews remained an elaborate affair. Oftentimes, the pope himself would be present for and sometimes even conduct the ceremony, which came to be "a major feature of one of Rome's most sacred annual ceremonies, the celebration of the eve of Easter Sunday."<sup>66</sup> As late as the nineteenth century, these ceremonies remained much the same. The historian Ferdinand Gregorovius described one of the ceremonies of a woman's baptism he witnessed, stating that she "...stood at the baptismal font swathed in a white veil, with a burning taper...in her hand, and after her head and the nape of her neck were thoroughly anointed...she was led back to the Lateran in procession."<sup>67</sup> With each Jewish baptism, the Church could be more reassured that Catholicism was indeed God's chosen faith and have less fear that the Jews would convert Christians to Judaism.

Undoubtedly, the prospect of re-entering a world with material comforts and the pomp and circumstance that surrounded a baptism were attractive to the Jews, who were living a

desolate life in the impoverished ghetto. Perhaps what was even more attractive was the almost immediate advancement in social status that came with conversion. The objective here was to make sure the new Christian would have good footing in the world he or she was entering. The converted Jew would always be given clothing, which was a symbol of the new life upon which he or she was embarking. Along with this gift, alms would be collected for the new Christian, and other Christians would promise to support that person in his or her new life.<sup>68</sup>

By promising an immediate increase in societal and economic status directly after a Jew converted to Christianity, the Catholic Church was making the Christian religion and society look incredibly appealing to Jews. After all, once they became Christian, Jews no longer had to wear the telltale yellow veils and patches or refuse to be addressed as “sir” by Christians. Removal of these stigmas would be attractive to the oppressed Jews, let alone the possibility of escaping the poverty that pervaded the ghetto. Thus the Roman Ghetto served as the ultimate conversion tool for Carafa and the church of the Counter-Reformation because it illustrated the opposing lifestyles of Jews and Christians and served to prove that Christians had obtained the superior lifestyle because of their devotion to the Catholic faith.

Perhaps the most important thing that contemporary Christians possessed that Jews were denied was the right to freely practice their religion. The Christian Bible was available to read in Rome, as opposed to the Torah, which Paul IV had placed on the list of forbidden books. There were also plenty of churches to attend in Rome—but only one synagogue. That synagogue was, of course, located within the ghetto and was the only place available for Jews to practice their religion. However, it came with a price that served the purpose of the Catholic Church. After the Jews had their service in the synagogue, a Catholic priest would appear and preach to them. He would criticize the writings of the Torah, the teachings of their rabbi, and anything that was

related to their religion. He would then proceed to promote Christianity. Thus, even the one place in the Roman Ghetto that should have been reserved for Jews to practice their faith without the interference of a Christianizing Catholic Church was invaded every week by a Catholic priest who did just that—attempted to convert the Jews to Christianity.

Despite the relentless efforts of the Catholic Church and the Counter-Reformation papacy, much of the Jewish population resisted conversion. They did this by relying on their community within the ghetto. In order to survive the many hardships and obstacles that they had to face, the Jews of the ghetto banded together and relied more heavily on their neighborhood and neighbors for secular as well as for religious matters.<sup>69</sup> This close-knit relationship throughout the ghetto helped Jews fight the first step of the conversion process, which was to make Jews desire to become Christian. Relying on other Jews was counter-productive to the notion of charitable Christianity, because Jews could obtain the support they needed from their own neighbors in the ghetto rather than becoming dependent on Christians outside the walls. This was the best line of defense the Jews had against the onslaught of Christianity that was forced upon them through the many laws laid out in Paul IV's *Cum Nimis Absurdum*.

On the other hand, placing the Jews into the Roman ghetto prevented Christians from converting to Judaism. With a wall built around the small, dirty area of the city in which the Jews lived, it was impossible for them to freely mingle with the Christian community. This was meant to prevent Christians from being exposed to Jewish teachings and beliefs, even though it was generally the Christians and not the Jews who attempted to convert people to their faith. The other laws that were implemented within the ghetto also served to discourage Christians from joining the Jewish faith. After all, why would a Christian have any desire to give up real estate, wear distinctive clothing, have his or her economic activity strictly regulated, be forced to accept

charity from outside of the ghetto walls, live inside those confining walls, or be constantly hounded to revert back to the faith they had just left behind? By creating a difficult life for the Jews of Rome, the Church was also sending a message to Christians: if they converted to Judaism, then they too would have to undergo the hardships faced by the Jews.

While it may appear at first glance that the Roman Ghetto was created for the sole purpose of converting Jews to Christianity and preventing Christians from being converted to Jews, there was another, more subtle reason for its implementation: to use Jews as witnesses to the credibility of the Christian faith. One of the ways for the Church to accomplish this task was to define Christianity by illustrating what it was not—and it most certainly was not Jewish. In this way, the Church was defining itself through its enemies, who were targeted as the Jews.<sup>70</sup> During this time, Jews were the embodiment of everything that was un-Christian in the minds of Catholics. Part of this belief came from “legends about Anti-christ, the supreme leader of Satan’s army, whom Jesus would overcome in the final battle between good and evil that would precede the Millennium.”<sup>71</sup> According to this legend, it was the Jews who constituted much of Satan’s army. The other primary reasoning behind the belief that Jews were evil was the belief that they were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. The ghetto allowed for Jews to “live forever as in captivity and serve as a reminder to mankind that they are descended from those who crucified Our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, since Jews were bound to the devil in the eyes of Catholics, their dismal circumstances would serve as a constant reminder of the hardships that befell people who were not Christian, making it appear as though Christianity was “holy” and Judaism was “evil.”

Further proof of the defilement of Jews was exhibited by the foot races at Carnival each year. Carnival was the Christian celebration held in early spring just before Lent. On its opening Monday, eight Jews clothed only in loincloths, were forced to race along the Via Lata

(the present day Via Corso), the main north-south boulevard that ran through sixteenth century Rome were. Christian spectators would jeer and throw anything they could get their hands on at the Jews. The racers were often killed and rabbis were forced to follow them simply to listen to the crowd and kiss a statue of a pig at the end of the Corso in order to add to the humiliation of their people.<sup>73</sup>

Even passion plays, which were performed by Christians in churches for centuries around Easter time to illustrate Jesus' crucifixion, served as evidence to Christians that their religion was favored by God. In the passion plays, the Jews were represented by actors wearing large, fake noses and devils' horns. It was this group of misshapen people who would cheer for the crucifixion of Jesus and whom all of the Christians in attendance would come to view as their enemy and thus, what they did not want to be.<sup>74</sup> These passion plays could reach an even broader base of people than the Bible because they also catered to the illiterate population.

Thus Jews became, more than ever before, the ultimate outsiders, embodiments of all that was unseemly, illegitimate, un-Christian. They had come to represent a reversal or denial of the social order as it was intended to be. They provided a diabolically framed window, as it were, through which proper Christians might contemplate images of the fate of human beings who bound themselves to the devil.<sup>75</sup>

The window through which many Christians saw the Jews was the Roman Ghetto. It was a window to another world, one of poverty and inescapable filth. Yet Christians did not view the ghetto simply in this physical sense. Looking through this window, Christians also peered in on a world of people who were in league with the devil and who were being justly punished by God. Christians would be kind to these misguided souls because that was their duty; yet they would also pity them not because of the enforced poverty they had to endure, but for the very religion that defined Jewish life. This was the idea behind using Jews as witnesses to the credibility of Christianity. Christians believed that the misfortune of the Jews was the fault of their religious

beliefs and hence Christians were spared this horrid experience because they had chosen to follow the Catholic faith.

The repercussions of the Catholic Church's movements against the Jews were felt much farther than the walls of the city's ghetto or even the boundaries of Rome. Only the Jewish ghetto in Venice had existed in Italy prior to the formation of the one in Rome. Afterwards, Jews were forced into ghettos across Italy in Florence, Padua, and Mantua. This swift result of the example set by Rome occurred by 1612, and the Jews were often locked in at night. The signature clothing that had been forced upon the Jews in Rome became a common requirement for them throughout Italy, as did the employment restrictions. The Index of Forbidden Books also came to be honored throughout the country. This prevented Jewish, Protestant, and many theological writings from being read in Italy. The growing intolerance for deviation from the Catholic faith proven by the list of banned books, along with a sense of anti-Semitism that had been spreading eastward across Europe from England, both contributed to the treatment of the Jews in Rome and the rest of Italy. This same opposition to deviance fueled a prejudice among many Christians against any person who could be considered a heretic, making the Jews a primary target. The results of this bigotry were evident through such things as the ghettos, Index of Forbidden Books, and the accusations of ritual murder that would soon sweep sixteenth century Germany.

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<sup>44</sup> James Carroll, Constantine's Sword, The Church and the Jews (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 373.

<sup>45</sup> Carroll, 373.

<sup>46</sup> See Appendix, Image C.

<sup>47</sup> Carroll, 378.

<sup>48</sup> Carroll, 378.

<sup>49</sup> Carroll, 379.

<sup>50</sup> See my discussion on intolerance of deviance in the conclusion, 52-53.

<sup>51</sup> Carroll, 374.

<sup>52</sup> Modern History Sourcebook

<sup>53</sup> Carroll, 376.

<sup>54</sup> Carroll, 376.

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<sup>55</sup> See Appendix, Image D.

<sup>56</sup> Carroll, 376.

<sup>57</sup> David I. Kertzer, The Popes Against the Jews the Vatican's Role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 27.

<sup>58</sup> Carroll, 376

<sup>59</sup> Carroll, 376.

<sup>60</sup> Carroll, 376.

<sup>61</sup> Carroll, 376.

<sup>62</sup> Brian Pullan, The Jews of Europe and the Inquisition of Venice 1550-1670 (Totawa: Barnes and Noble Books, 1983), 251

<sup>63</sup> Pullan, 251.

<sup>64</sup> Kertzer, 41

<sup>65</sup> Kertzer, 41-42.

<sup>66</sup> Kertzer, 42.

<sup>67</sup> Kertzer, 42.

<sup>68</sup> Pullan, 252.

<sup>69</sup> Kenneth R. Stowe, "Marriages are Made in Heaven: Marriage and the Individual in the Roman Jewish Ghetto," Renaissance Quarterly 48/3 (1995): 489.

<sup>70</sup> Carroll, 32.

<sup>71</sup> Leonard B. Glick, Abraham's Heirs, Jews and Christians in Medieval Europe (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 192.

<sup>72</sup> Mark R. Cohen, Under Crescent and Cross, the Jews in the Middle Ages (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 130-131.

<sup>73</sup> "Conversion Sermons and Carnival Foot Races," n.d., <<http://www.jewishgates.com>> (15 March 2005).

<sup>74</sup> Carroll, 32.

<sup>75</sup> Glick, 193.



Chapter 3  
**Power and Propaganda: The Fuels of the Fire of Ritual Murder**

Ritual murder. The very words evoke horrible mental images and raise the question: who would participate in such a heinous act? For many Christians in the Middle Ages the answer to that question was simple—the Jewish people. It was a widespread belief among Christians throughout medieval Europe that Jews kidnapped Christian children and then murdered them. The rumors of ritual murder began flying in 1143 when Jews in England were accused of murdering a young boy named William as part of their religious ceremonies. Despite the denunciations of this belief for hundreds of years by Christian religious leaders, the sixteenth century found cases of ritual murder throughout Europe, many of which were concentrated in Germany. Jews were arrested, tried under torture, and condemned to death under the false accusations that were brought against them. Why did Christians continue to believe in such an appalling crime? This chapter will examine the proposition that Christians continued to believe that Jews partook in ritual murders because power struggles among religious and political leaders resulted in frequently oscillating stances on the Jewish people, with primarily the negative viewpoints on Jews being exhorted throughout Europe by a multiplicity of propagandist techniques.

In order to reason out why Christians were convinced that Jews committed ritual murder, it is first important to understand *what* they believed. The thought of many Christians in the Middle Ages was that Jews needed pure Christian blood in order to carry out several of their religious rites. This blood could be obtained from Christian children (usually boys) and was procured through grotesque methods that were often paralleled with the torture used during the crucifixion of Jesus. Sometimes Jews were accused of killing Christian children for the sole

purpose of re-enacting the crucifixion, the argument of Christians being that since Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus they somehow felt the need to recreate that event. It was rumored by many Christians that those children who had been killed had wounds in their hands, feet, heads, and sides similar to those Jesus suffered during his crucifixion. In other instances, Jews were accused of killing children to use and consume their blood in such religious practices as circumcision or Passover.<sup>76</sup> These accusations were the most prominent among Christians in the Middle Ages.

However, as prevalent as these accusations were, they were justly refuted by both Christian and Jewish religious leaders for multiple reasons. When Jews were accused of partaking in ritual murder they argued their innocence because Jewish law strictly forbade the consumption of any blood. Nor were they alone in pointing out the stark contradiction between their accused crime and their religious practices and regulations. For though some historians such as Gavin Langmuir claim otherwise, there is sufficient evidence that the popes also readily acknowledged that Jews indeed did not consume any blood in their diet and claimed that such accusations were false.<sup>77</sup>

Along with this glaring antithesis came uncertainties about the accusations because of the time frame between a child's actual death and the charge of murder brought against the suspected Jews. Often, these scapegoats were not indicted until weeks, months, and sometimes even years after the child's actual "murder," making it almost impossible to tell if they had actually committed the crime. This resulted in skepticism among religious authorities about the guilt of the charged Jews, which was exacerbated by the torture used to procure confessions from the accused. With such threatening devices as the strappada (a machine that hung a person from their arms and placed a weight on their feet, often resulting in the dislocation of joints) and the

frightening options of death by fire, quartering, drowning, or being buried alive, it was not uncommon for Jews to deny their guilt and then later change their entire story after hours, and many times after days, of torture. This resulted in contradictory notes taken during “confessions” and when religious officials examined them it was difficult to ignore the obvious influence of torture on those Jews accused of murder. One account that illustrated the effects of torture was that of Mercklin of Endingen, who had been accused of ritual murder in 1470. In it, officials asked him why Jews needed the blood of Christian children and

To that he answered in many words, saying first that Jews need Christian blood because it has great healing power. We would not be satisfied with his answer and told him he was lying, that we knew why they need it because his brother Eberlin had told us already. To this Mercklin said that Jews need Christian blood for curing epilepsy. But we replied: Why then is your son an epileptic? And we would not be satisfied with his answer.<sup>78</sup>

The inaccuracy of the testimonies of all of the Jews involved in the ritual murder accusation is even more clear upon an examination of two different testimonies the accused men offered. In one, the blood of the slain children was offered to Leo of Pforzheim, while in the other it was offered to a Jew named Smolle to name just one of the many differentiations.<sup>79</sup> Why then, despite all of the evidence against the validity of ritual murder accusations did Christians continue to believe that Jews participated in such an atrocious crime?

One possible answer lies in the contradictory views of political and religious leaders of that time. While some of these influential people opposed the accusations, lay Christians were inevitably subjected to differing opinions on the matter. Beginning in 590 with Gregory I, the popes denied the validity of ritual murder charges, adding some personal twists and arguments against the blood libel (a term for an accusation of ritual murder).<sup>80</sup> In 1247 and 1253 Innocent IV denounced blood libels and Pope Gregory X put forth a bull on October 7, 1272 that served to further Innocent’s denunciation.<sup>81</sup> In it he stated,

And most falsely do these Christians claim that the Jews have secretly and furtively carried away these children and killed them, and that the Jews offer sacrifice from the heart and the blood of these children, since their law in this matter precisely and expressly forbids Jews to sacrifice, eat, or drink the blood, or to eat the flesh of animals having claws. This has been demonstrated many times at our court by Jews converted to the Christian faith: nevertheless very many Jews are often seized and detained unjustly because of this.<sup>82</sup>

Two centuries later in 1478, Sixtus IV continued the tradition by warning a bishop in Germany to refrain from doing further harm to the Jewish people in his jurisdiction.<sup>83</sup>

However, while the popes were constant in their stance on ritual murder, other religious and political leaders were not so reliable. Some Catholic bishops in Germany refused to follow the instructions of the popes and advocated Jewish accusations of ritual murder. As we have seen, one prominent figure, Martin Luther, vacillated even more than the local Catholic leaders of the time. For even while Luther had protected the Jews, he had also been subjected to and influenced by Thomas of Monmouth's account of the ritual murder of William of Norwich (in which he invented the myth of the crucifixion ritual), and in his later years he allowed such influences to play a larger role in his attitude towards the Jews.<sup>84</sup>

Just as Luther changed his position on his beliefs about the Jews and ritual murder, so too did Charles V. The only difference was that Charles V's opinion changed in the opposite direction of Luther's. The Catholic Emperor originally backed ritual murder charges brought against Jews under his regime and even supported the decision of the Dominican order to forbid "the religious use of the Talmud" that had been made in the 1490's prior to his ascension to power. Charles V also continued to persecute the population of Marranos in Spain. These were Jews who had converted to Christianity in order to remain in Spain after their expulsion in 1492, yet continued to practice Judaism in secret. Charles also had advisors who believed that the

“Jews were responsible for the Reformation ‘because they [the Jews] had taught their faith to the Lutherans.’”<sup>85</sup>

Strangely, his opinion on blood libels changed at almost the exact time as Luther’s, and Charles V began to fiercely protect the Jewish people, forbidding the closing of synagogues and any interference with their practices.<sup>86</sup> His alteration of opinion can be linked to a power struggle between the Catholic Church and Martin Luther. The turning point of his attitude can almost be pinned down to the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, where Rabbi Josel of Rosheim, the Imperial Representative of the German Jewry, debated Anton Margaritha (Luther’s protégé Jewish convert) “concerning the merits of both religions.”<sup>87</sup> As Jerome Friedman assesses,

the ostensible purpose of the debate was to determine the true religion so that blasphemy might be eliminated from the Empire. It is difficult to understand how and why Josel was declared the winner of the debate, with Margaritha personally banished from Augsburg by Charles V. Whether Josel actually merited victory or whether Charles was making Germany Jewry a personal political tool at the expense of Protestantism [remains unknown].

As a Catholic, Charles V may have found it necessary to contradict whatever Martin Luther was supporting at the time, much as Martin Luther felt it necessary to contradict whatever the Church advocated. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Luther’s and Charles V’s opinions changed at parallel times. By forbidding what Luther had ordered in 1543 in *On the Jews and Their Lies* (this being the burning of synagogues, houses, and interference with ritual), Charles was merely trying to establish a clear distinction between his faith and that of Martin Luther.

Of course, Charles V was also using the Jews as valuable political pawns. By obtaining the support of the Jewish people, the Emperor was able to gain access to otherwise unreachable areas of his empire because of their presence in particular locations.<sup>88</sup> The Jews also provided a

good deal of money to aid Charles V in expanding his empire by financially backing his war with France.<sup>89</sup> He accomplished this by heavily taxing the Jewish citizens of his lands for such rights as the ability to practice their religion freely and the opportunity to conduct business ventures. Charles was not alone in making use of the political and monetary support of the Jews, as there were many other less influential governmental authorities in Germany who were bent on exploiting their local Jewish population monetarily for their own gains.<sup>90</sup> Upon examining the differing view points on Jews and ritual murder among religious and political leaders it is evident that political, religious, and financial considerations all shaped an individual's thoughts on ritual murder by the Jews.

Unfortunately, the oscillating stances taken by these individuals due to power struggles did not serve to create a clear position on ritual murder that lay Christians could believe, especially in Germany. Whether Catholic or Protestant, it would have been a confusing matter to determine what to believe about the Jewish people. Catholic Germans, for example, had religious leaders who constantly denied the validity of blood libels, and within a span of twenty years, their emperor changed from supporting ritual murder accusations to agreeing with the popes who had long practiced restraint in this area. Along with Charles V's change of view came new laws which he issued in 1544. Charles insured that

Jews were granted full freedom of trade; Jewish bankers were permitted to charge higher interest rates than those permitted Christian bankers. The closing of synagogues was forbidden as was any interference with Jewish ritual and religious practice. It was forbidden to spread false rumors regarding ritual murders or alleged Jewish desecration of the host and well poisoning.<sup>91</sup>

These new laws meant that the people of Germanic states had to adjust in order to be within the boundaries of the imperial government.

Lutherans in Germany were faced with even more complex problems because their religion never agreed with the laws of the imperial government, nor did Martin Luther maintain as constant a stance on ritual murder as did the popes. Protestants had to digest a radical change in their religion's view on Judaism as a whole from 1523 to 1543. They also had to attempt to reconcile the Protestant religion with the political law of the land, which was always converse to Martin Luther's beliefs. Ultimately, both denominations of Christianity had to determine which to believe: their religion, or the law of Germany. The shifting stances of both Charles V and Martin Luther made it bewildering for laypersons to know who or what to believe. With such confusing circumstances in Germany, the floodgates of susceptibility were opened for influences other than those of political and religious leaders.

Those influences could be found in the popular propaganda about the Jews and ritual murder that spread throughout Germany in the sixteenth century. While some of this was religious and political, a great deal of it was based only on popular tales and rumors. One of the primary ways propaganda was spread in the literate community was through printed text. Johannes Gutenberg's invention of moveable type in 1440 allowed for the inexpensive and speedy proliferation of anti-Semitic tales that featured the Jews committing the act of ritual murder.<sup>92</sup> It also allowed for a more literate society in Germany, thus broadening the range of people who had access to, and the means to read, such material. The mass production of the printed word also made possible the rumors and tales about the Jews to spread more quickly throughout Germany than would have been possible prior to the beginning of the fifteenth century. According to Gavin Langmuir,

No one had ever observed human beings doing what the accusations alleged, and the only 'evidence' for them was confessions extracted by torture. Nonetheless, these irrational fantasies developed by certain individuals were accepted and transmitted by writers distant from the alleged events and by popular rumor.<sup>93</sup>

The *Nuremberg Chronicle*, which was published in 1493, was one printed work that gained popularity as printing became more economically efficient. This book described Jews participating in such gruesome acts as piercing images of Jesus, crucifying William of Norwich, torturing the Host, and murdering Richard of Paris. Despite its original high cost, the book sold 1,000 copies in German and 1,500 copies in Latin. It was later made into a smaller, less expensive edition by the Augsburg printer, Johann Schonsberger. However, if the people of the German-speaking states could not afford a book in which anti-Judaism tales were the primary plot, they could afford pamphlets, broadsheets, and chapbooks, which were available for only a few pennies due to low production costs. The story of Simon of Trent was one popular anti-Jewish tale published on a broadsheet that could be purchased and was then meant to be read aloud by story-tellers.<sup>9495</sup>

One example of a printed story that spread malicious ideas about Judaism and ritual murder is still popular today: Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The tales, which were never completed, were first published after Chaucer's death in 1400 and the invention of the printing press allowed for the spread of this popular work of fiction outside of its home country of England into such places as Germany. There, *Canterbury Tales* was read by the literate population who were then introduced to the story of the ritual murder of the English boy, Hugh of Lincoln. The story called out to lay Christians because it told the tale of a virtuous young Christian martyr who died bravely at the hands of the Jews. According to the story as told by the character of the Prioress, the seven-year-old Hugh walked daily to and from school through a Jewish neighborhood singing a song to the Virgin Mary. When he did not return one day, his mother went out looking for him and eventually discovered him in a cesspool where he had been thrown after his throat had been cut. His body was taken to a church and, much to the



amazement of the priest, the boy began to sing his song of devotion to the Virgin and claimed that he would do so until a wafer was removed from his mouth that Mary had placed there as proof of the miracles of which Christianity was capable. After the removal of the wafer, he would cease to sing or speak and go to rest in heaven.<sup>96</sup>

Young Hugh of Lincoln is clearly depicted as the hero of the Prioress' Tale, while the depiction of the enemy is equally as clear—the Jews were the villains. Chaucer wrote several passages that depicted the Jews as evil criminals who would not go unpunished for the crime they had committed against the pious English boy. One passage states,

I seye that in a wardrobe they him threwe/  
Wher-as there Jewes purgen hir entraille./  
O cursed folk of Herodes al newe,  
What may your yvel entente yow avail?  
Mordre wol out, certain, it wol nat faille./  
And namely ther th'onour of god shal sprede,  
The blood out cryeth on your cursed dede.<sup>97</sup>

This passage refers to the Jews as a “cursed folk” and to their murder of Hugh as “evil.” It also proclaims that they will be castigated for the murder of Hugh because the “honor of God shall spread.” It is not until the very end of the Prioress' Tale that the identity of the young English lad is revealed as Hugh of Lincoln.

This would have driven the story home for those people in Germany who were able to read the account since Hugh of Lincoln had been the victim of an actual case of ritual murder in England. The fame of Hugh's case happened to be more well-known throughout Europe because it had received special attention from King Henry III of England, while other English cases of ritual murder remained relatively low-profile. However, Henry III had put John of Lexington in charge of investigating the case of Hugh of Lincoln, and John managed to obtain a written confession from the Jew, Copin. Although torture was forbidden to be used during interrogations in England, records state that Copin was questioned “in diverse ways.” Copin was also “promised personal immunity” if he confessed. The result was his confession, followed by

his swift execution ordered by Henry III and the imprisonment of 91 Jews in the Tower of London, eighteen of whom were hanged.<sup>98</sup>

Despite the evidence that suggested the use of torture and psychological manipulation, Chaucer nonetheless delivered the description of the boy's death in such a way that the villainy of the Jews was once again brought to the attention of his readers, as he stated, "O yonge Hugh of Lincoln, slayn also/With cursed Jews..."<sup>99</sup> While the *Canterbury Tales* may have been a primarily fictitious work, the mention of Hugh of Lincoln in the Prioress' Tale would have raised questions among Christians in Germany who were skeptical about what to believe concerning ritual murder. The story itself, even without the name of Hugh, was effective in painting Judaism in a negative and malicious light.

So it was, just as with the Prioress' Tale, that other stories also portrayed the Jews as a villainous people who killed young Christian boys. Popular folk tales in Germany told of ritual murders and the heroism of martyred children and were fueled by local gossip about Jews, which often originated from the old belief that Judaism engaged in magical practices.<sup>100</sup> In the sixteenth century, German Christians took that belief further and began to spread rumors that the Jews needed Christian blood for their magic, which confessions extracted from the Jews during torture only served to support.<sup>101</sup> Further fueling the folk tales about Jews was the drastically increasing popularity in the sixteenth century of writing, printing, and selling such stories for a profit—folk tales had turned into a commercial industry in Germany.<sup>102</sup> They were often written by clerics and laymen, produced by printers in urban areas, and then sold along pilgrimage routes.<sup>103</sup>

With such widespread popularity, it should not be surprising that there were even plays that were written and performed about the ritual murders in which these Jews of the sixteenth

century supposedly participated. While the plays were written first in text form, they were then performed by actors, allowing for the spread of popular stories to not only the literate, but also the illiterate population in Germany. One of these plays, entitled *Judenspiel*, portrayed circumstances that led up to and surrounded a ritual murder case in Emdingen, Germany in the 1460's and 1470's. The play had forty-eight cast parts, eight acts, a prologue, an epilogue, and an argument—obviously, it was far from a small production and was bound to leave an impression on anyone who saw it. Plays such as *Judenspiel* were written with a negative bias toward Jews and performed in the open air, making them easily accessible to all Germans.<sup>104</sup>

Plays, however, were not the only medium that could reach illiterate people in sixteenth century Germany—art and music were also prominent methods of anti-Jewish propaganda. A popular art form that was used to spread the stories of ritual murder was the wood-cut.<sup>105</sup> These often-times intricate carvings displayed various stories of ritual murders that had supposedly taken place.<sup>106</sup> They served as a valuable propagandist tool because they were often reproduced in works of printed text so that an illiterate person in Germany could purchase a book and glean the same story from the work as a literate person simply by looking at the drama as it was portrayed by the wood cut. The previously mentioned *Nuremberg Chronicles* as well as the broadsheet of Simon of Trent both had accompanying wood cuts. The original *Nuremberg Chronicle* had beautifully carved illustrations of each of the stories told in the book from the crucifixion of William of Norwich to the murder of Richard of Paris. The later, less expensive copy also had wood cuts depicting those scenes, though they were of a less elegant nature. The broadsheet of Simon of Trent placed a wood cut in the center of the text. The intention of placing wood cuts in each of these works was to reach any illiterate audience who may have purchased the anti-Jewish literature.<sup>107</sup>

Another important tool for reaching the illiterate people of Germany was music. Numerous original songs were written with ritual murder as the main topic, but many consisted simply of new lyrics that were placed to an old, familiar tune so that they would be easy for people to learn and remember.<sup>108</sup> One such song was entitled “The Ballad of the Parents and the Innocent Children,” and recounted the tale of the trial of Emden, Germany—the same trial about which the *Judenspiel* was written. One stanza of the song described the plotting of the Jews to kill a family of Christians lodged in their barn by saying, “The Jewess, she gave false counsel:/we will strike them all dead,/no one can say a thing, a thing.”<sup>109</sup> Another popular derogatory tune was “A Pretty New Song of What Recently Happened Between Two Jews and A Child in Sappenheim,” and it could be sung to one of two cheerful German folk melodies: “Time passes well in summer time...” or “I know not the Lily breeze...”<sup>110</sup> Overall, it is clear that the propagandist mediums of music and art, as well as plays and textual works helped to spread anti-Jewish sentiments among all classes of people in Germany, and they contributed to a culture that already tended toward such attitudes due to political and religious strife.

Indeed, in *Toward a Definition of Anti-Semitism*, Gavin Langmuir states that Jews were subjected to a self-fulfilling prophecy which, “is, in the beginning, a motivated definition of an outgroup as inferior in one fundamental way that is accompanied by treatment that evokes new behavior in members of the outgroup that seems to corroborate and strengthen the original judgment of inferiority.”<sup>111</sup> In the case of the Jews, who are the outgroup in this particular study, their inferiority lie in the fact that they were not Christian. When they were accused of the ritual murder of Christian children they were subsequently tortured, resulting in confessions which would serve as the “new behavior” that supported the “original judgment of inferiority.”

Sadly, Jews were not the only group of people subjected to the stereotypes of sixteenth century society. An uncanny parallel of events may be seen in the witchcraze that swept Europe during this time, and Langmuir's definition of a self-fulfilling prophecy may just as easily be ascribed to those people accused of witchcraft. By briefly examining the outbreak of violence against alleged witchcraft cases, it will be possible to glean a better understanding of the interactions of the many catalysts that resulted in the horrible actions taken against heretics, witches, and Jews in the supposedly more sophisticated era of the sixteenth century Renaissance in western continental Europe.

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<sup>76</sup> R. Po-Chia, Hsia, The Myth of Ritual Murder, Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 21.

<sup>77</sup> Gavin Langmuir, History, Religion, and Anti-Semitism (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 266.

<sup>78</sup> Hsia, 21.

<sup>79</sup> Hsia, 22.

<sup>80</sup> Mark R. Cohen, Under Crescent and Cross, The Jews in the Middle Ages (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 36.

<sup>81</sup> Cohen, 36.

<sup>82</sup> Mark Saperstein, ed., The Jew in the Medieval World, A Source Book: 315-1791 (New York: Hebrew Union College Press, 1999), 169-173.

<sup>83</sup> Hsia, 43.

<sup>84</sup> History, Religion, and Anti-Semitism, 210.

<sup>85</sup> Friedman, "Alien Eyes," 35.

<sup>86</sup> Friedman, "Alien Eyes," 35.

<sup>87</sup> Friedman, "Alien Eyes," 35.

<sup>88</sup> Friedman, "Alien Eyes," 38-39.

<sup>89</sup> Friedman, "Alien Eyes," 38-39.

<sup>90</sup> Hsia, 65.

<sup>91</sup> Friedman, 35.

<sup>92</sup> Hsia, 42.

<sup>93</sup> History, Religion, and Antisemitism, 264.

<sup>94</sup> Hsia, 47-48.

<sup>95</sup> See Appendix, Image E.

<sup>96</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, Canterbury Tales (New York: The Modern Library, Inc., 1929), 163-166.

<sup>97</sup> Chaucer, 163.

<sup>98</sup> History, Religion, and Anti-Semitism, 257-258.

<sup>99</sup> Chaucer, 166.

<sup>100</sup> Hsia, 28.

<sup>101</sup> Hsia, 29.

<sup>102</sup> Hsia, 58.

<sup>103</sup> Hsia, 59.

<sup>104</sup> Hsia, 37.

<sup>105</sup> See Appendix, Image F.

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<sup>106</sup> Hsia, 49.

<sup>107</sup> Hsia, 47-48.

<sup>108</sup> Hsia, 61.

<sup>109</sup> Hsia, 31-32.

<sup>110</sup> Hsia, 61.

<sup>111</sup> History, Religion, and Anti-Semitism, 342.

## Chapter 4 **The Created Deviance of Witchcraft**

The sixteenth century saw the beginning of the Great Witch Hunt, or Witchcraze, of early modern Europe. This sad chapter of history began around 1550, lasted until approximately 1680, and resulted in the deaths of approximately 100,000 people who were primarily women.<sup>112</sup> Interestingly, accounts of witchcraft had been present since the second century C.E., but they seldom ever resulted in the execution of the accused witch. This changed radically in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The parallel between the timing of the Witchcraze and the increased persecution of the Jews cannot be coincidence, especially since both groups were accused of similar crimes and persecuted in almost identical manners. The Reformation had created a sense of uncertainty within Christianity. According to Gavin Langmuir, “More important for people’s hatred of the Jews were their personal reactions to social problems they could not understand and to fissures in their faith they could not acknowledge.”<sup>113</sup> The same could be said of people’s hatred for witches and their desire to eradicate them from Christian society. Indeed, it may be argued that while the deviance of the Jews from Christianity was emphasized more during the sixteenth century, the unprecedented accusations during the Witchcraze were created as a result of many of the same forces. One of the primary reasons for the persecution of both of these groups was to create readily identifiable threats against which Christianity could unite in order to downplay the differences that now existed within the religion itself.

Witches, just as Jews, were targeted as an outgroup because people thought that they worshipped the devil and were part of an army that was moving against Christianity. In this line of thought, the only real difference between Jews and witches was that Jews had never been

Christian, while witches used to be, but had made a pact with Satan and vowed to serve him. It was a widespread belief that there was an actual religious group called the Luciferans, who had vowed to Satan that they would hurt God in any way possible. These people supposedly believed that Satan would throw God out of heaven and become the supreme being, at which point he would shower them with all of his blessings.<sup>114</sup> Due to contradictory accounts, there is sufficient evidence that this group of people did not exist. Nonetheless, people were still accused of membership and they, along with the Jews, were blamed for attempting to destroy Christianity.<sup>115</sup>

Yet another commonality shared by Jews and witches was their difference from the social norm of the sixteenth century. Jews were the exception to the norm because they did not believe in Jesus in a predominantly Christian Europe. Alleged witches were primarily women who stepped outside of the normal, submissive, social boundaries ascribed to their sex. Often times healers, midwives, spinsters, or widows were accused of witchcraft. Women living without men were frequently accused because it was believed at the time that women were lustful, weak-minded, and susceptible to the devil.<sup>116</sup> And while this trend against deviant women is obvious to scholars today, people in the sixteenth century truly believed that these women practiced black magic and were in league with the devil. If people became ill, a severe storm arose, or a crop was bad, it was not uncommon for the blame to fall on the old neighbor who was a widow and felt the need to create havoc and misery in people's lives in order to please the devil.

As a result of this kind of belief, witches were subjected to various forms of torture, many of which were also used on the Jews in alleged ritual murder cases. Witches, just like Jews, would be tortured until they confessed to whatever crime they had been accused of, and then would be put to death. While accounts of torture that took place during ritual murder trials are



not easily accessible, accounts of witch trials are. The guidelines for torturing witches laid out in *The Hammer of Witches*, completed in 1486, provide a better idea of the manipulation used in the trials of both Jews and witches:

...And when the implements of torture have been prepared, the judge, both in person and through other good men zealous in the faith, tries to persuade the prisoner to confess the truth freely; but, if he will not confess, he bid attendants make the prisoner fast to the strappado or some other implement of torture... Then...the prisoner is loosed again and is taken aside and once more persuaded to confess, being led to believe that he will in that case not be put to death.<sup>117</sup>

From this excerpt, it is evident that alleged witches on trial were led to believe that their lives would be spared if they confessed to practicing witchcraft, even though the inquisitors were fully aware that the execution would take place with or without the confession. The same was true of Jews who were on trial for alleged ritual murders. Once a confession was extracted during torture, a death sentence was carried out in spite of prior promises of a lesser sentence. Even worse was the insistence of inquisitors that witches and Jews name accomplices in their supposed exploits. The people on trial were told that if they named others who were guilty of the same charges, that their sentence would be mollified. In this way, large numbers of Jews and alleged witches came to be accused of such things as ritual murder, devil worship, and eating unbaptized babies, even though no evidence existed to support the accusations.<sup>118</sup> Witches and Jews were killed as well as accused in mass numbers. In 1589 for example, 133 witches were killed in one day at the convent in Quedlinburg, Germany.<sup>119</sup>

The stories of witches, just as those about Jews, were spread through multiple forms of propaganda, from oral stories to those available in print. The literature that had existed for centuries about witches was added to narratives by chroniclers in order to “provide preachers with materials for their sermons against heresy.”<sup>120</sup> Devil books, which described the powers of witches, were another form of written propaganda that was aimed at the public. It became a

widespread belief the witches killed unbaptized children in order to eat them or use their ashes in a salve that would allow for flight. The belief in the sabbat, which was a congregating of witches with the devil at which countless impure acts were performed, was also prevalent. It should be noted that the sabbat was originally referred to as a “synagogue.”<sup>121</sup> The use of this term to describe a meeting of witches makes it very clear that the relationship between Jews and witches was considered close, and that one group was really not considered less holy than the other.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that propaganda about both groups was widespread and far-reaching. The spread of propaganda only served to reinforce people’s beliefs about witches and Jews, which in turn created more accusations. Just as with Jews, pamphlets about witches were also published, one of which described the killing of 63 women in 1562 at Wiesensteig of the German southwest. It was entitled, “The True and Terrible Acts and Deeds of the Sixty-Three Witches and Sorceresses Who Were Burned at Wiesensteig.” Not surprisingly, Jon Oplinger points out that Wiesensteig was the scene of “bitter religious factionalism.” The witches had been created as a deviant outgroup that people could unite against and rid themselves of, while not going after the different religious factions. Almost the same may be said of the Jews, whose deviance was brought to a greater attention in the sixteenth century. But why were Jews and witches turned into persecuted outgroups at this time?

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<sup>112</sup> Jon Oplinger, The Politics of Demonology (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1990), 42.

<sup>113</sup> Gavin Langmuir, Toward a Definition of Anti-Semitism (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 208.

<sup>114</sup> Norman Cohn, Europe’s Inner Demons: An Inquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt (London: Sussex University Press, 1975), 56.

<sup>115</sup> Cohn, 56.

<sup>116</sup> Oplinger, 36.

<sup>117</sup> The Hammer of Witches, trans. by the University of Pennsylvania (Internet Medieval Source Book, 1996), 3-4.

<sup>118</sup> Oplinger, 75.

<sup>119</sup> Oplinger, 45.

<sup>120</sup> Oplinger, 55-56.

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<sup>121</sup> Cohn, 100-101.

## Conclusion

Both Jews and witches were the scapegoats for the strife that Christianity was experiencing within itself. Indeed, since there was no longer a single Christian church, there was deviance within the very religion that was intolerant to deviants! According to Jon Oplinger in *The Politics of Demonology*, “The history and circumstances surrounding the Great Witch Hunt argue that deviance is mass-produced when powerful groups believe their values and interests to be embattled and find it to their advantage to establish a moral boundary.”<sup>122</sup> The powerful group in the case of this study is the Christian religion and those powerful people who were at the head of it, be they Catholic or Protestant.

Martin Luther’s launching of the Protestant Reformation in 1517 was the start of many fissures within the Christian religion. These resulted in doubts among Christians and there was a need among Christian leaders, especially Pope Paul IV and Martin Luther, to assuage those doubts. In order to make people feel better about Christianity, outgroups were created, humiliated, persecuted, and executed.

Even though Jews had lived for centuries in relative peace in Rome, their deviance was emphasized in 1555 when Pope Paul IV created the Roman Ghetto. They became an outgroup in Rome so that Christians could define their religion by observing what Judaism was and, in turn, what Christianity was not. Paul IV was also hoping for the mass conversion of the Jews in the Ghetto because such an act would have validated the Catholic church as being the chosen faith of God. Oplinger’s statement may be applied here, because it is clear that the Pope felt his values and interests were being attacked by Protestantism, and he reacted by turning the Jews into an outgroup, which became the norm for cities throughout Italy.

Even Martin Luther, who had at first been convinced that he would be able to convert the Jewish people to Christianity, eventually turned them into an outgroup. He accused them of being in league with the devil and called for the burning of their homes and synagogues. He too, felt that his ideals and values were being threatened by the actions the Catholic Church was taking against him as well as by the lack of Jews converting to Protestantism. He, like Paul IV, had been counting on their conversion, as prophesied in the Bible to prove to the Catholics that his faith was a purified form of theirs. However, after years of failure, he turned on the very group of people for whom he had shown nothing but kindness.

The religious strife between the various groups of Christianity had very negative effects on the Jews. The competition between Catholics and Protestants in German lands resulted in frequently changing views among political and religious leaders on the Jewish people. Accusations of ritual murder became prevalent, despite the absence of evidence to support them. However, the presence of anti-Jewish propaganda and the continued executions of Jews based on ritual murder charges in Germany along with the herding of Jews into ghettos and anti-Jewish propaganda in Italy in forms such as passion plays, made the presence of actual evidence irrelevant for accusations and executions. The social place Jews had been given in German and Italian societies due to the fissures within Christianity had resulted in an anti-Jewish sentiment that spread through both areas.

It is clear that this sentiment was anti-Jewish and not anti-Semitic because of the accusations and executions associated with the fabricated deviance of witchcraft that occurred during the same time period. Witches were accused of and killed for the same crimes as Jews. They were tortured in the same way and were comprised primarily of women who deviated from the norm, just as Jews deviated from Christian society. Anyone who was a deviant at this time

was in danger of being categorized into an outgroup, due to the intolerance of Christianity. As Norman Cohn states in *Europe's Inner Demons*, "...this heresy and this sect were the products of a Christian society which insisted on religious conformity."<sup>123</sup>

In this time of a desire for conformity, the last thing Christians needed was doubt. And indeed, according to Gavin Langmuir,

But what non-Christian Jews could and did do in Jesus' life-time—and have done ever since through the account of them in the New Testament and their presence in the midst of Christians—was to challenge Christian ideas about Jesus. Their existence and disbelief reinforced any doubts that were lurking consciously or subconsciously in the minds of Christians.<sup>124</sup>

By turning the Jews into an outgroup and spreading anti-Jewish sentiments, Christianity was attempting to do away with doubts caused by the split within the religion. But did it work?

The tales about Jews were accepted by most people of the sixteenth century. But there is hope in that everyday people of this time were not necessarily as irrational as it would at first appear. They were simply relying on people in high and powerful positions to explain something that was beyond their scope of comprehension. Indeed, they were "victims of social irrationality" because their religions—whether Catholic or Protestant—provided them with false information regarding the Jewish people and witches.<sup>125</sup> The irrationality of Catholicism and Protestantism on these points may be attributed to the strife within Christianity due to the Reformation, as Protestants lashed out at Catholics, and both attacked the Jews and hunted down witches. Thus, it is clear that while feelings of anti-Judaism had existed and been acted upon for centuries before the 1500's, the situation for Jews in Italy and Germany became more problematic at this time due to the unprecedented discord within Christian belief itself.

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<sup>122</sup> Oplinger, 30.

<sup>123</sup> Cohn, 123.

<sup>124</sup> History, Religion, and Anti-Semitism, 290.

<sup>125</sup> History, Religion, and Anti-Semitism, 265.

AppendixImage A

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Image BOriginal cover of *On the Jews and Their Lies*, first published in 1543.

"Concerning the Jews and their Lies". Title page of the most virulent of Martin Luther's anti-semitic pamphlets, Wittenburg, 1543.

Image C

Pope Paul IV (1476-1559)

Image DA copy of the papal bull *Cum Nimis Absurdum*, set forth in 1555



Image E

A depiction of the ritual murder of Simon of Trent



Image F

An example of a woodcut, a popular form of propaganda in the sixteenth century.



*Woodcut from the title page of the satirical pamphlet, Der Judenspiess. Strasbourg, 1541.*

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