THE JEWISH ANTICHRIST IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN GERMANY

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The Antichrist: What or Who?

The legend of the Antichrist in its medieval manifestations must seem to modern readers to be the result of pure fantasy, similar to such entertaining motifs as fire-breathing dragons, unicorns, enchantments and the like. The Antichrist was, in our terms, an "imaginary" figure, a product of the collective, historical, theological, mythopoeic functions of the imagination. In our terms; to medieval Christians, the Antichrist was a terrifying reality. Matthew of Janow (1394) wrote that the Antichrist was so universally and thoroughly discussed that when he appeared, even the little children would...
know him instantly. Over one hundred years later, John Calvin was concerned above all to depict the ideas and concerns of “old believers” in the Catholic world as blind and superstitious when he wrote “in the papacy [in papatu] nothing is more widely and commonly discussed than the projected coming of the Antichrist.”

The pre-Christian Jewish tradition, based in part on Daniel (7:7-10), foresaw the advent of an anti-Messiah, known first as Belial or Beliar, and later as Armillus. This was to be an actual physical entity. However, from the time of the Church Fathers, learned Biblical exegesis has tended to interpret the Beast of Revelation 13, the basis of the (Christian) Antichrist legend, as a corporate entity: the totality and final sum of evil in the world. Nevertheless, many medieval and early modern authors who wrote in Latin were less concerned with precise Biblical scholarship than with Christian tradition. The term “Antichrist,” drawn from the Epistle of John, and fraught with the earlier tradition of the Jewish anti-Messiah, denotes both someone who opposes or does not believe in Jesus and one of the personnel of the Last Days. This shocking name was applied to the Beast of Revelation 13, thus anthropomorphizing the Beast and giving him a “speaking part” in the final drama. The vernacular sources that interpreted learned theology for the non-Latinate, primarily in literary and exegetical genres, provide evidence for a popular image of Antichrist strikingly different from that of the learned. On the European Continent, the broad masses of western Christendom as well as many learned clerks believed the Antichrist was a real person who would be born, live and die, often in a perverse parody of Jesus’ life, at the End of Time. He would persecute true believers and set up an

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5 Cited by Joshua Trachtenberg, The Devil and the Jews, 39. To medieval Christians, the Antichrist was “no legendary dragon spouting imaginary fire; he was a terrifying reality” (37-38); “… the Antichrist was no mere creature of scholarly dispute but the deeply disturbing concern of everyone.”

4 “… in papatu nihil magis celebre ac tritum est, quam futurus Antichristi adventus: interea tam sunt stupidii, ut eius tyrannidem cervicibus suis impositam non sentiant.” John Calvin, Commentary on 1 John 2,18; in: Opera quae supersunt omnia, ed. W. Baum et al. (Brunswick, 1896), LV, 321.


6 1 John 2,18: “Little children, it is the last time: as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby ye know it is the last time.” The situation in England seems to have been rather different. Lollard exegesis tended to see the Antichrist as the pope. Curtis Bostick notes that this is the result of a similar distinction between a corporate and a personal Antichrist: see his dissertation “The Antichrist and the “true men.” Lollard Apocalypticism in Late Medieval and Early Modern England” (University of Arizona, 1993). Bostick notes that the theologians Tyndale and Wyclif generally saw the Antichrist as a corporate entity, whereas at the popular level, the Lollards interpreted Antichrist as a real person, usually the pope. Most students of the Antichrist traditions have not paid equal attention to both views: Emmerson, for example, calls the personal inter-