Lost in Translation: Anti-Semitic Stereotypes Based on Mistranslations
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Introduction
Since before the Middle Ages, mistranslations of the Hebrew Bible and other religious texts have resulted in Jewish stereotypes that are still present today. While some of them where innocuous mistakes, others were part of very intentional Christian efforts to alter the language of the Hebrew Bible to create “evidence” for the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. Few Christians in the Middle Ages read Hebrew, so any changes would not have been noticed and the translated versions were accepted as the word of God.

Crucifixion Psalm
Many Christians have cited Psalm 22:17 as particularly convincing “evidence” from the Hebrew Bible of the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. The translation of the passage in the King James Bible reads as follows: “For dogs have compassed me; a company of evil-doers have inclosed me; like a lion, they are at my hands and my feet.” According to Rabbi Tovia Singer, the King James version “deliberately mistranslated the Hebrew word kaari as ‘pierced,’ rather than ‘like a lion,’ thereby drawing the reader to a false conclusion that this Psalm is describing the Crucifixion.” This mistranslation has been widely used in attempts to convert Jews to Christianity, often associated with anti-Semitic stereotypes that Jews do not even know their own holy scripture.

Horned Moses
When St. Jerome was translating the Hebrew Bible into Latin, he translated the Hebrew phrase garen pni Moše as “horns around Moses’ face,” despite his knowledge of alternate interpretations of garen meaning “glorified,” or “rays of light.” Much debate has been given over whether this was an innocuous misinterpretation on his part or a way of demonizing Moses, a leader of the Old Testament and thus a symbol of the “outraged” religion of the Jews from the perspective of contemporary Christians. It is no secret that St. Jerome was personally biased against Jews, considering their conscience “stained with the blood of Christ” and insolent in their rejection of Jesus’ messianic status.

In the Christian tradition, horns most often evoke the imagery of the Revelation of St. John, which portrays horned beasts as harbingers of the Final Judgment, quite evil in nature. On the other hand, in the Jewish tradition in which it is the Hebrew text that was written, horns on Moses would have been interpreted as symbols of power, or perhaps an even g-dlike status. This interpretation of the Hebrew text became visually manifested first in the Aethiopic Paraphrase, of 11th Century England. This document was used as an illustrated vernacular edition of the Torah and the Book of Joshua, and portrayed Moses as wearing a horned headress not unlike that of the Viking helmets familiar to that region. This pattern of portraying Moses with horned headaddresses continued through the 12th and 13th Centuries in English and French manuscripts. The first time Moses’ horns were portrayed as “natural growths” was in 1200, usually in sculpture or stained glass. The practice gained popularity, evidenced in Claus Sluter’s 1404 sculpture in Chartreuse de Champmol or even, most famously, Michelangelo’s sculpture of Moses in the Sistine Chapel (Figure 3).

Similar to St. Jerome, some consider the portrayal of Moses with horns in the time of Renaissance to be innocuous in its intention. While some in that time may have seen it that way, there were telltale signs in contemporary art that horns were often associated with the devil and demons. For such a trait to be on both demons and Moses (and rarely on other, more positively connoted beings), the evidence would suggest that the connection was negative in nature. Furthermore, Michelangelo also included the Jewish badge of shame of his time period on a painting of the biblical character Aminadab, Aaron’s father-in-law. The inclusion of this anachronistic detail implies an intention to otherize the characters of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, emphasizing their antiquated nature compared to that of the New Testament, and by extension, to reinforce the otherness of the Jews of his time.

Deviel StereoType
The Book of Revelation Chapter 13 in the New Testament describes the coming of the Antichrist. It references beasts with horns on multiple occasions: “...having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns.” (13:1-12). “And I beheld another beast coming up out of the earth; and he had two horns like a lamb, and he spake as a dragon.” (13:11-12).

Although the horns were written to symbolize power, horns naturally became affiliated with evil in the Christian tradition. The affiliation of Moses, and then eventually Jews, with horns led to an overall stereotype as Jews being affiliated with the devil. In the Early Middle Ages, the leaders of the Church referred to verses in the New Testament that stated that Jews were direct descendants of the devil and came to associate Jews with evil. During this time period, a lot of art, poetry, drama, and religious instruction identified Jews with the Devil. Jews were portrayed not only with horns, but also tails, goats’ beards, and noxious odor. They would be included in scenes in which they were conspiring with the Devil or as demons torturing Jesus. Even portrayals of the Devil himself were affiliated with Jews: he was often depicted as Jewish or surrounded by Jews. The literal demonization of Jews during this time period also led to other myths such as the legend of the Wandering Jew (Figure 1), who supposedly taunted Jesus on his way to crucifixion and was doomed to wander forever as punishment. This myth was particularly resonant with Christians who saw Jesus’ frequent homelessness due to expulsion as punishment for their not having accepted Jesus as the Messiah. Over time, the Wandering Jew also became associated with exorcism, furthering the association of Jews with demons and the Devil.

Conclusion
While it is not necessarily the case that mistranslations of the Hebrew text by Christians in the Middle Ages actively caused anti-Semitic sentiment, it is reasonable to conclude that the presence of mistranslated text served to aid those who wished to spread their anti-Semitism, and did so rather successfully. This is due in part to the lack of widespread Hebrew knowledge within medieval Europe, as well as the propaganda that reinforced these stereotypes in the art, poetry, and drama consumed by the masses, leading to deeply rooted and pervasive stereotypes which still can be found today.

Stereotypes Today
Rabbi Art Levine addresses the issue of the Horned Moses stereotype in a commentary on Parshat Ki Tisсу, the Torah portion in which this fateful verse occurs: “To the inescapable harm and suffering of Jews that Jerome’s interpretive intention was lost, ignored, and/or suppressed by those who either did not know better or who did, but had other agendas. The pernicious staying-power of this evil is also noted by Rabbi Sosnino. He recounts an experience of a friend in South Carolina in 1963, when mentioned to a civilian army base secretary that he was Jewish. The secretary asked to feel his head. After doing so, she said, in all seriousness: “Where are you horns? I thought all Jews had horns.” Ironically, I recently heard another version of the same story from an acquaintance whose grandfather visited his friend in Spain in the 1930s. When the friend made an anti-Semitic remark, the grandfather revealed that he was Jewish. His shocked friend demanded that he first remove his hat. When he removed his hat, he demanded that the Jew remove his shoes, to “revel” his devilish feet. My friend’s grandfather complained, and the two never spoke again.” [sic]

Clearly, the way the supposed horns on Moses’ head have been read throughout history has been overwhelmingly negative since Christians’ conflation of Moses, and by extension, Jews, with the devil.

Works Cited


Myths – Facts.pdf


Meaning of the Text [Internet].