

**Blood Libel Accusation –  
A Precursor of Anti-Semitism**

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## BLOOD LIBEL ACCUSATION: A PRECURSOR OF ANTI-SEMITISM

A young boy went missing in England in 1144, and when found, had stab wounds all over his dead body. It was claimed as a ritual murder done by Jews, who reportedly voted to murder one Christian child each year in order to use their blood to make matzot for Passover. Three other incidents occurred in England subsequently, followed by an uproar in York causing the murders of 150 Jews.

In 1171 the blood libel accusation crossed country borders to the small village of Blois, France. In the ensuing bedlam at least 31 Jews were burned to death.

Blood libel allegations continued through the centuries, never proven. But the accusations continued.

This paper will explore the conditions surrounding the first accusation, in Norwich (England) surrounding the death of young William, including the relations among the Jews and their Christian neighbors. How could a charge, baseless at the outset, be believed and allowed to fester and go on to other towns and villages in England, and then in France? How did Jews and their Christian neighbors interact? If the charges could not be proven, how did the claim or rumor of blood libel accusation advance from generation to generation?

The baseless, unproven charges from 1144 to the present day form a characteristic basis of anti-Semitism.

The blood libel accusation history has been uncovered anew in the last ten years, with at least six major books and historical analyses, many with new interpretations. What is it about blood libel, such an ancient tale, which reverberates with us today?

There are many terms used for the alleged ritual killing, and the definition by historian Darren O'Brien is formidable. "The allegation, arising in the medieval period, that Jews kill non-Jews, especially Christians, in order to extract their blood for consumption or some other purpose (medicinal, for example). Early Christians, heretical Christian groups, and witches were also accused of the same acts. It is a synonym for blood accusation. This term is used rather than blood accusation as it accurately communicates the slanderous nature of the charge."<sup>1</sup>

The first charge of blood libel precedes the murder of William, going back to the ancient Greeks. Some historians (Jessopp and James, among others) note that this actually set the precedent.

"The first known accusation of ritual murder against Jews is that recorded by the historian Posidonius in the second century BCE. He asserted that when Antiochus IV Epiphanes invaded and desecrated the Temple in 168, he found a Greek captive in the Temple who told him that every seven years the Jews captured a Greek, fattened him up, killed him, ate parts of him, and took an oath of undying enmity against Greeks."<sup>2</sup>

The story, on its face, is impossible. "It was fabricated as propaganda to justify Antiochus's desecration or was invented, probably in Alexandria, to express Greek

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<sup>1</sup> Darren O'Brien, *The Pinnacle of Hatred, The Blood Libel and the Jews*, page ix.

<sup>2</sup> This is cited in an article, *Thomas of Monmouth* by Langmuir in Dundes, editor, *The Blood Libel Legend Casebook*, p 7. Langmuir references Manahem Stern and Tcherikover in his footnotes, but does not quote them.

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hatred of Jews,”<sup>3</sup> according to Gavin I. Langmuir, an historian of anti-Semitism. “Whatever the precise explanation, we can be sure that the accusation was not an immediate reaction of people on the spot at the time but was created afterwards, probably by Posidonius himself.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus the first blood libel accusation was born. And, like many of the other accusations, the story was not created in the moment it occurred, but rather fabricated years after.

“The ritual murder legend occupies a tiny corner of historiography, yet it operates like an overloaded circuit, a high-friction relay point in efforts to account for the difficult course of Jewish-Christian history, the violence of the Holocaust, and even Israeli politics,” claims University of Pittsburgh professor Hannah R. Johnson. “Thanks to biased sources, competing religious views of reality, and a volatile history of appropriation of the story of ritual murder for political ends, determinations about ‘what actually happened’ in a given case of the accusation are more than usually elusive.”<sup>5</sup>

This is exactly the story of the first blood libel in England. It was many years after the murder of William that a monk, Thomas of Monmouth, took it upon himself to write a six-volume story over many years about the young boy’s murder. With more written about this case than any other blood libel accusation, this paper will examine it in detail.

“William, a young apprentice, was killed and left under a tree on the outskirts of Norwich (England),” relates historian E.M. Rose. “Finding a dead body is invariably

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<sup>3</sup> Langmuir, Gavin I., “Thomas of Monmouth: Detector of Ritual Murder,” p 7 in Dundes, editor, *The Blood Libel Legend Casebook*.

<sup>4</sup> Langmuir, “Thomas of Monmouth,” p 7

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, Hannah R., *Blood Libel*, pp 2-3.

an awkward experience ... especially in medieval England, where detailed rules specified the proper procedure for dealing with corpses. ... Many considered it advisable to move a dead body elsewhere, bury it quickly, or hope it might be discovered by animals or consumed by the elements before it was discovered.”<sup>6</sup>

Two people are known to have seen the body soon afterward, a “peasant” and Lady Lagarda, an aristocratic nun, who, at least, said prayers over the body before leaving. “On Holy Saturday (March 25) the day before Easter, the forester Henry de Sprowston was shown the corpse while he was riding through the woods in the course of his duties, looking for people who might be making mischief, or more likely, cutting timber without a license.”<sup>7</sup>

Wood was a very sought after commodity in Norwich at the time, as the second-largest city in England (after London) was undergoing a population increase.

Although neither deSprowston nor the peasant knew the identity of the corpse, it was finally determined that it was William, a young apprentice leatherworker and son of Wenstan and Elviva. “The news spread and people from the city rushed to the woods to see what had happened. After William’s uncle, brother and cousin identified the body, the dead youth was laid to rest with minimal ceremony and no elaborate marker.”<sup>8</sup>

If that were truly the end of our story, many hundreds of years of Jewish persecution may not have happened. But, alas, the story continues.

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<sup>6</sup> Rose, E.M. *The Murder of William of Norwich, The Origins of Blood Libel in Medieval Europe*, p13. This book won the 2016 Ralph Waldo Emerson Award from Phi Beta Kappa. She is now a visiting scholar at Harvard.

<sup>7</sup> Rose, *The Murder of William*, p 14

<sup>8</sup> Rose, *The Murder of William*, p 15

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Information about William's death comes from Brother Thomas' account, *The Life and Passion of William of Norwich* "which is one of the only surviving texts from the large library of the twelfth-century Norwich Cathedral. Thomas arrived at the monastery a **few years after** (emphasis mine) the discovery of William's body and took a passionate interest in the dead boy ...Six years after the murder Brother Thomas claimed to have pieced together what had happened during that fateful Holy Week of 1144. He set out to prove that William had been killed for his faith and therefore deserved to be hailed as a saint."<sup>9</sup>

The jump from the case of an anonymous body lying in the forest waiting to be devastated by animals to a child murdered because of his religion and in the same manner as Jesus is not an easy one to make. But it was made, and almost believed.

"The receptive mindset into which Monmouth sowed the crucifixion accusation," comments historian Darren O'Brien, "has been illustrated. ... Monmouth's Jews were described as enemies of the Christians, enemies of Christ, our enemies, constant enemies of the Christian name and the Christian religion, and shedders of innocent blood."<sup>10</sup>

O'Brien continues that "to Monmouth and its anticipated audience, the Jews were avaricious people with wicked hands who not only pestered for the repayment of money, but entertained 'crafty' plots. Jews were heartlessly cruel and their hatred for Christians was inborn."

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<sup>9</sup> Rose, *The Murder of William*, p 15

<sup>10</sup> As quoted in Darren O'Brien, *The Pinnacle of Hatred*, p 103. The second part of the quotation describing the Christian attitudes about Jews, is from *The Life of St. William of Norwich*, written by Brother Thomas. The complete text of Brother Thomas' work is included as an appendix to O'Brien's book.

The work by Brother Thomas, according to O'Brien, "is a continually drawn parallel between the suffering of Christ familiar to him and his readers from the passion narratives of the gospels and the suffering of the boy William of Norwich, both at the hands of the Jews."<sup>11</sup>

O'Brien explains that the contempt by which Christians held Jews in 1144 in Norwich was incredible. "To Monmouth and those receptive to his narrative, crucifixion as a mode of execution was clearly Jewish behavior. It was what Jews did. It was how the 'Christianicide' Jews functioned. For this reason Jews did not deserve to live among Christians. They deserved extermination. Thomas places his own (and his audience's) desire into the mouths of the victims..."<sup>12</sup>

How can such intense hatred exist? This is clearly a relationship in which Christians could not tolerate Jews living even in the same city. As Jews at that time were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus, there must have been the thought, according to Brother Thomas and some of his peers, that they would crucify everyone.

An excerpt from "The Life", Brother Thomas' work, sheds much on this:

...in the ancient writings of his fathers, it was written that the Jews, without shedding blood, could neither obtain their freedom, nor could they ever return to their fatherland. Hence it was laid down to 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 that so they might avenge their sufferings on Him, inasmuch as it was because Christ's death that they had been shut out from their own country, and were exiled as slaves in a foreign land. Wherefore the chief men and rabbis of the Jews who dwell in Spain assembled together at Narbonne, where they cast lots for all of the countries the Jews inhabit; and whatever country the lot falls upon, its metropolis has

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<sup>11</sup> O'Brien, *Pinnacle*, p 103

<sup>12</sup> O'Brien, *Pinnacle*, p 103. The sentiments regarding crucifixion and living with the Christians are those expressed by Brother Thomas in "*The Life*."

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to carry out the same method with the other towns and cities, and the place whose lots is drawn has to fulfill the duty imposed by authority. Now in the year which we know that William, God's glorious martyr, was slain, it happened that the lot fell upon Norwich Jews, and all the synagogues in England signified, by letter or by message, their consent that the wickedness should be carried out in Norwich.<sup>13</sup>

A person named Theobald gave the basis of the Jewish conspiracy theory to Brother Thomas. He had been Jewish but converted and became a monk, and resided in the same monastery as Thomas.

Brother Thomas was the "historian" on William, but even more so, he was the supreme advocate to make him a saint. He and his Cathedral would be the beneficiaries, both in terms of prestige and honor.

We are going to return to William's murder, but this time adding many more details. The question from a historical perspective is, how accurate is the information? The answer from the perspective of the twenty-first century is irrelevant. At every twist and turn there are many reasons to understand exactly what has happened and stop the "history." But when one person is the advocate and has a personal vendetta, there is no stopping it, as noted previously.

"Relying on information provided by the victim's family, Thomas claimed that young William was induced to accompany a man who offered him a job working for the archdeacon's cook. ... When the man checked with the boy's aunt the next day, she was sufficiently suspicious to send her daughter to follow William. The daughter reportedly saw the man and William enter a certain Jew's house. There, after some time, Brother Thomas insisted, William was sacrificed in a bloody

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<sup>13</sup> O'Brien, *Pinnacle*, p 104, quoting Brother Thomas' *The Life*, Book II, Chapter 11.



mockery of the Crucifixion. After which his abused body was abandoned in the woods outside of town.”<sup>14</sup>

Please note that there are no details offered in this “proof.” We do not know the name of the “Jew” whose house this occurred in, nor do we have testimony from the cousin who went to the house. We also do not have any testimony regarding the actual murder. It all amounts to a story.

The crucifixion was a key for Brother Thomas. “Thomas’ argument is largely implicit,” says Johnson. “If Christ dies having received certain wounds, and one of his believers received these wounds also, then that believer must be holy, not precisely as Christ was, but in a similar manner.”<sup>15</sup>

The entire murder scheme must have had to percolate in Brother Thomas’ head from a long time. It took six years after William’s death (1144-1150) for this scheme to come to light. There was no mention of William’s death by family or friends or townspeople in that time relevant to a crucifixion or to sainthood.

Many historians believe that *The Life* was begun in 1150 (the date I will use in this paper); with others stating that the writing did not begin until 1155. One scholar (J. McCulloh) claims to have “found proof that knowledge of the accusation in Norwich reached continental Europe even before Thomas began writing his book: the list of martyrs written in Bavaria includes an entry from the late 1140s about the crucifixion by Jews of the lad William in England on April 17. The fact that information about the accusation made in Norwich reached Germany in about 1147 reinforces the

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<sup>14</sup> Rose, *The Murder of William*, pp 15-16

<sup>15</sup> Johnson, *Blood Libel*, p 41

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argument that the accusation of ritual murder appeared in Bavaria almost at the same time as it appeared in Norwich.”<sup>16</sup>

Whether Brother Thomas began writing in 1150 or 1155 does not alter the writing or the subject. No one was clamoring for the history of the murder of William. “So long as William was only seen as a poor boy who might have been cruelly killed by some Jews out of religious animosity, he could be viewed as a passive victim, but hardly a saint; and in fact he attracted little attention,” according to Langmuir.

“One small modification, however, could and did radically change the significance of his death. If an innocent boy of twelve was crucified by Jews during Passover and in Easter week for no other reason than he was a Christian, that he was a symbol of Christ’s truth; he would seem Christ in microcosm. ... Only a little imagination was needed to make William a symbol of comfort and ultimate victory, and Thomas did not lack imagination. He crucified William and thereby made him a notable saint.”<sup>17</sup>

Although there was little popular conversation about the murder, there was conversation in other parts of England about other people’s saintly nature. “Local disinterest concerning William at the time of his death stands in marked contrast to the popular attention garnered by some of his holy contemporaries, such as St. Wulfric of Haselbury, St. Godric of Finchale and St. Thomas Becket, men who were instantly acclaimed as powerful heavenly intercessors when they died,” according to Rose.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb*, p 168. There were some claims of “ritual murder” in Germany prior to William’s, but historians debated whether they were ritual murders or clandestine murders, not done for ritual effect. Note also that the date used is different than the usually accepted date of March 25.

<sup>17</sup> Langmuir, *Thomas of Monmouth*, p 35

<sup>18</sup> Rose, *The Murder of William*, p 17

The lack of attention to William might also have been because of a small-scale war. His death occurred during a civil war between Stephen and Matilda, the children of Henry I. “Scholars debate the extent of the war’s devastation,” according to Rose, “but there is no doubt around 1144 it raged with particular ferocity in East Anglia and its swampy fernlands... Under the circumstances, it is therefore not surprising that local authorities did not investigate the death of the young apprentice with more vigor.”<sup>19</sup>

The one person who had the vigor to pursue everything was Brother Thomas. Even though most people have never heard of him, he stands, for the wrong reasons, as one of the most influential people in the history of hate. “Thomas of Monmouth was an influential figure in the formation of Western Culture,” states Langmuir. “He did not alter the course of battles, politics or the economy. He solved no philosophical or theological problems. He was not even noteworthy for the holiness of his life or promotion to monastic office. Yet, with the substantial help from an otherwise unknown converted Jew (i.e. Theobald, as referenced earlier) he created a myth that affected Western mentality from the twelfth to the twentieth century and caused, directly or indirectly, far more deaths than William’s murderer could ever have dreamt of committing.”<sup>20</sup>

What did Brother Thomas really expect to obtain from the writing? Did he do it just as an exercise? “For Thomas, the real meaning of William’s death lies in his own mundane accounts of the miraculous,” said Johnson, “and how these reassert the coherence of his community and his place in that community.”<sup>21</sup>

In 1150, six years after William’s death, Brother Thomas put his plan into action. The body had been moved from the churchyard to the Chapter House, and now, in

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<sup>19</sup> Rose, *The Murder of William*, pp 18-19

<sup>20</sup> Langmuir, “Thomas of Monmouth,” p 34.

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *Blood Libel*, p 45

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1150 was being moved to the high altar of the church. After that the body was moved into a small chapel of the church dedicated to the martyrs. "William now had a personal sacrist (Brother Thomas) assigned to the care of the relics and take note of the miracles that occurred around his tomb. Artwork was commissioned, and he could boast of his own feast day. The restoration of William's reputation," Rose argues, "had begun."<sup>22</sup>

The reconstruction of the case by Brother Thomas, years after the murder "engages in a systematic redefinition of key terms like martyr and cause over the course of his debates with critics, even as he elides or erases the significance of these changes," according to Johnson. "When Thomas' opponents accuse him of accounting that 'holy which is not holy,' their criticism appears to consist of two parts: William is not venerated by the church and his sanctity is not certain but is in dispute.

"On both counts, Thomas subtly reworks the terms of the debate. On the first count, the accusation that, because William's cult is not more generally known, Thomas is 'presumptuous' to call him a saint, he is quick to stage the conflict as a matter of the local versus the global."<sup>23</sup>

Much of the background for the crucifixion story involves stories from a person named Theobold. Theobold's very existence is in doubt, as is his story about his conversion to Judaism. "Some scholars have questioned the very existence of Theobold," said Rose, "while others assume that he must have been known to the readers of Brother Thomas' *Life*. Although in Cambridge in 1144 Theobold described himself as a Jew among Jews, there was no known Jewish community in Cambridge until a later date. In fact," Rose continues, "the contribution Theobold

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<sup>22</sup> Rose, *The Murder of William*, p 23.

<sup>23</sup> Johnson, *Blood Libel*, p 37. Material quoted is from Thomas, *A Life*, Book II

made reveals little about England; possibly he converted elsewhere during the turmoil of the Second Crusade.”<sup>24</sup>

Much of the animus created by Brother Thomas came from talks with Theobald and others, not from himself. “Thomas never described William’s ultimate reward in his own words. Or he did so only in words he ascribed to others,” according to Langmuir. The story he relates casts a very special “halo” around William.

“He tells of a very young virgin of Mulbarton, who was very religious for her tender age and had a vision of hell and heaven. Guided by a dove, she saw Christ in heaven with Mary at his right hand and, very close to him, a small boy of incomparable beauty whose robes were nearly identical with Christ’s in all respects, in color, jewels, and gold as ‘as if the one garment had been cut from the other.’ The dove told her that this was William, the blessed martyr of Norwich, slain by the Jews. ‘Because he truly copied Christ in the passion of his death, Christ did not disdain to make him equal to himself by the honor of his purple robes.’”<sup>25</sup>

How could stories such as the one regarding the young virgin, and the entire tale of the murder of William even stand up in that time? “We nevertheless need to explain why these dormant images suddenly burst forth with such force and over such a wide geographic scope specifically during the 1140s,” stated Yuval. “In my opinion, the martyrological image of the Jews against this background of the pogroms of 1096 contributed decisively to this course of events.”<sup>26</sup>

Yuval goes against many other historians to state that Brother Thomas’ work was so voluminous and detailed because he had to convince people that Jews, in fact,

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<sup>24</sup> Rose, *The Murder of William*, p 83

<sup>25</sup> Material quoted from *Life*, page 77, from Langmuir, “Thomas of Monmouth,” in Dundes, *The Blood Libel Legend*, p 35.

<sup>26</sup> Yuval, *Two Nations*, p. 170.

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could do something of this nature. “What motivated Thomas to disseminate these rumors was England’s distance from their focal points, which is why the first medieval tractate on the ritual murder libel was written in England. This may also explain a very surprising fact,” continued Yuval. “Thomas’ book is the most detailed source for the ritual murder accusation in the Middle Ages. The “first” ritual murder libel is also, for some reason, the most extensively documented – a fact that demands some explanation, since historical facts generally become more thoroughly documented the more they are prolonged and repeated.

“Here, apparently, the opposite occurred. The explanation lies in the need felt by Thomas and the monks who supported him to persuade the public, which tended not to easily accept the claim that William’s death was in fact that of a martyr,” said Yuval.<sup>27</sup>

“Thomas himself refers to the skepticism in his text,” said Yuval. “...whenever the corpse of a Christian was found, Christians tended to accuse Jews of having killed the Christian.”<sup>28</sup> “In France and Germany there was no need for propaganda in order to win support for the accusation.”<sup>29</sup>

Yuval provides a tale from the time noting the difference between England and the other countries.

Rabbi Eleazar ben Judah, author of *Sefer ha-Rokeah*, writes that in 1187 the Jews of Mainz (Germany) were accused of killing a Gentile. The Jews swore that they were not guilty, and on that occasion they were even forced to swear that ‘they do not kill any Gentile on the eve of Passover. So we know

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<sup>27</sup> Yuval, *Two Nations*, p 170

<sup>28</sup> See note 74 in Yuval. He describes similar situations such Jews cited as killing Christians in such places as Speyer in 1195, as well as in Boppard and other ritual murders, p. 171.

<sup>29</sup> Yuval, *Two Nations*, p 171

that in 1187 there was widespread belief in Germany that Jews kill Christians on the eve of Passover.<sup>30</sup>

David Nirenberg, a historian at the University of Chicago, also understands how the stories spread, and provided additional details. “The rise of these stories about murderous Jews enmity toward Christian children and the child Christ has often been studied in terms of the increasing importance of Marian devotion, of Eucharistic piety, or of the need to generate local martyrs, saints, and pilgrimage sites,” he stated. “For our purposes, it is equally important to stress the interdependence between the theological and political meaning of these stories.”<sup>31</sup>

The death of William, Nirenberg stated, is heavily connected to the political reality of the time. “The birth of ritual murder in England, during a time of intensive royal exploitation of Jews by the Angevin dynasty, is significant. Already on the occasion of the first telling, with the death of young William of Norwich in 1144, royal complicity had crystallized into narrative.... Three hundred years later, starting to tell a similar story long after the Jews had been expelled from England, Chaucer’s Prioress still remembered royal perfidy as an indispensable detail: Ther was in Alsye, in greet cite/Amonges Christene folk a Jewerye/ Sustened by a lord of the contree/ For foule usure and lucre of vileynye/ Hateful to Cristland to his compaignye.’<sup>32</sup>

To add to what Yuval stated earlier, there also had to be the acceptance of the blood ritual. However, that understanding expired in England in 1235, when, on December 28, thirty-four Jews in Fulda were killed by the town’s citizens and became the first known victims of blood accusation. “The governing powers of

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<sup>30</sup> Yuval, *Two Nations*, p 171.

<sup>31</sup> Daniel Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism, The Western Tradition*, p 205.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*, p 206. The quote is from the “Prioress’s Tale” cited from Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. Larry Dean Benson, p 209, lines 488-492.

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Europe quickly understood the danger that the emergent myth presented to the state,” stated Edmund Levin. “Frederick II, the Holy Roman Emperor, sought to stamp out the inflammatory accusation and the public’s wrath against the Jews; like Thomas of Monmouth, he turned for help to Jewish apostates, but with the opposite purpose. In 1236, just after the Fulda massacre, he convened an assembly of Jewish converts to Christianity from across Europe. They found that none of the Jews’ sacred texts indicated that they were ‘greedy for human blood’. “Accepting their judgment, Frederick declared the Jews of Fulda to be exonerated and forbade anyone ever again from making such a charge.”<sup>33</sup>

Nothing except for grand hyperbole ever came from the trials mentioning the death of William. He “may have been a victim of foul play, but there was little effort to find a perpetrator, and evidently no one was ever prosecuted for his killing,” according to Rose.<sup>34</sup>

When the Bishop Eborard retired, William Turbe replaced him. He had been “prior at the time of William’s death in 1144, (and) also failed, apparently, to bring up the case when he met with colleagues and superiors. No further mention was made of William, no miracles are recorded, and relations between Christians and Jews appeared to have continued uneventfully for the next few years. ... the memory of William had all but died out.”<sup>35</sup>

The Second Crusade (1147-1149) would change that.<sup>36</sup> When crusaders came back after the war they had a defeatist attitude, but beyond that, were very much in

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<sup>33</sup> Edmund Levin, *A Child of Christian Blood*, p 31.

<sup>34</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 21.

<sup>35</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 23.

<sup>36</sup> The Second Crusade was an attempt to stop Muslims from taking key land from Christians during the years 1147 to 1149. Pope Eugene III started the attempt but the armies failed to stop Muslim control completely. Part of the reason is that many



debt. While they could repay any loans (for personal equipment, for example) fairly easily after the First Crusade, this was not the case after the Second Crusade.

“In 1149, Sir Simon de Novers, deeply in debt and unable to repay money he had borrowed from a Jewish creditor, arranged to have his creditor ambushed and killed in the woods outside Norwich,” according to Rose. “The body of the victim was discovered and taken to London for burial. Simon may have boasted about the deed, for his guilt was widely acknowledged, and later he appeared unrepentant.” Even Brother Thomas, writing in *The Life*, could not challenge his guilt.

“He has become so insolent and obstinate that when we came to see him to settle the bond” a number of Jews in Norwich claimed (in the words of Brother Thomas, who did not dispute his assertion) “he hurled at us abusive curses and aimed at us a multitude of threats, which we do not deserve. So we consider the guilt of the murderous knight to be sufficiently demonstrated.”<sup>37</sup>

The connection to William’s death will soon become obvious. “Pitied, admired or feared, Simon was in debt, and there is little wonder he would have blamed those who held power over him, according to Rose “... Certainly he judged, correctly, that if it came to trial he would be ably defended by his bishop and the local monks. His status as a knight (and possibly a former crusader) may have aided to his social rehabilitation.”<sup>38</sup>

Rose continues: It was not surprising, therefore, that a Norwich knight would attempt to resolve his financial difficulties by murdering the banker to whom he was

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of the fighting knights had been killed during the first Crusade, leaving fewer fighting soldiers to take part. (Reference.com)

<sup>37</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 68. Material quoted from *The Life*, Volume II.

<sup>38</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 69. As a reference she quotes a passage from the book “*Costs of Crusading*” by Jonathan Riley-Smith. “The standing of many returning crusaders could have helped to ease any financial burdens they faced.”

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indebted, or that this crime would not have raised eyebrows among Simon's contemporaries in 1149. Nor has this killing drawn the attention of scholars, since there is good reason to believe that there were many such assaults during the twelfth century. The Norwich murder was in many ways a typical crime of the period.<sup>39</sup>

However, Simon would be brought to justice since King Stephen sought to exert his rule. "The king claimed to be in control of the country, and the prosecution of capital crimes was both necessary and profitable. It was important for the king to be regarded as the fount of justice, mercy and Christian rule. Justice must both be done," according to Rose, "and be *seen* to be done."<sup>40</sup>

This was an important trial, pitting the Archbishop and the knight against the Jewish population of Norwich. "The case seemed open and shut," according to Rose, "and the outcome appeared obvious. King Stephen may have come to the Jews in search of funds and at their request; they were prepared to pay generously for justice. 'We Jews are yours, your tributaries year in and year out, often required by you for your needs and always loyal and useful to your kingdom,' Brother Thomas quoted them (the Jews) addressing the monarch. King Stephen seemed already convinced of the truth of the charge against Simon. All agreed that in 'so difficult a case the speech for the defense would have to be something very special in quality.'"<sup>41</sup>

The Archbishop of Norwich was set to defend the errant knight. "A lifelong monk, Bishop Turbe was of a different stamp than his predecessors, who had been royal nominees," stated Rose. The first trial was held in Norwich "after some time had

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<sup>39</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 70.

<sup>40</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 71.

<sup>41</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, pp 77-78. The quote within the citation is from Thomas, *A Life*, Book II.

passed, when the king visited Norwich and the Jews assembled in front of him” and made their case for the prosecution of the knight.<sup>42</sup>

The trial in London, at least according to Brother Thomas’ journals, was different than everyone expected. “The bishop knew that he was addressing a group of aristocrats and churchmen who were predisposed not to believe his excuses for the indebted knight. Turbe,” Rose wrote, “therefore took a different defense tactic, one that involved issues he knew would be immediately recognizable to his contemporaries, and that is what made him credible. He praised the knight’s character, quickly passed over the knight’s action, and went on the offensive.”<sup>43</sup>

It is said the best defense is a good offense. Turbe knew this and chose to turn the trial from one against the Crusader to one against the Jews. He had the Jews prosecuted for the murder of William. “We think,” he said according to the record left by Brother Thomas, “that we Christians should not have to answer in this manner to the accusations of the Jews, unless they are first cleared of the death of our Christian boy, of which they themselves are known to have been previously accused and have not been purged.”<sup>44</sup>

The Bishop wanted to charge all the Jews with the murder. He had been Bishop for four years but had not spoken about the death of William at any time with any one. Rose concludes it is very curious that this was brought up during the trial of the Crusader, and that the judicial counsel allowed the maneuver.<sup>45</sup>

“The rigor of justice should not be delayed too long,” demanded the bishop, “We beg that it be deferred no longer.” ... In a classic tactic, Turbe blamed the victim,

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<sup>42</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 79. The quote within the citation is from Thomas, *A Life*, Book II.

<sup>43</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 80.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas, *A Life*, Vol. II, 69:13 as stated in Rose, *William of Norwich*, p 81.

<sup>45</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 81.

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framing the murder of Deulesalt (The Crusader) as a justifiable revenge killing. ... The bishop maintained that the real issue was the unresolved murder of the apprentice William in 1144, at the heart of which was the conduct and character of the Jews of Norwich. The principle of *mala fama*, their evil reputation or bad character, was sufficient to initiate proceedings. As was later made explicit in ritual murder trials of the fifteenth century, the material evidence was not important.<sup>46</sup>

The character of the purported killing and the motivation of the alleged killers were of greater concern to the court than the facts themselves, asserts Rose.<sup>47</sup> This is a **major** turning point not only in the trial but also in the history of the Jews. Not only is the court not prosecuting the cold-blooded killer of a very prominent member of the Jewish community, but it is, in fact, prosecuting the community for a murder which everyone, Christian community included, forgot about.

“It was the characterization of Jews as killers of Christ and William as a Holy Innocent that was of prime significance,” Rose asserts. “The Norwich defense team emphasized that William was a type of Christ based on his physical suffering.”<sup>48</sup>

The three witnesses that Turbe called were questionable, and he did not call any of William’s relatives who were in Norwich at the time of the murder. The three people called were Aelward the burgess (a political or official representative) who died just before the trial and possibly served as a diversion in the trial. In order to gain the information that had been told to him in confession, the confessional seal would have needed to be opened.

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<sup>46</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 81. Rose refers to other works, including R. Po-Chia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany*, p 107.

<sup>47</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 81

<sup>48</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 81

Theobold, the Jewish convert, who was the source of much of Brother Thomas' research, was another witness. He most likely was not even in Norwich at the time of the murder.

And, there was an unnamed Christian maid. "As for the Christian maid, Brother Thomas does not mention her in the early part of his account. He subsequently argued that this was because she 'held her tongue for a while' out of fear of retribution from her Jewish employers. She surfaces only later in *The Life*. It was probably when Brother Thomas was polishing his text that he added her 'eyewitness' account, in which she told of peering through a chink in the doorway. Although fabricated (according to Rose), the scene is vivid and detailed.

As she was preparing alone in the kitchen some boiling water, as ordered by them, not knowing what was going on, nonetheless heard clearly the noise of it. ... she happened to see through the open door – with one eye, since she could not with both – the boy fixed to a post. Having seen this she was horrified; she closed her eye and they shut the door ... While indeed she went busily about, hither and thither, she found part of a boy's belt and, hanging from the belt, a sheath with a knife in it, a needle and purse. Next she looked around with more care and noted definite clues to what had happened.<sup>49</sup>

A Christian maid in a Jewish household would become a recurring character in later blood libel accusations, according to Rose. She would be able to "verify" facts in the case. <sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 83 with material quoted from Brother Thomas' *A Life*, II, ix, 59-60.

<sup>50</sup> Much like the recurring chorus in Greek dramas would inform the playgoer of what really was happening onstage, this Christian maid would enter the story and provide crucial facts. The maid's late appearance in Brother Thomas' account suggests that personal testimony by the witnesses he originally invoked were not sufficient to convince people of William's sanctity. (Rose, *William of Norwich*, p 84.)

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The other witness Brother Theobald, the converted Jew, has been mentioned in detail earlier. However at trial other information about him was revealed, including that he knew of the Nasi (president, an important person in the Jewish community, the original meaning was prince) of Narbonne. “This has led some scholars to believe that he must have had access to Jewish sources and significant Jewish learning. William of Malmesbury, writing in the 1130s made reference to the Nasi in the legend of the ‘Jewish Pope’ of Narbonne (*summum papam*) and hints of a Jewish conspiracy. Peter the Venerable testified to a general knowledge among Christians of the contemporary Nasi of Narbonne in his work ‘Against Jews’ (*Adversus Judaeorum*, ca. 1148) and derided his importance.”<sup>51</sup>

Another component of the ritual murder accusation was that the Jews needed Christian blood in order to return to their homeland. Rose concludes that “This is a conflation of two myths that circulated in the high Middle Ages: The first was that Jews were cursed to wander until their conversion at the Second Coming of Christ; the second was that Jews needed Christian blood for medicinal purposes. These various elements were woven together.”<sup>52</sup>

It was a foregone conclusion that Simon (the Crusader) would be found guilty of killing Deulesalt. But he was not. “As Brother Thomas neatly summed it up: ‘On the knight’s behalf, William, Bishop of Norwich spoke effectively.’ Turbe offered a masterful defense, dramatic and enthralling, emotionally satisfying, logically consistent, and theologically acceptable, if not entirely persuasive. He included familiar details, bits and pieces of contemporary ‘facts’ on which to hang his story.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 86. She refers to Peter Carter’s work, “The Historical Content of William of Malmesbury’s Miracles of the Virgin Mary,” in *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to Richard William Southern*, ed. R. H. Davis and J. M. Wallace Hadrill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp 127-164.

<sup>52</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 87

<sup>53</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p. 88.

Further, “Turbe was not laying out a legal brief for William’s murder, merely demanding the postponement of the trial of Simon de Novers. He raised a procedural issue, one that was sure to gain sympathy with his audience,”<sup>54</sup> according to Rose.

The bishop’s gambit was to delay the trial. The picture which Rose paints is that there was simply too much testimony to review, and that the royal court needed more time to review everything. “Simon’s trial was adjourned *sine die* (without any future date being specified) and the knight was free to go. Twenty years later he was still wrecking mischief in Norwich. Had he been found guilty, at the very least he would have had to leave the kingdom.”<sup>55</sup>

There was never another court case to prosecute the killers of St. William of Norwich. “The postponement of the case against Simon, a postponement that proved permanent, allowed each side to claim victory,” observes Rose. “The failure to reach a conclusion – or to prosecute the Jews for the murder of William – demonstrated the king’s irresolution in protecting the Jews, as in so many other things. Ephraim of Bonn has only heartfelt praise for Stephen: ‘In England the Most High King (God) rescued (the Jews) through the instrument of the King of England, putting into his heart to protect and save their lives and property.’”<sup>56</sup>

The case was closed since the High Court did not want to rule for one side or the other. It must be noted that there were no uprisings, additional deaths or other

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<sup>54</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 88

<sup>55</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 88-89

<sup>56</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, pp 89-90. She makes reference to Ephraim of Bonn’s *Sefer Zekhirah*, p 131. Ephraim wrote the *Sefer Zekhirah* (“Book of Remembrance”) and dirges on the sufferings of the Jews during the Second Crusade. He also composed *piyyutim* for the festivals, 27 of which (two in Aramaic) have been published. His commentary on *piyyutim* still exists in manuscript; it contains many traditional details concerning the early liturgical poets, poems, and liturgical customs (Hamburg, Ms. no. 152). Four manuscripts of his remain.

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charges against the Jews of Norwich, although they now felt even more out of place in the Christian town because of the ritual murder charges.

Word of what happened in Norwich spread throughout England and the remainder of Europe, but there were no more accusations of ritual murder until:

- 1168 in Gloucester, England (on the other side of the country from Norwich, and close to the Welsh border);
- 1170 in northern France;
- 1171 at Blois, France, on the lower Loire River. And
- 1181 at Bury, St. Edmunds in Suffolk (England) as well as Paris.

There is a paucity of information regarding these accusations.<sup>57</sup>

There is some information on the incident in Blois, France, and this paper will next focus on it, not only because of the accused blood libel, but also because of the charges against the Jewish community.

“The ritual murder libel of 1171 in Blois also took place on Passover,” notes Yuval, and also started on the basis of unfounded and unconfirmed rumors. “A Christian saw a Jew going down to the Loire in the night with a skin under his arm and then throwing it into the river. The Christian believed that the Jew was drowning a Christian child. As (historian) Robert de Torigny explicitly says: ‘Frequently, as has been said, they do so during the days of Easter, if they have an opportunity.’<sup>58</sup> Langmuir thought the accusation in Blois did not relate to ritual murder, but only to a ‘regular,’ and brutal murder.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 127

<sup>58</sup> Yuval, *Two Nations*, p 171, quoting R. Howlett, ed., *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II, Richard I*, vol. 4, pp 250-251

<sup>59</sup> Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Anti-Semitism*, p 284 as quoted in Yuval, *Two Nations*, p 171



The Book of Remembrance cited earlier, also discussed the blood libel accusation at Blois. “In the year 4931 (1171) evil appeared in France, too, and great destruction in the city of Blois, in which at the time there lived about forty Jews. It happened on that evil day, Thursday, toward evening, that the terror came upon us. A Jew (Isaac bar Eleazar) rode up to water his horse; a common soldier – may he be blotted out of the book of life – was also there watering the horse of his master. The Jew bore on his chest an untanned hide, but one of the corners had become loose and was sticking out of his coat.

“When, in the gloom, the soldier’s horse saw the white side of the hide, it was frightened and sprung back, and it could not be brought to water. The Christian servant hastened back to his master and said, “Hear my lord, what a certain Jew did. As I rode behind him toward the river in order to give your horses a drink, I saw him throw a little Christian child, whom the Jews have killed, into the water.

“When I saw this, I was horrified and hastened back quickly for fear he might kill me, too. Even the horse under me was so frightened by the splash of the water when he threw the child in that it would not drink.

“The soldier knew that his master would rejoice at the fall of the Jews, because he hated a certain Jewess influential in the city. He as much as put the following words in his master’s mouth: Now I can wreak my vengeance on that person, on that woman Pulcinea.”<sup>60</sup>

As in Norwich when no one saw exactly what happened to young William, someone viewing the actual incident was clearly impressed by the fact that he saw a Jew, that he fashioned a story of what he wanted to see.

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<sup>60</sup> Ephraim bar Jacob of Bonn, *Book of Remembrance*, cited as Source Texts in O’Brien, *Pinnacle of Hatred*, p 294

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Unlike Norwich, however, this incident would not go quietly into the night. The Jewish community in Blois, and the world, would never be the same.

The Jews of Blois were executed on the 20<sup>th</sup> of Sivan following a trial. The day of the incident which Ephraim bar Jacob of Bonn claimed was “that evil day” was reckoned to be *juedi saint*, that is Maundy Thursday, the Thursday before Easter. Explaining the significance of this date, Yuval claims, “The preciseness of the dating proves that the accusation in Blois involved ritual murder from the outset” and that nothing was fabricated.<sup>61</sup>

However, unlike Norwich and other blood libel accusations, there was no mention of the blood being used in Jewish ritual usage. “Nor is there any mention of crucifixion,” notes Yuval, adding that the direct connection to Passover and Easter “was connected to a season of messianic significance, even if its motifs were still taking shape and developing.” The developments occurred in England and France, “yet in the Mediterranean countries in general, and Spain in particular, the ritual murder libel did not take hold before 1350.”<sup>62</sup>

The accusation in Blois, and the deaths in the Jewish community, proved terrifying. “The consequences in Blois were new and frightening,” comments Rose. “The ritual murder accusation was given full faith and credit by Count Thibaut V of Blois, a close relative of the French king, who had many motives to do so. This was a time of economic hardship for him; he had perceived need to express independence from an increasingly powerful and encroaching king; and he may have been inspired as well by developments in Christian spirituality that centered on the cult relics and devotion to the Virgin.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Yuval, *Two Nations*, p 172.

<sup>62</sup> Yuval, *Two Nations*, p 172

<sup>63</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 158.

It is interesting to note that there was a civil war at the time of the death of William of Norwich that took attention away from that murder. In Blois there was a change in the religious orientation of Christians toward the Virgin that perhaps caused a different focus on the Jews in France.

“The role and the importance of Jews in Blois and Chartres differed from those in the royal domain and in Champagne,” notes Rose. “... King Louis had apparently encouraged Jewish settlement; the counts of Champagne welcomed Jews and were eager for them to attend their fairs. Jews were even more densely settled in Champagne than in the kingdom of France proper. Blois and Chartres, on the other hand, had only small Jewish settlements. ... The Jews of Blois appear less prominent and more vulnerable than others, a situation reflected in the political circumstances of their ruler and the declining status of the county.”<sup>64</sup>

In order to take his mind off the economic and political woes, Thibaut wanted to find a way to attack the Jews. “The ruler was revolving in his mind all sorts of plans to condemn the Jews, but he did not know how. He had no evidence against them until a priest appeared ... who said to the ruler, ‘come, I’ll advise you how you can condemn them.’”<sup>65</sup>

This would not be good for the Jewish community in Blois, which understood what was happening around them. “Recognizing that danger faced them, the Jews reacted swiftly and coordinated their activities. In the name of the highly regarded Rabbi Jacob Tam, neighboring Jewish communities sent circular letters describing

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<sup>64</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 161. In this she refers to Blumenkranz’ book, *Les Juifs a Blois*, where he estimates that there may have been a community of between 105 and 140 in 1170. Scholars, she says, either cite that number or one from Ephraim of Bonn, who mentions four *minyanim* so that the adult population is calculated at 40, of which 32 or 33 were burned.

<sup>65</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 162, in which she quotes Ephraim of Bonn, as quoted in Marcus, *Jew in the Medieval World*, 128.

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the events, proposed penitential acts, and wielded what political and economic influence they could.

Rose observes that “Despite the immediate and decisive action of the Jewish community at Blois and elsewhere around France, appeals to the king of France, and major bribes to interested parties and their relatives, more than thirty of the Jews of Blois were imprisoned in the dungeons of Blois fortress and shortly afterward were put to the flames in punishment for the alleged crime.”<sup>66</sup>

The bribes apparently were not accepted, but, in the end, Thibaut and his ruling group prospered greatly from the death of the Jews. “They appropriated the chattels and loans from the Jews who were killed, demanded large sums to ransom bodies and books of those who survived, received payment from exculpating Jews from such charges in the future, and tried to extract more money from the Jews for the right to bury their dead.”<sup>67</sup>

One might think, especially with the perspective of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that there would have been a major response by the townsfolk of Blois. “This **horrendous punishment was not** (emphasis mine) a result of the uncontrolled passion or the frenzy of a crowd claiming popular justice when they first learned that the Jews were accused of murder. On the contrary,” insists Rose, “prior to the burnings there was a series of ongoing negotiations over the price of the prisoners’ release. ... punishment by burning was not the anticipated result.”<sup>68</sup>

Public burnings in France might have been accepted politically, but one still has to come to terms with the actual burning. Fire. “To those who witnessed the

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<sup>66</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 163, in which she quotes Chazan, “The Blois Incident of 1171,” regarding the political and economic influence.

<sup>67</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 167

<sup>68</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 163

execution, “ Rose commented, “the ordeal by fire proved that the Jews of Blois were guilty, just as the ordeal of water immediately preceding it had done. The fire confirmed religious guilt; it was not the obvious, natural conclusion to a typical case of medieval homicide. There was little likelihood that young children and nursing babies had participated in any murder yet they too were condemned and consigned to the flames, as were many women.”<sup>69</sup>

Rose summarizes events by saying, “The outcome was sufficiently shocking and unexpected that Rabbi Tam called for an annual perpetual fast day on the twentieth of Sivan, the anniversary of the burnings. The eminent rabbi died almost immediately after, whether of old age, shock or some combination of the two. The leaders of the Jewish community also called for Jews to limit the size of wedding parties and for sumptuary laws that required women to forego wearing fancy silk cloaks and men to undertake rigorous fasts. Many heart-rending liturgical poems (piyuttim) survive to this day commemorating Jewish martyrs in Blois.”<sup>70 71</sup>

While it was earlier noted that Brother Thomas really did not receive any fame or honor within the church for his work on the William saga, again, with the Blois case it was different. Thibaut gained power. “Thibaut’s actions in Blois should therefore be placed in the political context of competition for power and prestige on a national and international scale. The burnings of Jews at Blois can be linked with notable public burnings before and after by members of the family, such as those in Orleans and Sens. Burning became an acceptable punishment for heretics in western

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<sup>69</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 172

<sup>70</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 163. She also notes: Well into the second half of the seventeenth century, throughout Poland, the Blois martyrs were recalled by Jews who undertook this annual fast. The date this remained important in the communal memory for centuries, long after details of the events of Blois were forgotten.

<sup>71</sup> As a separate part of this project, I plan to write a Martyrology section for the Yom Kippur service featuring prayers and piyyutim from the period.

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Europe only after King Robert II “The Pious” of France burned ten convicted heretics at Orleans in 1022.<sup>72</sup>

The blood libel accusation at Blois was completely unlike Norwich. While Brother Thomas defamed Jews in his history written over a long ten-year period, no community uprising was ever recorded.

I think Rose is a bit understated when she summarizes the blood libel accusation at Blois as “striking.” It “was a striking event in Christian-Jewish relations, and it also signaled changing relations between the king of France and his vassals. So much historical attention has concentrated on tracing textual influences that there has been a tendency to overlook the effects on those who watched. ... Although the events at Blois were ostensibly civil and secular in origin – the alleged murder of some local child – it was their ecclesiastical commemoration that made them significant. In Blois, as in Norwich ... the religious and the secular were inextricably linked.”<sup>73</sup>

The burnings at Blois forever impacted the Jewish religion – through the Jewish liturgy and relations with Christianity. A table in O’Brien’s book lists over 50 murders by Jews with some element of ritual murder accusation from 1096-1235. (The one prior to Norwich is claimed by many to be a civil murder by a Jew on a Christian not connected with blood libel.)<sup>74</sup>

And after the killing and destruction a portion of Jewish liturgical text was changed, most notably in a prayer known as “Alenu” (“It is our duty to praise the Master of all”) which is one of the concluding prayers of the traditional service. According to Yuval it entered the traditional French and Ashkenazic prayer books in the twelfth

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<sup>72</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 169

<sup>73</sup> Rose, *Murder of William*, p 185

<sup>74</sup> O’Brien, *Hatred*, pp 186-190

century and was “a decisive response to the parallel Christian declaration (Te-Deum).”<sup>75</sup>

Rabbi Jeffrey Hoffman, in a comprehensive study of “Alenu” stated, “Alenu gradually became one of the concluding prayers of daily services beginning in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries in the Franco-German region. It entered the morning Shaḥarit service first, and within a couple of centuries, it concluded all services, three times a day, throughout the entire liturgical year.”<sup>76</sup>

“The recitation of Alenu,” said Yuval, “served a very clear and impressive, anti-Christian polemical function when recited by the martyrs of Blois. This may well be the ideological background for its become the concluding prayer. I. Ta-Shma recently conjectured that the absorption of Alenu into the standard liturgy accompanied its removal from the non-obligatory framework of the Ma’Amadot, optional prayers of individuals, customarily said even in ancient times.”<sup>77</sup>

Originally used only on the High Holidays, Hoffman found “there is no evidence of Alenu in a liturgical location other than the High Holiday prayers before the Blois massacre.” He continues by saying, “It is, in fact, reasonable to consider the movement of Alenu from Rosh HaShannah to daily worship as another example of vicarious vengeance for the anti-semitic attack at Blois. However, this may simply be the result of prudence and self-preservation in the face of a powerful majority culture.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Yuval, *Two Nations*, p 199.

<sup>76</sup> Jeffrey Hoffman, *The Image of the Other in Jewish Interpretations of Alenu*, in *Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations*, The Electronic Journal of the Council of Centers of Christian-Jewish Relations, Volume 10, Number 1, 2015.

<sup>77</sup> Yuval, *Two Nations*, p 193 quoting I. Ta-Shma, “*The Source and the Location of the prayer Alenu le-Shabeah in the Siddur: The Ma’Amadot and the Question of the end of the Prayer*,” (in Hebrew), in *Sefer Zikaron le-Efriam Talmage I* (Haifa, 1993) pp 85-98.

<sup>78</sup> Hoffman, *The Image*, pp 7-8

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Hoffman and Yuval disagree about the Alenu prayer being “pushed into prominence” after Blois, since there is “indeed reason to question the report of the Jews actually chanting Alenu at Bois.”<sup>79</sup>

Whether or not the martyrs actually recited the prayer as they were dying, “the point is that the Jewish communities of the region appear to have taken that report quite seriously and literally,” stated Hoffman. “It is Alenu’s reported role that is crucial. ... The very fact that the Jews showed themselves willing to die for their faith indicated to medieval Jews the truth of Judaism, and the testimony of their chanting Alenu – whose theme echoed this triumphalist view – only emphasized the ultimate vindication of the martyrs and their religion.”<sup>80</sup>

The version of Alenu introduced in the twelfth century is very different from the prayer in the traditional Siddur today.<sup>81</sup> “An early version of Alenu found in a few late twelfth-century prayer manuscripts contains wording not found in other texts of the prayer. All other versions describe non-Jewish worship fairly generically, saying, ‘For they bow down to vanity and pray to a god who cannot save.’ In a manuscript dated 1189 that French Jews brought with them to London and in a few parallels from that world, we find a grotesquely expanded version of this line, as follows:

For they bow to vanity and emptiness – a man of ash, blood, bile, rotting flesh (inhabited by) maggots (those who bow down to this man are) defiled men and women, adulterers and adulteresses, dying in their iniquity and rotting in their wickedness, decaying in the dust, rotten with maggots and worms, and pray to a god who cannot save.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Hoffman, *The Image*, p 8. See also Yuval, *Two Nations*, p 192.

<sup>80</sup> Hoffman, *The Image*, pp 8-9

<sup>81</sup> See for example *The Koren Siddur*, p 364.

<sup>82</sup> Hoffman, *The Image*, pp 14-15.



The vivid language and portrayal shows a complete disdain for the Christian faith. “This is apparently a direct reference to Jesus,” noted Boston College’s Ruth Langer, “emphasizing his base humanity and denying his resurrection; it asserts in graphic terms that his body decomposed like anyone else’s.”<sup>83</sup>

Hoffman claims “the fact that this version of Alenu is not known beyond a few, isolated manuscript leaves is not surprising. If anything, the fact that this reading survived Christian censorship at all is remarkable.”<sup>84</sup>

But there was censorship of the revised prayer, as noted by an analysis by Howard Tzvi Adelman of Queens University, Kingston, Canada. “Christians, with good reason, have felt that the Alenu prayer was said against them, a sense that the incident at Blois would not undermine nor the fact that some Jews also spit in the synagogue when they said this line. “Rik” (a Hebrew word found in the prayer) means both “emptiness” and “spit.” In Yiddish the expression, “Er kumt tsum oysshpayen,” “He arrives at spitting time,” means to be very late for services since the Alenu is at the end. Christians further tried to prove their suspicions about the Alenu by showing that the expression “varik” added up in Gematria, a system by which numerical values are assigned to each Hebrew letter, to 316, the same as “Yeshu,” the Hebrew for Jesus; that “hevel varik” added up to the same as ‘Yeshu umohammed.’ (i.e., Jesus and Mohammad)

“By 1370, perhaps with the appearance of Alenu in the Mahzor Vitry,” continues Adelman, “Christians began to protest against the Jews saying such a prayer. Sometimes they even tried to force Jews to abstain from saying the offensive line.

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<sup>83</sup> Ruth Langer, *The Censorship of Aleinu in Ashkenaz and Its Aftermath*,” in *The Experience of Jewish Liturgy: Studies Dedicated to Menahem Shmelzer*, Debra Reed Blank, editor, p 150, as cited in Hoffman, *The Image*, p 15

<sup>84</sup> Hoffman, *The Image*, p 15. For more information on the Alenu prayer, please see Macy Nulman, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Prayer*, Alaynu, pp 24-26 and Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, particularly pp 71-72, 82, 85.

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For example, in 1702 the Prussian government began an investigation of the prayer which, concluding on August 28, 1703, banned the offending line as well as spitting. This ban was repeated in 1716 and 1750.”<sup>85</sup>

The blood libel accusation of medieval times would extend into present days as well. Historical writer Edmund Levin notes in detail a murder and conspiracy in Tsarist Russia – The Beilis Blood Libel, which occurred in 1911. Much like the case of William, a Jewish factory worker was falsely accused of murdering a 13-year-old Christian boy.<sup>86</sup>

But even today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *in 2016*, the words of blood libel exist. In the *Jerusalem Post* it was reported that a Hamas leader “Salah al-Bardawil, said in an interview with Hamas TV last November that Jews have ‘ancient biblical beliefs, which instructed them to kill children and collect their blood, in order to knead it into the bread that is eaten on Passover. Today, they are trying to say that these things never happened, and that it was a joke or a lie, but these are the facts of history. Anyone reading about their history will find this there.’”<sup>87</sup>

In the 2016 US Presidential election, which had all-time lows in name-calling and degradation, the blood libel accusation term used was used, totally incorrectly. It was used as a term of animosity. “Billionaire Charles Koch called the notion that he would support Democrat Hillary Clinton in the general election ‘**blood libel**,’ while doubling down on his assertion that he wouldn’t support Republican Donald Trump (emphasis is mine).

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<sup>85</sup> Howard Tzvi Adelman, “*The Worship Service as a Cultural Experience*,” The Jewish Agency for Israel, p 1. The writer is Associate Professor of History and Director, Program in Jewish Studies at Queen’s University, Kingston, Canada.

<sup>86</sup> Edmund Levin, *A Child of Christian Blood: Murder and Conspiracy in Tsarist Russian: The Beilis Blood Libel* (New York: Schocken Books, 2014).

<sup>87</sup> Editorial, The *Jerusalem Post*, June 25, 2016.

“The first thing I want to do is correct a rumor that the media keeps stimulating, and that is that I’m probably going to support Hillary,” Koch told a group of about 400 donors. He added, to a round of cheers: ‘***That is a blood libel***,’ using a term that refers to the anti-Semitic belief that Jews used the blood of Christian children to make ritual bread called matzo.” Koch continued: “At this point, I can’t support either candidate, but I’m certainly not going to support Hillary.”<sup>88</sup>

Certainly one role of the blood libel accusation was to present severe animosity against the Jews. That animosity continued for generation after generation. It stoked the fires that ultimately fed into the Holocaust. The murder of young William cannot be compared, on any scale, to the murder of millions. Yet, the early embers of anti-Semitism glowed at the feet of William and Brother Thomas.

“After all,” writes Johnson, “the Holocaust comprises a series of extreme, traumatic events that occurred on a massive scale. In such a context it may be difficult to see medieval accusations of ritual murder as anything but a series of minor oppressions. But what brings these two cases together is the sense that something fundamental eludes our understanding about each one.

“We might even express this as an inverse relation: the Holocaust is attended by a mass of documentation, yet its motivating mechanisms remain elusive. Ritual murder accusations are so sparsely documented that the most basic historical reconstruction becomes an epistemological challenge.”<sup>89</sup>

In the final analysis, there is only one common factor in all of the blood libel accusations, leading to the Holocaust and existing until this day. “The only prescribed, common, consistent, *ritual* element to any of the corpus of allegations

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<sup>88</sup> Rebecca Ballhouse, *Charles Koch: It’s ‘Blood Libel’ That He Would Back Hillary Clinton*, *The Wall Street Journal*, July 31, 2016

<sup>89</sup> Johnson, *Blood Libel*, p 9

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under examination here,” states O’Brien, “is that the accused were Jews. The commonality in the instances where the blood libel allegation was raised against other groups was that they, too, were minority.

“The only reason the blood libel accusation has persisted against Jews is because Jews continue to exist. Witches, heretical Christians, and other groups accused in the past have all but disappeared from view. The only scapegoat remaining on which to hang the allegation is the Jew. The obvious outcome,” he concludes, “is that those who continue to believe in and use the allegation will continue to use it until Jews cease to exist.”<sup>90</sup>

Blood libel accusation is, at its core, one of the most ignominious charges that any individual or group could throw at the other. The fact that it has persisted from at least the 12<sup>th</sup> century until today proves the uneven, contemptuous relationship between religious groups. That many, if not all, of the blood libel accusations are based on fabricated stories which have no factual basis, further proves this point. No one saw William being tortured. There was no ritual killing at all in Blois, an untanned hide simply slipped out of a coat.

No facts are needed because the relationship between the communities was at a breaking point. There was a civil war in England. There were hard economic times in France. An unwitting monk decided a young boy’s body looked like he had been crucified. In France, it looked like a body of a small, dead boy had been dumped in the water.

Because of the differences between Christians and Jews, because of the contempt and hatred between them, especially in the Middle Ages, the concept of blood libel was able to fester. Instead of realizing what the religions have in common,

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<sup>90</sup> O’Brien, *The Pinnacle*, p 264.

differences were accentuated, contempt was heightened and the worst tendencies were allowed to be brought forward.

Unfortunately, these differences continue to exist, and be accentuated, even today.

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This paper was the result of a conversation I had with my friend and teacher Rabbi Jeff Hoffman several years ago regarding his paper on Alenu (which, coincidentally, is referenced several times in this paper). When I read and studied the paper over the next several months, one thing stayed in my mind: Blois. I couldn't shake it. Every time I thought about writing a senior paper, Blois would come back to me. I needed to find out more about Blois, and the blood libel accusation.

I must also thank someone whom I have never met, but whose elucidation on the topic of blood libel accusation and the case of William, in particular, brought the subject into very clear focus. E. M. Rose through her book, *The Murder of William of Norwich* presented comprehensive detail of the first blood libel accusation. This book won the 2016 Ralph Waldo Emerson Award from Phi Beta Kappa. She is now a visiting scholar at Harvard.

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