

Katherine Aron-Beller
***Christian Images and Their Jewish Desecrators:
The History of an Allegation, 400-1700***

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Christian allegations of Jewish image desecration are an unusually complex and potent topic for the religious history of Europe. Any discussion of these allegations must draw from many wells: theological understandings of the power of images, widespread legends and their perpetuation in literature and art, specific legal contexts, and popular culture. A proper treatment therefore demands multiple areas of competence, including Christian theologies, European history over a long span, jurisdictional sources, art history, and the social history of ordinary Jews and Christians in many parts of Europe. Luckily, Katherine Aron-Beller possesses these skills, as well as a command of Jewish theological and historical sources. With sensitivity, she shows us the urgency and import of image allegation disputes; the beliefs that underpinned the evolution of these beliefs; and the strong emotions they aroused in Jews, Christians, and the institutions that governed them.

Aron-Beller's deeply researched analysis is both an intellectual history and a cultural history. It makes two main points. The first is that Christian ideas about Jewish desecration reflected the evolving status of images within Christianity. In other words, charges of image desecration provide valuable evidence to Christians (whether they know it or not)—and to later historians—because they reflect and clarify changing theological positions on images. The second major point treats the intersections of myth and fact. Aron-Beller shows that Christian theology and Christian parables about Jewish image desecration influenced the actions of real Christians and Jews in the late medieval and early modern periods—ordinary people who would never read Chrysostom or later Cardinal Paleotti, both influential theologians on images.

Aron-Beller begins by analyzing an image, in this case of the “Christ of Beirut” legend. The introduction then provides a rigorous definition of terms and a pre-history of image theology in early Judaism and Christianity. In her first chapter Aron-Beller traces the Byzantine origins of the first foundational legends about Jews’ desecrating Christian images, their links to the Iconoclastic Controversy, and their impact on Jewish-Christian relations as they began to be disseminated across

Europe. In chapter 2 Aron-Beller follows the codification of these stories into medieval European Marian tales, notably the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*. She establishes the links between these devotional tales of Jews' destroying or desecrating images, an increased emphasis on the Eucharist, and the rise of allegations of blood libels and host desecrations, culminating in the first real accusations of image desecration against living Jews. In the next chapter she continues chronologically, looking at devotional life in Spain and the changing influence of image devotion on pre-expulsion Jews and *conversos* post-expulsion. Aron-Beller reveals the ongoing tension between the radical emotions of the increasingly powerful mendicant preachers and the more cautious policies of rulers, keen to protect (often to exploit) as many of their citizens as possible.

In chapter 4 Aron-Beller sets this history against Jewish approaches to Christian images, first showing how they are rooted in biblical sources, then tracking their evolution through early rabbinic, liturgical, aggadic [legendary], and legal literature into the Middle Ages and beyond, summarizing the key points of a vast and intricate corpus of texts. Jews responded polemically to increasing allegations of image desecration as well as to Christian attempts to convert them. Aron-Beller establishes that Jews were fully aware of Christian allegations. They modified their behavior to avoid offending their neighbors and sometimes knew exactly how to cause offense or conspire against their own coreligionists. She also argues that Jewish theologians responded to Christian images by elevating the status of the Torah scroll—considered holy for its unillustrated text—into Judaism's most sacred object.

In the final two chapters Aron-Beller examines early modern Italy, which is her primary area of expertise and one with the richest archival sources. In chapter 5 she analyzes allegations of image desecration in the context of overlapping challenges: Counter-Reformation stringencies, the growth of the Inquisition, and increasing pressure on Jews in Italy to convert to Catholicism. Aron-Beller is especially good on the material culture of Italy and the increasing ubiquity of images and sacred objects. Theological debates sit alongside everyday, practical questions: which sacred objects a Jewish pawnbroker may accept, for example, or how a Jewish tenant might best cover a painted crucifix in his rented house. In chapter 6, drawing on her previous work, she offers an extended case study of a Jewish family running a mill in the Modenese countryside and what happened when the Inquisition took an interest in the images on their property. It uncovers the layers of fear, assumption, piety, and practicality on all sides.

Historiographically, *Christian Images and Their Jewish Desecrators* sits alongside other works that address individual facets of Jewish-Catholic interaction such as sumptuary legislation and conversion preaching. But it also offers a broader counterweight to the many recent works on early modern Christian-Jewish intellectual exchanges, extending those exchanges into new areas while maintaining its own intellectual credentials. Aron-Beller's extraordinary erudition is worn lightly and her history is accessible. The balance of textual analysis and case study makes it vibrant and readable but in no way oversimplified. The Christian and the Jewish

historical figures who populate the narrative seem properly human, by turns passionate, resentful, scared, and imperfect. With a wider geographical range, Aron-Beller could have discussed the experiences of Jews in Ashkenaz and the evolution of Protestant positions on Jewish image desecration. Given the author's specialization in Catholic institutions and theology, however, her work's narrower scope makes sense, as it also now makes the need for a parallel study for Northern and Central Europe seem urgent. Historians, art historians, and theologians alike will find it both valuable and exemplary.