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Johannes Heil. *"Gottesfeinde"-"Menschenfeinde": Die Vorstellung von jüdischer Weltverschwörung (13. bis 16. Jahrhundert).* Essen: Klartext, 2006. 672 pp. EUR 44.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-89861-406-1.

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Early Views of the Jewish World Conspiracy

In this extremely erudite and far-ranging book, Johannes Heil provides a systematic overview of anti-Jewish representations from the thirteenth through the sixteenth century with a focus on the idea of alleged Jewish world conspiracy. The theme allows Heil to tie together many aspects of antisemitic discourse, which he thoughtfully and helpfully contextualizes within a broader consideration of historical and discursive developments. Heil makes many well-reasoned comparisons with descriptions of or accusations against Jews and similar discourses about heretics, witches, and external enemies such as Turks. The theme also serves to anchor a study that will be of great interest beyond the chronological boundaries set in the book (indeed, it opens with a broad engagement with the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" [1903]). The chronology that Heil has selected is itself both bold and provocative, forcing historians to reconsider the impact of late medieval and Reformation developments and filling a very real need for synthesis for the late medieval and early modern periods.

Throughout, Heil reviews an extremely impressive volume of secondary and primary sources (including historical, legal, and theological materials, as well as selected visual depictions), but he does so with great care, selecting intriguing scholarly observations, subjecting well-read texts to intense scrutiny, and opening rarely considered texts for discussion. He achieves a fine balance that makes this study both scholarly and accessible. The volume also includes a helpful bibliography and indexes.

Heil asserts that the earliest conceptualization and expression of Jewish world conspiracy can be traced to the thirteenth century; he believes that the seventeenth century ushered in a secularizing process of the image of Jewish world conspiracy. For Heil, the stereotype of the hostility of Jews was largely religiously oriented in the earlier period, and based on the concept of enmity to God; with modernization, however, the conspiracy of Jews was now increasing portrayed as involving enmity to humanity.

Heil begins by providing an extensive and nuanced

evaluation of conspiracy as an "imagined reality" that aids in the formation and boundary-setting of community. He rejects the idea that conspiracy thought, like other perceptions of hostility, can simply be dismissed by recourse to modern psychological concepts such as irrationality, paranoia, or madness. Instead, Heil stresses that the imagined and the real had important connections in the medieval and early modern worlds. Similarly, the question of truth or untruth in such expressions is basically irrelevant, as Heil seeks to understand a particular "mindset." He argues that premodern accusations of conspiracy must be viewed within a broader understanding of contemporary concepts of political-social actions (alliances, brotherhoods, and so on) and that anti-Judaism needs to be seen within a wider connection to perceptions of opposition and strategies of devaluation. Heil also reads such perceptions and accusations in a thoroughly contextual manner, examining various threats and crises–perceived and real–across society (consider, for example, the Black Death, the Hussite war, reform of the church and the empire, and so on). At the same time, Heil is diligent in placing alleged Jewish conspiracy into a culture of prejudice that existed in relation to conflicts with non-Christians as well as internal Christian dissenters. In this regard, Heil makes important contributions both to the theme and to the methodologies for studying antisemitism and history.

Heil reviews the characteristic and underpinning accusations associated with conspiracy, including secrecy, plotting, the use of foreign or incomprehensible language, anti-Christian sentiment, blindness, and armed opposition (many of these aspects are reviewed and detailed in the fifth section of the book, "Forms and Elements of the Conspiracy Stereotype"). He points out the negative effects of the combination of theological and economic motives in the discourse describing alleged Jewish enmity and conspiracy. He also notes that allegations of Jewish conspiracy took on additional meaning in the charged atmosphere of increasing apocalypticism. Of course, the motif of conspiracy was fed by the very differences perceived in Jews and Judaism, the sense of Jewish unity, and Jewish international connections, especially at times of crisis–here Heil reviews the serious persecution of lepers in 1321 and the impact of the Black Death in the middle of the fourteenth century. The events of 1321, in particular, were central, according to Heil, because they shifted anti-Jewish accusations from a local plane–accusations of blasphemy, host desecration, and ritual murder–to an international one.

The book includes an extensive discussion of aspects of the Reformation, making the important point that Jews were often presented as aligned with other out-groups and utilized in the discourse of identity, co-opted by Lutherans as well as Catholics in their internal Christian debate. Heil gives some useful attention to Johannes Eck and Martin Luther and their writings that dealt with Jews. His periodization here reinforces a notion that has gained ground in scholarship: that the Reformation must be seen not as a breaking point but as part of a broader continuity that stretched from the end of the High Middle Ages into the seventeenth century. What emerges is a powerful anti-Jewish motif that was not constant over the period under review, but that changed and adapted to various conditions and resulted in different manifestations of anti-Jewish discourse. The Reformation, for Heil, while continuing many earlier themes, nonetheless furthered the process of criticizing sacral legends manifest in such accusations as ritual murder, without thereby eliminating enmity towards Jews.

Given the broad period covered, some chronological jumping occurs throughout the volume. At times there are some very long paragraphs and some repetition. But these are really only minor quibbles, as this marvelous book presents a grand and coherent narrative but never loses sight of meticulous details and scholarly evaluation. This brilliant study simultaneously draws from the best scholarship on the subject, re-engages a wide range of historical sources, and, in the end, advances our understanding of the theme and the possibilities for innovative historical research.

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