



The Church
(Ecclesia)



The Synagogue
(Sinagoga)

**JEWISH IMAGES IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH:
ART AS THE MIRROR OF THE JEWISH-CHRISTIAN CONFLICT
200 - 1250 CE**

Henry N. Claman

Description: The art of Western Europe tells us about how Jewish-Christian relations evolved in the Middle Ages. While Judaism adhered strictly to the Second Commandment (“no graven images” and hence almost no religious Jewish art), Christians used art as an essential part of their religious activities. This presentation describes and analyzes the art of the Roman catacombs, medieval mosaics, Romanesque sculpture, and Gothic stained glass. The images show how Christianity adopted and reinterpreted the Jewish scriptures. Thus, we learn how to resolve the paradox: Why do

we see Moses and David with haloes in churches and cathedrals at the same time that Jews were being increasingly marginalized in medieval society?

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This presentation to the AJL included slides of art and it summarized the contents of my book of the same name. The book is about medieval art and society and it demonstrates how

this art reflects Jewish-Christian relations in Western Europe during the Middle Ages.

The question which was originally asked was, “why are there so many pictures and statues of Jewish subjects, such as Moses, David and Abraham, in Catholic churches? What do they mean?”

At first, prior to 200 CE, there was virtually no figurative Christian art. This probably reflects the closeness of early Christianity to Judaism, where the Second Commandment forbade figurative religious art.

After Christianity became a *licit* religion (313), it had to face the question, “what to do with the Jewish Scriptures?” The Fathers of the Church decided that - rather than abandon them as they had abandoned Judaism - they would accept the Hebrew Bible (which they knew as the Greek Septuagint) and they adopted the doctrine of *Supersessionism*. This (implied) doctrine said that:

- 1) Christianity had superseded Judaism as God's chosen revelation
- 2) Judaism was a necessary prelude to Christianity, and
- 3) The Jewish Bible foretells the coming of Christ

At the same time, the Church decided to abandon the Second Commandment and profusely used images of biblical scenes, persons and symbols in churches and manuscripts. The earliest body of Christian art is seen in the catacombs, and I have shown and described a number of images, particularly from the catacombs of Rome. They show Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT) scenes, especially those emphasizing *deliverance themes*, for instance Daniel in the lion's den or Jonah.

(I also have a section devoted to the third century synagogue of *Dura-Europus* in Syria which is covered with frescoed scenes from the OT. The meaning of this apparent Jewish flouting of the Second Commandment is discussed.)

OT and NT scenes are frequent on Christian sarcophagi in the fourth century, without any particular anti-Jewish bias. After a brief discussion of the Iconoclast controversy in Byzantium, we turn to the economic revival in Western Europe following the Millennium, and the rise of Romanesque art. Romanesque (and some earlier art) used symbols for their iconography. There are images of the four Evangelists, where, for instance, a lion symbolized Mark. Similarly, a menorah would represent Judaism. The writings of certain Hebrew prophets were interpreted to predict the coming of the Messiah (i.e. Jesus). These included passages from Jeremiah, Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel and Moses.

Some OT figures were themselves felt to be prefigurements (“types”) of Christ. For example, Noah. As Noah was “the first man” after the Flood, so Jesus was “the first man” of Christian revelation. Jonah, too, was a Christ prefigurement. As Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days, so Jesus was in the tomb Friday, Saturday and Sunday. There is considerable discussion of the principles of medieval iconography.

Over the centuries, however, the position of the Jews in Western Europe became more perilous. They gradually lost their “civil rights” and eventually, many of their religious

rights as well. They were persecuted physically and a number were murdered during the early Crusades.

These social attitudes were reflected in art. Certain images became more hostile and antisemitic. A common theme was the contrast between the (new) Church and the old (obsolete) Synagogue. This is seen in the two pictures at the top of this article. They are directly on the front of Notre Dame in Paris. *Ecclesia* (the Church) on the left is a nice-looking young woman with a halo, a crown, a cup (the Holy Grail) and a staff and banner. On the right is *Sinagoga* (representing Judaism) stooped (seductive?) and older, without a halo. Her crown (the symbol of her former authority) has fallen to her feet, her staff is broken, and she cannot see. What is wound around her head and in front of her eyes is a *snake*, the symbol of evil. The blindfolding of *Sinagoga* reflects the blindness of the Jews who could not see the truth of Christianity. There is no more graphic depiction of what medieval Christians thought about their Jewish neighbors and their religion than these two statues. (I chose them for the frontispiece).

The marginalization of the Jews increased until they were expelled from France and England. An important symbolic act was the burning of the Talmud in Paris in public in 1246.

In this book, relevant works of public art are shown, including frescoes, mosaics, statues and stained glass—in B&W and color. The book has been published by Mercer University Press.

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