The painter...has spread out the blooms of his art. All of these he wrought by means of colors as if it were a book that uttered speech...for painting, even if it is silent, is capable of speaking from the wall and being of the greatest benefit.

Gregory of Nyssa, Laudatio S. Theodori, PG 46,737

The eyes encourage deep thoughts, and art is able by means of colors to ferry over the prayer of the mind.

Agathias, Anthologia graeca, I, 34

In a recent article,1 Walter Cahn noted: “In the high and later Middle Ages, Jews were singled out pictorially through the ascription to them of distinctive physiognomical traits, elements of dress, or symbolic attributes...thus whereas Jews in early medieval art are all but invisible, later they are hard to miss and indeed endowed with an extravagant hyper-visibility, as if their Jewishness, for the intended viewer, was all that mattered and everything else flowed from this unfortunate condition.”

The image of Jews in art has only recently found its way into the domains of interest of art historians in general. The “birth” of Jewish art and its acceptance as an academic discipline,2 themselves a result of research and discoveries in the last 75 years, may have been the trigger

---


needed. The very fact that Judaism recognized and sometimes even encouraged figurative expression in the service of spiritual tradition, gave to Jewish figurations an unexpected weight. Thus, Jewish art may have led to Jews in art or, at least, to a better look at what they were and how they appeared.

Bernhard Blumenkrantz’s3 pioneering book offered for the first time a broad study of the image of the Jew in medieval art, encompassing Old and New Testament subjects, and covering media as varied as sculpture, miniatures, stained glass windows, ivories, and so on. The medieval encounter with the Jew, which translated into images mainly negative, distortive, and aggressive, sometimes bordering on visual violence, was thoroughly researched and presented on the background of patristic texts and polemics. The Western world was extensively covered, the Byzantine imagery totally ignored.

Further studies followed this path. The focus was on Western art, as well as on the decisions concerning the Jews of Western rulers and theologians. Depictions and texts were paralleled and the result was impressively decisive. The visual image matched “à la perfection” Christian intentions. Heinz Schreckenberg’s book4 broadened widely the scope of iconography and reiterated the importance of comparing medieval text and image. Recent books5 ventured into the “otherness” of the Jews and opened new views towards a history of the theme.6

Byzantine art as a fertile field of research on the image of the Jew has still mainly remained unsearched. Eighteen years ago, my book Image of the Jew in Byzantine Art7 and Kathleen Corrigan’s study,8 although restricted to ninth-century Byzantine Psalters, confronted two different views of largely ignored material. Our opposing interpretations, if it still remains an open question, had the benefit of presenting a visual world of signs and symbols related to Byzantium. Whether fiercely

---

5 S. Lipton, Jews, Demons and Saracens (Princeton, 2001).
6 The Other as Threat: Demonization and Anti-Semitism. Papers presented at the International Conference of the Vidal Sassoon Center for the Study of Anti-Semitism at the Hebrew University (Jerusalem 1997).