



Lost in Translation: Anti-Semitic Stereotypes Based on Mistranslations

Averyl Edwards, Annika Wurm, Manuel Castillo

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 were 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 G-d.



Figure 1: The Wandering Jew by Gustave Dore.

Background

There are three general ways in which texts can be interpreted: through etymology, internal structure, and cognates. In reference to the Hebrew Bible, confusion due to etymology occurs between the words “desirable” and “take,” which have the same roots. Therefore, translators have sometimes written the commandment “thou shalt not covet” as “thou shalt not take.” Even these subtle differences in meanings can distort texts to a high degree. The Hebrew meanings of “virgin” and “young woman” are nearly identical, causing translations of many parables to be disputed among scholars. Lastly, the terms “father,” “brother,” and “sister” were originally used to describe the hierarchy of society, and not necessarily kinship ties. Therefore, **even an experienced and well-versed translator may easily misinterpret texts.**



Figure 2: Michelangelo, Moses from the Tomb of Pope Julius II, c. 1513-1515, marble, 235 cm (San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome)

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, the assembly of the wicked have enclosed me; they have pierced my hands and my feet.”* This translation, however, differs greatly from a common Jewish translation of the same verse: *“For dogs have encompassed 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.

Stereotypes Today

Rabbi Art Levine addresses the issue of the Horned Moses stereotype in a commentary on *Parshat Ki Tissa*, the Torah portion in which this fateful verse occurs:

“To the incalculable harm and suffering of Jews thereafter, 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 Sonsino. 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 no horns appeared, he demanded that the Jew remove his shoes, to “reveal” his devilish feet. My friend’s grandfather complied, 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.

Horned Moses

When St. Jerome was translating the Hebrew Bible into Latin, he translated the Hebrew phrase *garen pnei Moshe* 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 “outdated” 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 the Hebrew text 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 Aelferic 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 headdress not unlike that of the Viking helmets familiar to that region**. This pattern of portraying Moses with horned headdresses 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 Chatreuse 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.**



Figure 3: Late 15th Century painting from Frankfurt-Main depicting Jews as consorting with the Devil. Both the Jews and the Devil wear the circular Jewish badge of shame, a common tool for setting Jews apart in the Early Modern Era.

Devil 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) *“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 all 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 resonant with Christians who saw Jews’ 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.

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