

Do Jews “Men-struate”¹?

Thirteenth-Century Conceptions of Jewish “Male Menstruation”

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The thirteenth century sees a shift in Christian anti-Jewish polemics, in keeping with a desire to establish boundaries between the groups—both in the theological and the social realm. While by the early-thirteenth century, Jews were largely integrated into Christian environments, and relations between the two groups were mostly neighbourly, this proximity progressively resulted in the delineation of boundaries. Such boundaries indicated who belonged to which group and established Christian moral superiority. Consequently, the marking of boundaries led to the development of a variety of restrictions imposed on Jews in various areas of life ultimately culminating in the absolute expulsion from their homelands.² These restrictions were accompanied by a set of polemic directed against Jews that served as their theological and socio-cultural buttress.

Images of Jews as blind believers in the wrong faith, stubbornly clinging to their letters’ literal and ultimate meaning, as hostile towards the saving role of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary’s mercy, as economic exploiters in their roles as money-lenders, as asocial and members of a secluded group plotting against their Christian neighbours, and as wicked evil-doers, well-poisoners and child murderers have been widely explored. They all served the purpose of constructing the Jew as the ultimate theological and social opposite of the Christian.³ Less well known are corporeal conceptions of the Jew that arise early in the twelfth century. While the image of the crooked Jewish nose has survived into modern times and was particularly exploited in antisemitic Nazi-propaganda, other features in the construction of a “Jewish body” have received less attention. Based on Paul’s claim about the sexual depravity of the Jews, Christians developed an image of a “Jewish body.” Paul had depicted the Jews as carnal, as the embodiment of the “old Adamic nature of fallen humanity” in sharp contrast to the new and spiritually advanced Christian who could free himself from fleshly desires in his covenant with Christ. Similarly, the “Jewish body” was not only different from a Christian’s, but also distorted with regards to its sex and gender. A remarkable image in the canon of Christian conceptions of Jewish corporeality is the “men-struating” Jew.

Various scholarly voices have contributed to the notion of the Christian perception of Jewish “male menstruation.” Leading scholars, like Salo W. Baron, not a medieval historian of course, spread the view that the thirteenth century Dominican monk Thomas de Cantimpré’s *Bonum Universale de Apibus* claimed this to be the case. The *Bonum* is a compendium of theological sentences, practical moral and spiritual teachings, and a variety of *exempla*, in which Thomas reported the ritual murder in Pforzheim in 1267. Three Jews are said to have murdered a seven-year-old Christian girl and collected her blood for cure of what Baron later called a “Jewish malady often appearing as a sort of male menstruation.”⁴ In fact, Thomas de Cantimpré says nothing of the kind. In his text, Thomas claims that “a vein of evildoing” runs through the Jews “through a stain of blood” and causes a blood flow they are “tormented importunately by [...] without expiation.”⁵ Yet, he does not go as far as to provide his readers with any

¹ G. Steinem, “If Men Could Menstruate,” in *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (New York: New American Library, 1983).

² Cf. O. Limor, “Christians and Jews,” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, ed. M. Rubin and W. Simons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 133–48.

³ Cf. J. Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 10–9.

⁴ S. W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 11: 153.

⁵ Cited from I. M. Resnick, “Cruentation, Medieval Anti-Jewish Polemic, and Ritual Murder,” *Antisemitism Studies* 3, no. 1 (2019): 104. The Latin reads: “[...] ex maledictione parentum [referring here to Matt. 27:25 and the blood curse] currat adhuc in filios vena facinoris, per macula sanguinis; ut per hanc importune fluidam proles impia inexpliabiliter crucietur, quousque se ream sanguinis Christi recognoscat poenitens, et sanetur,” *ibid.*, 120–21.

physiological or medical description of this flow of blood. Nevertheless, his report has often claimed to be first “‘scientific’ statement of this phenomenon”⁶—namely Jewish “male menstruation”—most notably by historian Sander L. Gilman in his influential book *Jewish self-hatred*. Gilman presents the Christian image of a “men-struating” Jew as historical fact and does not doubt that

Male Jews menstruated as a mark of the ‘Father’s curse,’ their pathological difference is a result of their original denial of Christ. This image of the Jewish male and female was first introduced to link the Jew with the corrupt nature of the woman, since both are marked as different by the sign that signified Eve’s mortal nature after her fall from grace.⁷

Gilman does not present his readers with any more detail about what Christians believed Jewish “male menstruation” really was, how it was constructed, what his—Gilman’s—sources were for the claim about linking the Jew and corrupt women, and, if contemporary authors really established that link, what motivated them to do so.

Around the same time, and in an attempt at clarification, Peter Biller analysed a quodlibetic question c.1300 as to whether or not Jews suffered from a regular flow of blood.⁸ The question was responded to by either Henry of Ghent or Henry the German, both of which were masters in the arts and theological faculties in Paris by the time. A distinction between their two voices is difficult in the question in particular, yet whichever Henry debated to the question described the “fluxus sanguinis” as haemorrhoidal and resulting from a malfunction of the Jews’ digestive system.⁹ This contrasts with the depiction of the Jewish blood flow in Thomas de Cantimpré’s report, which is mentioned only implicitly albeit with a clear theological and moral implication. The *quodlibet* however draws attention to something completely different—namely, to contemporary medical knowledge. Medieval practical medicine and physiology were based on the Ancient Greek theory of the four humours as it was developed by Hippocrates and Galen. Being hot or cold, and moist or dry were the essential qualities of every body. Health depended first and foremost on keeping these four humours in the right balance. A hot and dry body was the most desirable as it allowed food to be processed into bodily fluids to a higher degree. The qualities of heat, cold, moisture and dryness were connected to the four humours of yellow bile, blood, phlegm and black bile, which contributed to the formation of further fluids the body would eventually discharge such as mucus, urine, menstrual blood or semen. Each of these discharges was also connected to proper digestion, with semen being the most refined of bodily fluids, resulting from men’s better concoction of food.

Menstrual blood was also processed from food, but remained less pure due to women’s general cold and moist condition. Its flow out of the body could not be contained and served as means of purging the body of excess cold and moisture. Haemorrhoidal bleeding, such as the one mentioned in the Paris *quodlibet*, is similar to menstruation in it being the result of too much cold in men. Haemorrhoids were thought to be a very common condition in most men, considered pathological only when they started bleeding regularly. Men who would suffer from regular anal bleeding resulting from haemorrhoids, like women, were believed to be too cold to properly digest foods. This would in turn result in the accumulation of too much black bile or blood that their bodies needed to purge themselves from. As

⁶ S. L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 74.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁸ Cf. P. Biller, “Views of Jews from Paris around 1300: Christian or ‘Scientific’?” in *Christianity and Judaism: Papers Read at the 1991 Summer Meeting and the 1992 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. D. Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 187–207.

⁹ “Ad questionem dicendum quod iudei habent fluxum sanguinis hemoreidarum. Et causa est prima quia dicunt medici quod fluxus sanguinis causatur ex sanguine grosso indigesto quem natura purgat. Sed iste magis habundat in iudeis quia ipsi sunt melancolici ut in pluribus;” translated by P. Biller: “Jews have a flux of blood of the haemorrhoids, and the first cause of this, is that doctors say that a flux of blood is caused by gross indigested blood which nature purges. This abounds more in the Jews because for the most part they are melancholics.” Cited from Biller, “Views of Jews,” 192–3; 205–7.

Jews were generally believed to have a more melancholic complexion, resulting from a bad and spicy diet and a more sedentary lifestyle, regular haemorrhoidal bleeding was thought to be not only common among them, but most natural. While the conceptualisation of haemorrhoidal bleeding as a form of cleansing parallels the notion about the nature of menstruation, we do not find a gendered perspective in the *quodlibet* text that would substantiate the conclusion of something like Jewish “male menstruation” from it. The “Jewish flux” that the *quodlibet* describes does not carry the same stigmas as female menstruation did as an unclean, uncontrollable and shameful leakage of a body that lacked cohesiveness and containment. Albeit a more positive evaluation of menstruation is present in practical medicine, natural philosophical thought had been spreading these stigmatising views of menstruation from Pliny the Elder¹⁰ and into the medieval times. Nor does the *quodlibet* explain a “Jewish flux”; on the contrary, it mentions that some Christians are afflicted with the same condition. To conclude, the *quodlibet* offered nothing like the phenomenon that Gilman described.

A decade after Gilman, Willis Johnson undertook the first effort to present a corpus of texts that transmitted what he calls the “myth of Jewish male menses.”¹¹ His was also the first attempt to drawing out the origins of the myth and an etymology of the notion of Jewish “male menstruation.” In Gilman’s interpretation of Thomas de Cantimpré, Johnson saw a clear misreading and refers to Jewish “male menstruation” as a notion that did not arise until modern times.¹² It is true that multiple writings from the early modern and modern period document this notion.¹³ However, when Johnson claimed that there was no idea of a “men-struating” Jew with its gendered implications before the sixteenth century, he missed out an important instance that was noticed shortly after his article was published. The same year, Irvn M. Resnick presented yet another text transmitting the motif of Jewish “male menstruation” in a way that cannot be read as ungendered.¹⁴ Certainly, we have to bear in mind that we must not project backwards our perceptions of sex and gender, but claiming that pre-modern times, and especially the Middle Ages, did not know such a thing as gender, let alone multiple genders, is equally inaccurate.

So, was the medieval Jew really “men-struating” or not? Let us now turn to three textual witnesses from the thirteenth century.

(1) The Haemorrhoidal Flow

The first is from the mid-thirteenth century Italy, from a medical compendium addressed to students of surgery and composed by Theodoric Borgognoni under the title *Surgery (Cirurgia)*. Its third distinction deals at length with different sorts of fistulas, hernias and haemorrhoids. Theodoric describes haemorrhoids as resulting from superfluous blood and black bile that abound in the body and cause infections. He recognises three different forms of haemorrhoids and haemorrhoidal bleeding in men, the first of which Theodoric describes as follows

Now the flow is of this sort in men: sometimes it is normal, such as the flow of menses in women, whence like a woman they menstruate every month. And certain men suffer hemorrhoids every month. But some only four times a year, and some once a year. But these should not be tied off because in this way they cleanse these men’s bodies of superfluous melancholy humors. (*Surgery*, Book III, ch. 41)¹⁵

¹⁰ Cf. Pliny the Elder, “Remarkable Circumstances Connected with the Menstrual Discharge,” in *Natural History*, ch.13, 2151–2 (LCL).

¹¹ W. Johnson, “The Myth of Jewish Male Menses,” *Journal of Medieval History* 24, no. 3 (January 1998): 273–95.

¹² *Ibid.*, 274.

¹³ Cf. G. Pomata, “Menstruating Men: Similarity and Difference of the Sexes in Early Modern Medicine,” in *Generation and Degeneration: Tropes of Reproduction in Literature and History from Antiquity through Early Modern Europe*, ed. V. Finucci (Durnham: Duke University Press, 2001), 109–52.

¹⁴ Cf. I. M. Resnick, *On Roots of the Myth of Jewish Male Menses in Jacques de Vitry’s History of Jerusalem*, International Rennert Guest Lecture Series 3 (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan-University Press, 1998).

¹⁵ “Et huiusmodi fluxus in viris: quando[ue] est naturalis, sicut fluxus menstruorum in mulieribus. Unde sicut mulier singulis mensibus menstruat: sic & quida viri singulis mensibus haemorrhoidas patiuntur. Quidam[m]

While the text mentions menstruation and juxtaposes it with haemorrhoidal bleeding, it does not go as far as to relate one bleeding to the other. Rather, menstruation is presented as a regular, monthly, bleeding by which the body is purged of superfluous humours. Accordingly, Theodoric suggests that men who tend to accumulate excessive amounts of melancholic blood and black bile suffer from the same form of regular bleeding to cleanse their bodies which can occur once a month. This condition of superfluity of melancholic humours renders the male sufferer less male and more female with regards to their respective humoral condition. It can therefore be assumed that what is true for women—a melancholic complexion not only with regards to their physique but also to their psyche—is also true for those men who suffer from a regular haemorrhoidal bleeding, even though both “conditions” are considered as natural.

However, Theodoric does not go as far as to draw a direct line between this special unmanly condition to the Jews. Yet our next text does.

(2) The “Jewish” Haemorrhoidal Flow

Published between 1303 and 1305, Bernard de Gordon’s *Lily of Medicine* (*Lilium Medicinae*) still reads like a typical thirteenth-century medical text. Rationalisation is key to these works; the coalescence of Arabic and Galenic ideas and synthetic treatment grounded in philosophy of nature is carefully subordinated to empirical knowledge. In his compendium of diseases with their symptoms, causes and treatment, Bernard deals with illnesses such as scabies, splenic and pestilential fever and, most notably, leprosy. Its distinct organisation, comprehensiveness and clarity made the *Lily of Medicine* a prized encyclopaedia used widely. It served as a standard textbook at Montpellier and Vienna universities well into the early modern times. In his text, Bernard de Gordon supports the image of the Jew as both melancholic and unmanly, even “woman-like.” According to Bernard, Jews would

[...] suffer an immoderate flow of blood from hemorrhoids, for three reasons: generally, because they are in idleness, and for that reason the melancholic superfluities are gathered. Second, they are generally in fear and anxiety, and for this reason melancholic blood is increased, according to this [saying] of Hippocrates: “Fear and timidity, if they have a lot of time [to work], generate the melancholic humor.” Third, this occurs as a divine punishment, according to [the text], “And he struck them in their posteriors and gave them over to perpetual opprobrium.” (*Lily of Medicine*, 5.21)¹⁶

While following the classical Hippocratic teaching about the four humours, in comparison to Theodoric’s *Surgery*, the *Lily of Medicine* innovates in its description of the haemorrhoidal flow that Jews suffer. Like Theodoric, Bernard de Gordon traces the bleeding haemorrhoids to an accumulation of melancholic blood resulting from lack of motion and bad digestion. However, the words he uses to describe the Jews’ melancholic condition are pejorative and judgemental. Additionally, he also introduces theological arguments. While Theodoric saw bleeding haemorrhoids in all men as natural and without moral implications, Bernard argues that the condition is natural, yet found *especially* in Jews as a result of divine punishment. His allusion to Ps 78:66 references God’s punishment of the Philistines with some sort of anal disease; read in the light of 1 Sam 5:6, the disease is often interpreted as bleeding haemorrhoids. This serves Bernard as an exegetical proof-text for the so-called “Jewish flux.” No longer is the Jews’ haemorrhoidal bleeding a result of their humoral composition *alone*; it is a punishment for the spilling of Christ’s blood.

autem in quatuor anni temporibus: quida[m] semel in anno. isti vero nun sunst stringendi: quia corpus eorum sic mundificatur a superfluitatibus melancholicis.” Theodoricus de Cervia, *The Surgery of Theodoric: Ca A.D. 1267*, ed. E. Campbell and J. Colton (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955–1960), 2: 111.

¹⁶ “Iudei ut plurimum patiuntur fluxum haemorrhoid. propter tria, et quia communiter sunt in ocio, et ideo congregantur superfluitates melancholicae. Secundo, quod communiter sunt in timore et anxietate, ideo multiplicatur sang. melancholicus, iuxta illud Hipp. Timor et pusilanimitas si multum tempus habuerint, melancholicum faciunt hum. Tertio quia hoc ex ultione divina, iuxta illud. Et percussit eos in posteriori dorsi, opprobrium sempiternum dedit illis.” L. E. Demaitre, *Doctor Bernard de Gordon: Professor and Practitioner* (Toronto: Pontifical Inst. of Mediaeval Studies, 1980), 9.

Despite his broad education, Bernard was a doctor rather than an exegete. His *Lily of Medicine* was above all a textbook. By bringing into discussion the idea of divine punishment as causing regular Jewish anal bleeding, Bernard draws on an earlier tradition that must have been widely accepted by the time he published his *Lily of Medicine*. Let us now turn to that tradition.

(3) Jewish “Male Menstruation”

While the purging of the body of superfluous blood and black bile is an important aspect to both the notion of the “Jewish flux” and female menstruation, they are still distinct phenomena. Menstruation follows a fixed cycle, reoccurring in a specific pattern—roughly once a month. Can this also be said of the Jewish flow? Jacques de Vitry’s *History of Jerusalem (Historia Hierosolimitana)*, makes exactly such a claim. Jacques de Vitry was a French canon regular, bishop of Acre (1216–1225) and later Cardinal-Bishop of Tusculum. His involvement in the Fifth Crusade led to his work on a tripartite history of the crusades, of which he completed only the first two books. The *History of Jerusalem* is part of his first book on the *History of the Orient (Historia Orientalis)*. In his description of the Holy Land and its dwellers, Jacques reports that the Jews

[...] have become unwarlike and weak even as women, and it is said that they have a flux of blood every month. God has smitten them in their hinder parts, and put them to perpetual opprobrium [...] (*Historia Hierosolimitana*, 82)¹⁷

While the cause for this blood flux is the one we have already encountered, the nature of the bleedings differs from those we have read so far. Divine punishment is the cause, which, according to Jacques’, appears “singulis lunationibus”—“with every changing of the moon.” While not explicitly using the word *menstruum* here, it appears that what Jacques had in mind is indeed the female menses, which linguistically linked both to month (lat. *mensis*) and moon (gr. *méne*). Jacques is drawing here on ancient medical theory that linked the female menstrual cycle with the lunar cycle.¹⁸ But not only does the time frame render the “Jewish flux” “feminine,” it also presents the Jews as unwarlike and weak, “even as women”. The general association of the Jews’ weaker physical and accompanying weaker intellectual condition already implies their distorted gender. Combining this idea with “men-struation” helped to sharpen the conceptualisation of the Jew as the ultimate opposite and “other” of the Christian—spiritually, intellectually and physiologically.

To conclude, what can be deduced from these three cases? When surveying the full corpus of texts from before 1500, we find that multiple traditions of the “Jewish flux” as ungendered or gendered run in parallel. Indeed, there is an even earlier account, dating to roughly 1190, that describes the “Jewish flux” as reoccurring monthly and as somehow female. This was most likely the source for Jacques de Vitry’s report. At the same time, works like the late-thirteenth or early-fourteenth century *De secretis mulierum*, attributed to Pseudo-Albert the Great, made an effort to distinguish between Jewish “men-struation” and female menstruation, seeing each as a form of bodily cleansing, the former a result of the Jews’ melancholic condition *only*, the latter also linked to the curse of Eve. Most of the writings however, make it clear that the “Jewish flux” was also a punishment for transgression. This notion is especially apparent in *exempla* that report Jewish men suffering from an annual blood flow on Good Friday as a recollection of the Crucifixion. Traditions like these were known in the thirteenth century and existed

¹⁷ “Imbelles enim et imbecilles facti sunt quasi mulieres. Unde singulis lunationibus, ut dicitur, fluxum sanguinis patiuntur. Percusit enim eos Deus in posteriora et opprobrium sempiternum dedit illis.” I. M. Resnick, *Marks of Distinction: Christian Perceptions of Jews in the High Middle Ages* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 210.

¹⁸ Cf. Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae* XI, i: “The menstrual flow is a woman’s superfluous blood: it is termed ‘menstrual,’ *menstrua*, because of the phase of the light of the moon by which this flow comes about. The moon is called *MENE* in Greek.” Translation by W. D. Sharpe in *Isidore of Seville: The Medical Writings*, ed. *ibid.* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1964), 48.

in parallel to the tradition of haemorrhoidal bleeding of the medical compendia by Theodoric and Bernard de Gordon, and Jewish “male menstruation” as can be found in Jacques de Vitry.

It is important to examine these early sources and try to understand the shaping of the motif of Jewish “male menstruation” which was widely employed in writings from the mid sixteen-hundreds onwards to file their anti-Jewish and increasingly antisemitic cases of ritual murder accusation, demonisation of Jews and evidence of the importance of purity of blood. Only a thorough examination will allow for the answer to a host of interesting questions: When did the gendered image of the “men-struating” Jew emerge, and what was its significance? How widely was it discussed, represented, preached, and to what effect on the making of the image of Jewish men among their neighbours, and in the minds of those who legislated the conditions of their existence in European communities? Only when we have analysed the historical corpus of reference to the possibility of Jewish men suffering this feminine affliction, will we be able to understand and evaluate better, and possibly demystify what has so often been called the “myth of Jewish male menses.” My PhD aims to do so, and so to shed light on the always-complex relations between Jews and Christians.