THE ORIGINS OF THE RITUAL MURDER ACCUSATION AND BLOOD LIBEL

The first time that we learn of the accusation of Ritual Murder being levelled against Jews is in the remarkable episode recorded in Flavius Josephus' *Against Apion*. According to Josephus (c. 38-100 C.E.), Apion, the Alexandrian anti-Semite, had charged that the Jews annually kidnap a Greek, fatten him up for a year, and then convey him to a forest where they offer his body as a sacrifice, eat his internal organs, and while immolating the Greek, would swear an oath of eternal hatred towards all Greeks. Similar in import is the following statement of a certain Democritus:

> Every seven years the Jews catch a stranger, whom they offer as a sacrifice, killing him by tearing his flesh into shreds.

Nothing further is known of this Democritus. It is quite possible that he was inspired by Apion. Apart from these two writers, there is no other instance of this charge being levelled against the Jews by any other Greek or Roman pagan author. With the Christians, however, the case is quite different. Christians were mercilessly hounded with this accusation. The Church Father, Tertullian (c. 160-220), bitterly lamented:

> We are said to be the most criminal of men, on the score of our sacramental baby-killing, and the baby-eating that goes with it... Oh! the glory of that magistrate who had brought to light some Christian who had eaten up to date a hundred babies!
After Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire (395 C.E.) the accusation of Ritual Murder, levelled against either Jews or Christians, seemed to pass into oblivion. But only twenty years later (415 C.E.), the fifth century Church historian, Socrates, relates that once during the Festival of Purim, a group of Jews at Inmestar, Syria, took a Christian child, bound him to a cross, and hung him up. They mocked and derided him for some time; but after a while they lost control of themselves, and so ill-treated the child that he died.4 “It is almost universally agreed,” observes Professor Cecil Roth, “that this episode, if founded in fact, was merely an outrage committed by some drunken ruffians on the occasion of Purim. However, it is the earliest antecedent for the medieval Ritual Murder accusation on record, other than the grisly, but entirely academic, allegations made by Apion and Democritus.”5 In Professor Roth’s view, then, this episode at Inmestar was the original prototype of the medieval Ritual Murder accusation. Support for this theory is to be found in the eleventh century Byzantine legislation which included in the oath of abjuration of any Jewish convert to Christianity a ban on those Jews who celebrate the Festival of Mordecai, and those who nail Haman to a piece of wood, join it to a sign of the cross, and burn them together while hurling curses and anathemas against the Christians.6

Professor Salo Wittmayer Baron, despite his own weighty objections to Professor Roth’s theory,7 concedes that some such “fantastic rumors,” upon reaching Western Europe, may have added credibility to the belief that the Jews crucified living children during the four-week interval between Purim and Passover; and that, ultimately, they also consumed their victims’ blood.8 These “fantastic rumors” were, however, soon to bear bitter fruit. In 1144, in Norwich, England, the Jews of that city were accused of having killed the innocent Christian child, William, for ritualistic purposes. According to Thomas of Monmouth (c. 1173), a monk at the Norwich Benedictine monastery, the Jewish convert, Theobald, then a monk at Cambridge, had informed him that:
In the ancient writings of his fathers it was written that the Jews, without the shedding of human blood, could neither obtain their freedom, nor could they ever return to their fatherland. Hence it was laid down by them in ancient times that every year they must sacrifice a Christian in some part of the world to the Most High God in scorn and contempt of Christ, that so they might avenge their sufferings on Him; inasmuch as it was because of Christ's death that they had been shut out from their own country, and were in exile as slaves in a foreign land.

Wherefore the chief men and Rabbis of the Jews who dwell in Spain assemble together at Narbonne, where the Royal seed [resides], and where they are held in the highest estimation, and they cast lots for all the countries which the Jews inhabit.9

The particular country in turn designated by lot the locality where the child was to be crucified. In 1144, the Narbonne Council had designated Norwich as the place, and William as the object of that sacrifice.

After the incident at Norwich, similar episodes occurred at Gloucester (1168), at Bury St. Edmonds (1181), at Bristol (1183), and at Winchester (1192). Fortunately, in none of these English accusations were there any Jewish victims. Catastrophic, however, were the results of the first Ritual Murder accusation in France, in May, 1171. There, the small Jewish community of Blois, numbering some 40 souls, was condemned to death by burning on the charge of Ritual Murder. In this first French Ritual Murder accusation, 32 martyrs, including 17 women, suffered death after refusing the alternative of conversion to Christianity. This event made a profound impression upon Western European Jewry. Rabbenu Tam (1100-1171), Rashi's grandson, immediately proclaimed the 20th of Sivan as a permanent fast day for English, French, and German Jewries.

II

In none of these accusations, however, was there, as yet, any charge that the Jews required or drank Christian blood. This last component of the Ritual Murder accusation, i.e., the Blood Libel, crystallized in the thirteenth century from two diverse sources.
Some time between 1238-1244, Cardinal Odo of Chateau-roux, at that time Chancellor of the University of Paris, in a debate with Rabbi Yehiel of Paris, charged that:

You (Jews) eat the blood of the uncircumcised (Gentiles). For thus did Balaam prophesy: "And drinks the blood of the slain" (Numbers 23:24).10

There is nothing in pre-thirteenth century Christian literature alluding to any Jewish desire to consume Christian blood. Odo, however, may have been influenced by the pagan historian, Dio Cassius (c. 155-235). In his Roman History, Dio reports that under the reign of the Roman Emperor Trajan (98-117), the Jews of Cyrene, Egypt, and Cyprus revolted and put some 500,000 Greeks and Romans to death. According to Dio, the Jews would eat the flesh of their victims and then anoint themselves with their blood.11 Whether this incident actually occurred, or is merely a figment of Dio's imagination, does not concern us here. What does concern us is the possibility that Odo may have come across a garbled version of Dio's account to the effect that the Jews drank their enemies' blood.

A totally different motivation, however, was suggested in 1258 by Thomas de Cantimpré in his popular Bonum universale de Apibus. According to Thomas, from the time that the Jews shouted: "His (Jesus') blood be on us and on our children" (Matthew 27:25), Jewish men have been afflicted with a secret malady often appearing as a sort of male menstruation!12 The Jews, however, mistakenly believed that relief from this secret ailment could only be obtained through Christian blood (solo sanguine Christiano). Therefore, they instituted the custom of annually shedding Christian blood in every province in order that they might recover from their malady.13

That the Ritual Murder accusation and Blood Libel took root in the Christian psyche during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is eloquently attested to by the anonymous Jewish author of the thirteenth century anti-Christian polemical work, the Sefer Nitzahon Yashan Noshan14 (The Old Book of Confutation). He asserts:
The Christians reproach us and say that we murder their children and drink their blood. Answer them: No nation has been as strictly admonished against committing murder as we have. And this applies equally to the murder of non-Jews... “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17) means you may not murder anyone — this includes the non-Jew as well. Why is this so? Because “God made man in his own image” (Genesis 9:6). And it is also written: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed” (ibid.). This applies to everyone.

Furthermore:

We are also more scrupulous than any other nation in regard to blood. For even with meat that has been ritually slaughtered and is fit for consumption, we, nonetheless, salt it and are very careful to remove all the blood. But you libel us in order to shed our blood as David prophesied in Psalm 44. For he foresaw that in the future you would blaspheme us in order to shed our blood, and that you would kill us for the sake of our religion. Therefore, did he pray for us: “Thou art my King, O God; Command the salvation of Jacob” (Psalm 44:5).

In December of 1235, five children of a miller residing in the vicinity of the city of Fulda, Germany, were murdered, in consequence of which, 34 Jews and Jewesses were slaughtered by the Crusaders. The Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II (1194-1250), thereupon organized a Royal Commission to investigate the causes of this catastrophic event. He invited distinguished Christian churchmen and informed Jewish converts from all parts of Europe, who, in answer to the question whether Jews required Christian blood (Judei Christianum sanguinem in parasceve necessarium haberent), replied:

Neither the Old nor the New Testament states that the Jews lust for human blood: on the contrary, it is expressly stated in the Bible, in the laws of Moses, and in the Jewish ordinances designated in Hebrew as the “Talmud,” that they should not defile themselves with blood. Those to whom even the tasting of animal blood is prohibited surely can not thirst for that of human beings, (1) because of the horror of the thing; (2) because it is forbidden by nature; (3) because of the human tie that also binds the Jews to Christians; and (4) because they would not wilfully imperil their lives and property.

The Emperor thereupon issued an Imperial Edict absolving the
Jews of Germany of any suspicion of Ritual Murder. But as Professor Baron notes: "The accusation has persisted through the ages despite sharp denials by popes and monarchs, courts of justice and royal commissions, even the sworn testimonies of converted Jews. Born from the ancient conception of Jews as the odium generis humani, magnified beyond recognition in the crucible of the harsh age of Crusades, it found ready acceptance in a populace which expected from the persecuted Jews some such reaction to its own undying hatred." 20

We see, then, that the accusation of Ritual Murder originated in the pagan Hellenistic-Roman world, and that the early Christians were its principal victims. When Europe itself became Christian, the accusation of Ritual Murder was transferred to the Jews — reaching full literary expression, as well as claiming its first victims, in the twelfth century. In the thirteenth century, Odo of Chateau-Roux and Thomas de Cantimpré were the first Christian writers to give literary expression to belief in the Blood Libel. The acceptance by Christian Europe of both the Ritual Murder accusation and the Blood Libel was due, in large measure, to the activities of two Jewish apostates, Theobald of Cambridge and Nicholas Donin.

Postscript

The case which destroyed any lingering vestige of credibility in the Ritual Murder accusation in the eyes of Christian Europe was, of course, the famous Mendel Beilis trial of 1913 in Tsarist Russia which provoked universal condemnation. 21 And as a consequence of the ecumenical spirit generated by Vatican Council II (1962-1965), Archbishop Alessandro Gottardi of Trent, Italy, on October 28, 1965, with the full approval of Pope Paul VI, stripped the supposed child martyr, Simon of Trent — the most famous case of alleged Jewish Ritual Murder in Italy — of his status as a "martyr," and forbade any further veneration of his relics or saying of Masses in his name. The Church further concluded that the Ritual Murder trial of the Jews of Trent in 1475 had been a "judicial assassination." 22 Most recently, however, as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Ritual Murder
acquision and Blood Libel, having died in Christian Europe, have been revived in the Arab world, though apparently with no success.23

NOTES


5. Ibid.


10. Excerpted by Z. Kahn from Joseph ben Nathan’s Sefer Yosef ha-Mekanne, in Birchat Avraham (Berlin Festschrift), ed. by A. Freimann and M. Hildesheimer, (Berlin, 1903), Hebrew Section, p. 85; and in J. Rosenthal’s edition of Joseph’s Sefer Yosef ha-Mekanne, (Jerusalem, 1970), pp. 53-54, section 35. The Blood Libel was not discussed at the famous debate at Paris between Rabbi Yehiel and Nicholas Donin (1240). The exchange between Cardinal Odo and Rabbi Yehiel probably took place at an informal meeting between sessions, or at another debate. See Rosenthal’s observations, op. cit., p. 53, n. 4; and in his review of H. Merhavyah’s Ha-Talmud bi-Re’i ha-Natzrut, Kiryat-Sefer, Vol. 47, (1971), p. 30.


13. Thomas de Cantimpré, Bonum universale de Apibus, in Strack, op. cit., p. 261. Cf. also Strack’s translation in his The Jew and Human Sacrifice, tr. by H. Blanchamp, (New York, 1909?), p. 175. Strack believes that the source of Thomas’ “information” was none other than the notorious apostate Nicholas Donin! It is known that Thomas and Nicholas were personally acquainted. See Strack, “Blood Accusation,” p. 261.
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17. The author uses the term עֵבֶרִים to refer to the Blood Libel. This is the first occurrence of the use of the word עֵבֶרִים to describe the Blood Libel in the history of Hebrew Literature. Henceforth, the accusation came to be known as the עֵבֶרִים. The original meaning of עֵבֶרִים is “baseless charges.” See Deuteronomy 22:14, 17; and F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, (Oxford, 1966 reprint), p. 760, s.v. עֵבֶרִים.


