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The Conflicting Traditions of Portraying the Jewish People in the Chester Mystery Cycle

ABSTRACT

The article seeks to analyze the portrayal of the Jews in two plays from the Chester mystery cycle: “Trial and Flagellation” and “The Passion.” The analysis acknowledges that the cycle is a mixture of, and a dialogue between, the universal standpoint emerging from the presentation of the biblical story of humankind and a contemporary perspective, pertaining to the reality of the viewers. Therefore, while pointing to the unique formal and structural uniformity of the cycle, which strengthens the idea of continuity between the Old and the New Covenant and the role of the Israelites in the history of salvation, it also recognizes the potential of the plays to engage in the current stereotypes. The article examines how the Gospel account of Christ’s trial and death is modified through presenting the Jews as torturers, whitewashing the non-Jewish characters, and placing special emphasis on the question of Jewish ignorance. It is demonstrated how different theological and popular stances concerning the Jewish people are merged and reconciled in the Chester representation of the passion of Christ and it is argued that the plays in question retell the biblical story in such a way that the justification for the expulsion of the Jews from England could be derived from it.

Keywords: The Chester Mystery Cycle, Chester Passion, anti-Judaism.

The relation between Christians and the Jews in early-medieval England could be described as relatively harmonious. The differences and distinct identities were recognized, but it did not result in the oppression of the minority at the hands of the Christian majority. The gradual marginalization of the Jews and the increase of hostility towards them in the Middle Ages, with its apogee in the form of their expulsion from England in 1290, was “accompanied by the changing theological and anthropological understanding” of the Hebrew people (Frassetto xiii). Most significantly, the blame for Christ’s death came to be more commonly ascribed to them. This shift is reflected in the approach to the theme of Christ’s crucifixion in devotional treatises, poetry and drama of the time. The present article analyzes the portrayal of the Jews in two episodes from the Chester mystery cycle: “The Trial and Flagellation” and “The Passion.”¹ It seeks to address the question of the extent to which the tradition of depicting the Jews as playing their part in the divine plan for humanity’s salvation is overshadowed by the stereotypes and the hostile attitude towards the Jews that had already been developed in the times when the cycle was composed and staged.

THE CHESTER CYCLE AND ITS UNIVERSAL PERSPECTIVE

A. THE STATUS OF THE JEWS IN THE POST-BIBLICAL HISTORY OF SALVATION: AUGUSTINIAN AND MEDIEVAL THEOLOGY²

The theological grounds for the acceptance of and respect for the Jewish people and their tradition were provided in the doctrine of Jewish witness, developed by Saint Augustine of Hippo and adapted by most major

¹ Quotes from the plays in the present article come from Lumiansky and Mills’s 1974 edition. The titles of the plays used there are editorial choices. Following that choice, 16A is referred to in the main body, as well as the parenthetical notes in this article as “Trial,” 16B—as “Passion.” Numbers provided in parenthetical reference refer to verses quoted. As Mills explains elsewhere, “[t]he 1607 manuscript presents this action of *The Trial and Flagellation* and the following action of *The Crucifixion* as a single play the other manuscripts present them as two separate plays but do not assign a number to *The Crucifixion*. In the EETS edition [i.e. R. M. Lumiansky & D. Mills’s 1974 edition], *The Trial and Flagellation* is numbered 16 and *The Crucifixion* 16A” (Mills, *The Chester Mystery Cycle: A New Edition* 268). In his modernized spelling edition of the cycle from 1992, Mills presents the episodes as parts one and two of play 16.

² An in-depth analysis of Augustine’s teachings on the Jews, presented against the background of the historical context and the context of Augustine’s

theologians dating from the fifth century (Turner 197). The doctrine, as summarized by Turner,

asserts that Jews play a necessary, even vital function in God's plan for human salvation and Christian faith; thus, Jews must not be killed or converted by Christians but rather be protected and preserved within a larger Christian society. Augustine explains in his *De civitate Dei* that God had a clear purpose in allowing Jews to continue to live and practice their faith after the arrival of Christ; namely, their observance and thus preservation of the teachings of the Old Testament provide testimony to the truth of the prophecies concerning Christ. (197)

Thus, the Augustinian model of toleration, though based on juxtaposition and not free from hierarchizing, acknowledged the Israelites' role as the carriers and propagators of the Holy Scriptures. The Old Testament was perceived as illuminating and authenticating the New Covenant, and, following from that, the role of the Jews in the history of salvation, both biblical and post-biblical, was clearly defined.

The theological shift came only in the twelfth century (Chazan 222; Cohen, *Living Letters* 150–66), and was spread, especially with the teachings of Dominican and Franciscan friars, in the century to follow (Cohen, "The Jews as the Killers of Christ" 24). For hundreds of years the basis of Christian-Jewish relations, Augustine's doctrine started to give way to a view that post-biblical Judaism had little to do with the religion described in the Bible and thus the medieval Jews could no longer be treated as bearing witness to the truth of Christian faith (Cohen, "The Jews as the Killers of Christ" 23–24).³ The representative of the most

own intellectual and spiritual development, is provided in Fredriksen. For a detailed study of the Jew as constructed by medieval Christian theologians, see Jeremy Cohen's *Living Letters of the Law*. The historical account of the actual Jewish people in the British Isles in the Middle Ages can be found in chapters i to vi of Roth.

³ This is not to say that such views had never been voiced before—while the Augustinian approach dominated Christian thought for several centuries, "*Adversus Iudaeos* polemic (arguments 'against the Jews') of many church fathers—Justin Martyr, Melito of Sardis, Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, Ephrem the Syrian, Aphrahat, John Chrysostom, Ambrose of Milan" (Cohen, *Living Letters* 9) might be seen as closer to the later, more hostile medieval tradition. On the other hand, Wilken's analysis of John Chrysostom's sermons reveals that the presentation of the Jews in them was in line with the tradition of ancient rhetoric and the practice of *psogos* ("invective") (112) rather than with the spirit of later anti-Judaism, the latter interpretation of Chrysostom's letters being, according to Wilken, a projection of "the later unhappy history of Jewish-Christian relations . . . onto the early Church"

extreme stance within that new tradition was Duns Scotus, an influential theologian living at the turn of the fourteenth century. In his teachings on the Jews he went as far as to propagate forced conversions of both adults and children to Christianity (Turner 183). This is because he believed that the desired, ideal state would be people's complete unity in Christ—he claimed that Christianity was created by God to be a universal religion uniting and embracing all humanity (Turner 192). As he argued,

it was better for the seed of Abraham to cross over to the common pact than to remain under the sign of a special pact. [This is] because it is better to be a part in the whole, for which it would simply be better, than to be distinct from the rest of the part, so that in some way or other it would be good for themselves and bad for others. (qtd. in Turner 192; modifications original)

The special pact, that is the Old Covenant made between God and Jews, was limited and temporary, of which Jews, according to Scotus, were perfectly aware. Nonetheless, out of selfishness and, as Turner summarizes Scotus' teachings, out of "anger over their reduced status under the New Law," they decided to stick to the Old Law (192). This redefinition of the role of the Jews was fraught with consequences for the biblical exegesis, especially the interpretation of the passion of Christ.

B. THE CYCLE'S STAND ON THE ROLE OF JEWS IN THE HISTORY OF SALVATION

Few works of art express a stance on the role of the Jews in the Christian history of salvation as fully as a mystery cycle, where the whole biblical story of humankind is captured in a number of plays constituting one narrative. The events from the Old and the New Testament form a continuum there and together they comprise universal history. The Chester cycle reveals a unique formal and structural uniformity, which, as Mills sees it, is exceptional when compared to other English mystery cycles and thus puts an additional emphasis on the continuity (*The Chester Mystery Cycle: A New Edition* xx). What contributes to this unity are formal and structural elements such as the Chester stanza: an eight-line stanza with a particular rhyming and rhythmic pattern; framing speeches—of God at the beginning and of four evangelists at the end of the cycle—which shape the whole and present the story of humankind as a divine plan; as well as cross-references, for example when John sleeps on Christ's bosom during

(xvi). In fact, one can go back to as early sources as the Gospels themselves in the pursuit of the first anti-Jewish Christian attitudes.

the last supper scene and states several plays later that he had a vision of the Apocalypse back then (Mills, *The Chester Mystery Cycle: A New Edition* xxiii). What connects particular plays with each other are also prophecies, first delivered and then fulfilled in subsequent pageants. They “are carefully selected so that the Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection, Ascension and Sending of the Holy Ghost, are all prophesied and explained in advance, just as the Three Kings in presenting their gifts foretell the Babe’s full career” (Kolve 203–04).

The division of Chester into three parts performed on three separate days, which took place around 1530, had “artistic implications, for the tripartite division changes the audience’s perception of cyclic cohesion. Each day’s production becomes a distinct unit moving towards its own affirmative conclusion” (Mills, “The Chester Cycle” 117). The first part of the cycle contained the stories from “The Creation and Fall of Angels” to “The Magi’s Gifts,” the second day opened with infanticide committed by Herod in an attempt to kill the newborn Jesus, and culminated in Christ’s actual death and his descent into hell. The third day told the New Testament story from the resurrection of Christ to Doomsday (Mills, “The Chester Cycle” 117). The dividing lines, particularly that between the first and the second day, had a significant bearing on the role of the Jews in the events unfolded in the plays. Mills argues that the division between parts one and two constitutes a distinct caesura between the times when the Jews were the “chosen vehicle of God’s grace” (“The Chester Cycle” 119) and the moment when they fell into disfavour—foreshadowed on day one in Mary’s vision (in play six, “The Annunciation and the Nativity”) and finding its fulfilment in the pageants following the story of the three Magi (Mills, “The Chester Cycle” 119–20).

To view Jewish history as a “coherent and meaningful narrative” only to the point of Christ’s incarnation was one way of understanding the Jews’ role in God’s divine plan (Elukin 3). This approach was developed by the early Church Fathers, who on the one hand wanted to substantiate the departure from the observance of Jewish law, which was still a common practice among early Christians and who, on the other hand, tried to convince Greco-Romans, who respected the Jews and their ancient tradition, that “Christianity was not a recently contrived distortion of biblical Judaism but the genuine continuation and fulfillment thereof” (Cohen, *Living Letters* 10). According to such interpretation of Jewish history, “God had . . . disowned the Jews, annulled their ritual law, and transferred their inheritance to the church, which now constituted the only true Israel, not a recently arrived impostor” (Cohen, *Living Letters* 11). This was still an Old Testament vision of the relation between God and his people, wherein God readjusts his plans concerning humanity in response to their disobedience.

The Chester cycle stresses both the division and the continuation, but it does so from the position and through the prism of the already dominant Christian religion and the self-assured theology of the church which succeeded in attracting the Gentiles, gained the support of emperors and “no longer had to justify itself to the Jewish community” (Cohen, “The Jews as the Killers of Christ” 21). Augustine adopts this Christological point of view overtly when he states that the Old Testament “is in its entirety nothing other than the image of the new people and the New Testament, promising a heavenly kingdom” (qtd. in Cohen, *Living Letters* 26). As he explains, “[a]ll that Moses wrote is of Christ—that is, it pertains completely to Christ—whether insofar as it foretells of him in figures of objects, deeds, and speech, or insofar as it extols his grace and glory” (qtd. in Cohen, *Living Letters* 27). This understanding of the Old Testament was then propagated by subsequent theologians, including Scotus, who thought that “the Old Law’s ceremonies retain significance and sanctity in the post-biblical world only in what they signify concerning Christ and the Christian sacraments that followed—that is, in what they prefigured about the future offerings of Christ” (Turner 190). Chester shares this understanding of the history of the chosen people and presents it as meaningful only from the Christian perspective. The cycle introduces the figure of the Expositor, who explains the parallels between the New and the Old Testament and who presents stories from the Old Testament as heralds of the events from the Gospel—for example he interprets to the audience three episodes from Abraham’s story as the prefigurations of God’s sacrifice of his son and of the sacraments: baptism and Eucharist (Mills, “The Chester Cycle” 122; *The Chester Mystery Cycle: A New Edition* xxi–xxii). As the Chester cycle sees the events from the Old Testament in the Christological perspective, the plans and actions of God are there prior to, and not resultant of, people’s misconduct, and the very misconduct is an anticipated part of these plans.

THE CHESTER CYCLE AND ITS CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

While mystery plays do not treat of contemporary times, the traits of the present permeate through them in various forms. The very discussion over the etymology of the term “mystery” as used in “mystery play,” though now admittedly outdated,⁴ neatly reflects the two perspectives that the

⁴ *OED* provides two entries for “mystery”—MYSTERY¹ embracing theological and non-theological uses connected with the mystical or with secrecy and MYSTERY² including meanings such as service, occupation, craft, trade, profession, trade guild. According to *OED*, “mystery” in “mystery play” (as

cycles simultaneously assume—the timeless one and the one set in the reality of its viewers. Obviously, these two perspectives or levels are not disconnected and independent of each other. The specific, contemporary level might surface and reveal itself only through influencing and reshaping the universal, seemingly stable one.⁵

During the times when Chester was composed, staged and re-written into subsequent manuscript versions, Jews were literally non-existent in the English reality. Still, the stereotypes and the hostile attitude towards them had already been developed. Jews were to be absent from England for five centuries after the expulsion, but they were still, and even more visibly, present in the teachings of the church, as well as in the English literature of that time. Julius goes as far as to suggest that “England was the principal promoter, and indeed in some sense the inventor, of literary anti-Semitism” (153). According to Pearsall, “Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale and other anti-Jewish stories of the fourteenth century express something of the virulent hatred of the Jews that persisted, but, in the absence of actual Jews to vent it on, it was in many ways a form of rhetoric” (56). Julius observes that the conception of the Jews that emerged from the English literary works written when Jews did not live in England was “ultimately theological in character” (154). It was not so much the ideas of contemporary Jews, but rather of the biblical figures, as interpreted by the church, that formed the basis for the literary representations.⁶ Tomasch refers to this construct as “the virtual Jew” and argues that it “was central not only to medieval English Christian devotion, but to the construction of Englishness itself” (69).

explained under MYSTERY¹) is used after French “mystère”/medieval Latin “mystērium” “as a name for the miracle-play,” but “this sense is often erroneously referred to MYSTERY² [i.e. derived from middle Latin “misterium” as an altered form of “ministerium”] on the ground of the undoubted fact that the miracle-plays were often acted by the mysteries or trade guilds” (“Mystery”). For an explanation of the development of the two senses of “mystery” in English and the complex relation between their etymologies, see Durkin’s *The Oxford Guide to Etymology*, where the word “mystery” is used to illustrate the phenomenon of merger (80–81).

⁵ An example of a direct and particularly conspicuous interference in “Trial” is one of Christ’s torturers stating that: “No lade unto London / such lawe can him lere” (321–22).

⁶ The question remains whether theological shifts are themselves the reaction to changing social and political circumstances. The issue of the interrelations between theological stances on the Jews and their historical contexts is addressed from various perspectives in Frassetto. To determine unambiguously the cause-effect relation between the shifts in these planes, if possible at all, is beyond the scope of the present study.

The conception of the Jews manifested in literature which is grounded in the teachings of theologians and preachers reaches its fullest expression in the literary representations of Christ's passion—the works which emerged as a direct consequence of the medieval theological shift from *Christus Victor* to Christ as a figure of suffering.⁷ As Bestul observes, when Christ's torture and agony became the focal point of religious meditations and deliberations, his oppressors naturally came to the fore and became the subject of interest as well, their cruelty being exaggerated to evoke an even stronger emotional response (71). In the passion plays the emphasis is even greater for a practical reason—as the fastening of an actor to a cross, which had to be presented on stage, was time-consuming, the dialogue between the crucifiers was a necessary accompaniment to that action while it was being accomplished (Kolve 178).

A. WHAT ARE THE JEWS DOING THERE? JEWS AS CULPRITS

Whereas the cultural, social or political context might be needed to account for what Tomasch terms “the paradox of Jewish absent presence” (70) in, for example, Chaucer, the question of the legitimacy of the use of Jews as characters in the passion narratives and mystery cycles might seem rather absurd—obviously, the source material requires them to be there. Only not quite. In the case of Chester some surprising alterations are introduced to the biblical account of the events that are central to the theological problem of the guilt for Christ's death. While in the Towneley cycle the characters that torture and crucify Christ are referred to as “tortors” and in the York “Crucifixion” they translate as “soldiers,” in *N-Town*, as well as in Chester plays, the Jews are substituted for the Roman soldiers and become torturers and executioners. In other words, it is the Jews that literally, in the physical sense, crucify Christ. Moreover, unlike in the Bible, it is the Jews that throw the dice to win Jesus' garment. Such substitution is the plainest illustration of the shift in the approach to the crucifixion. Symbolically, Romans are cleared of responsibility and they give way to the new torturers.

⁷ As Happé explains it, “[f]rom the twelfth century there was a shift in attitudes to Christ, as there developed a greater concentration upon him as a figure of suffering—the Man of Sorrows—rather than the figure of triumph perceivable in earlier art and theology. The Cross of Victory became the Cross of Salvation” (23). This shift led to the development of affective piety—a form of religiousness grounded in the reflection upon Christ's life, most significantly his suffering on the cross which was to evoke an emotional response that would have been produced had the person him- or herself witnessed the events he or she meditated upon.

The moments when the violence is presented are extended if compared to the short mentions from Scripture—both the scene of beating and that of nailing Christ to the cross are prolonged (the latter also for the practical reasons already mentioned), the cruelty of the oppressors being emphasized. As observed by Bestul in his analysis of medieval devotional writings on the last hours of Christ, such a portrayal of the Jews is characteristic of the reflections upon the passion from about the middle of the twelfth century. While earlier texts usually devote “scarcely any attention . . . to identifying the tormentors of Christ specifically as the Jews, or to calling attention to or elaborating upon their part in the Passion” (70), from then on their role becomes enlarged and they are “increasingly seen as the mockers, the torturers, and finally the murderers of Christ” (69–70). The sustained torment, which involves spitting (cf. “Trial” 76), filing (i.e. sullyng) (cf. “Trial” 80–81), and one of the Jews blowing his nose onto Christ (cf. “Trial” 347–50), conforms to the depictions of tortures inflicted on Christ by the Jews in devotional writings of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, in which, as Bestul argues, what adds to the horror of the brutal scenes is the depiction of the “contamination by physical contact” with the Jews (85), thus a physical and ritual defilement—a threat which was resonant especially after the Black Death strengthened the irrational accusations against the Jews of the great conspiracy consisting in poisoning wells (104–05). Apart from presenting the Jews as mindless and cruel torturers, Chester also introduces more subtle shifts in emphasis, and the interplay of the pageants with the scriptural sources is the subject of further analysis here.

B. SHIFTS IN EMPHASIS: WHITEWASHING OF OTHER BIBLICAL CHARACTERS

The most obvious candidate for the accomplice in the crucifixion of Christ is Pontius Pilate, yet in Chester the prefect is presented in a rather favourable light. He does not reveal any cruelty or willingness to condemn Jesus at any point—on the contrary, he attempts to defend him. Such a presentation follows one of the two traditions of presenting Pilate. As David Mills states, “Pilate had two reputations in the Middle Ages—as an evil man who condemned Jesus, and as a well-intentioned man who tried to save him” (*The Chester Mystery Cycle: A New Edition* 270). The latter tradition is taken to the extreme in, for example, the Gospel of Nicodemus, where Pilate sends a letter to the emperor in which he reports the true story of Jesus, thus becoming a witness of the Christian faith. Chester does not go to the lengths of making the prefect the pillar of Christianity, but, in accord with John’s Gospel, it makes him

the only character willing to engage in a conversation with Christ, which gives Jesus an opportunity to answer the question of what truth is. To underline his distance from the verdict, Pilate washes his hands and states openly in front of the Jews that he is “cleane and innocent” and has no intention of shedding Christ’s blood (“Trial” 240–42), the scene to be found only in Matthew. On the other hand, another episode present only in Matthew, that is the dream of Pilate’s wife, which is to make the prefect aware of who Jesus is and thus warn him against condemning Christ, is absent from the play. In fact, he does not even pronounce the verdict in the play. He just allows the Jews to take Jesus with them and punish him as they wish: “Take him to you nowe, as I saye, / for save him I ney maye, / undonne but I would bee” (368–70).

Another character who shifts blame onto the Jews is Longinus, a blind soldier who is to check whether Christ is still alive by piercing his heart. He states in the play that he will follow the orders, but it is the Jews that are to take responsibility and run the risk for such an action as he does not know himself whether what he does is good or evil:

I will do as ye byd mee,
but on your perill hitt shalbe.
What I doe I may not see,
whether yt be evell or good. (“Passion” 380–83)

Longinus’ literal and metaphorical blindness is healed once the water from Christ’s heart streams down onto his eyes, but the Jews, who earlier provocatively demanded a miracle from Christ as a sign of his divine nature, seem to have now disappeared from the stage as they do not say anything till the end of the play.

The third figure used in the Chester “Trial” and “Passion” sequence to underline the guilt of the Jews is Simon of Cyrene. Being most probably a Jew himself, he is, however, put in opposition to the Sanhedrin, as well as distanced from the crowd of ordinary Jews. He says: “Would God I had bynne in Rome / when I the waye hither come” (“Passion” 34–35), thus suggesting his position of a stranger. He initially opposes the High Priest but is threatened by him, which is why he makes a statement of his innocence, in an analogous manner to Pilate and Longinus:

To beare no crosse am I entent,
for yt was never myne assent
to procure thys profettes judgment,
full of the Holy Ghoost. (“Passion” 25–28)

C. THE TRADITION OF JEWISH IGNORANCE IN THE CYCLE

The statement made by Simon is crucial to the understanding of the theological stand of the play for one other reason. An important reinterpretation of the Bible and of the tradition takes place here when it comes to the figure of the Cyrenian. While the Scripture provides hardly any information on him and traditionally his hesitation is ascribed to him being preoccupied with his own matters and not wanting to be troubled—the Bible mentions that he is on the way from the fields—the play presents a whole new justification of Simon’s resistance. He opposes the killing as he is aware of Jesus’ divine, or at least messianic or prophetic, nature. This refers us back to the role of the Jews in the killing of Christ. It is clearly visible that the Jews are presented as the killers in the pageant, but even if the murder is ascribed to them, this alone is not tantamount to them being guilty of deicide. The issue to be considered is the awareness (or ignorance) of what kind of crime they actually commit.

Again, conflicting theological stances on this question might be singled out, and the play adopts one of them. Cohen (“The Jews as the Killers of Christ” 9–20), and later Turner, summarize the development of different theological traditions as follows: on the one hand, there was a line of reasoning represented most famously by Augustine and later by, among others, Peter Abelard, as well as Anselm of Canterbury, who claimed that “no person could ever desire, at least knowingly, to kill God” (qtd. in Turner 192). Jews were unaware of Christ’s divine nature, so they were not guilty of deicide. With the exception of isolated exegetes, among them the Venerable Bede—who first suggested the willingness of the Jews to kill the Son of God out of envy—the tradition of Jewish ignorance was the dominant one until the twelfth century. The opposite stance was adopted by Nicholas of Lyra and Duns Scotus; the latter responded to Anselm’s argument quoted above thus: “This, I do not believe, but I believe that even if they had known him to be God by [the] union [of Son and Father in God], still they would have been able to have killed him” (qtd. in Turner 192; modifications original). Both Nicolas and Scotus believed that the Jews recognized Jesus as divine, but their knowledge failed “to withstand their malice and ultimately govern their actions” (Cohen, “The Jews as the Killers of Christ” 20). The position in between these two, represented most notably by Thomas Aquinas, assumed that a differentiation needed to be made between the ignorant masses and the well-informed leaders of the Jewish community, as well as between the recognition of Jesus as God as distinct from his recognition as the prophesized messiah—the Jews being able to identify only the messianic, but not the divine nature of Christ (Cohen, “The Jews as the Killers of Christ” 19–20).

The Chester “Trial” and “Passion” plays seem to adopt the early tradition insofar as they are consistent in promoting the stance that the Jews were in general unaware of Christ’s divine nature. While the cycle definitely presents the Jews as guilty of condemning, torturing and murdering Jesus, it also hints at them being ignorant of the weight of their deed.⁸ According to Kolve, mystery cycles, “alone among medieval religious writings, sought to reveal as much about the men who scorn and kill Christ as about the pathos and dignity of His suffering” (180). At the same time, Travis notes that Chester is an exception to this rule, inasmuch as Christ’s prosecutors—Annas, Caiphas and two other Jews—speak with a uniform voice and are indistinguishable as characters (277–78). Chester uses the technique of the individuation of characters selectively, or rather treats the Jews as a collective character. It has to be said that the differentiation between the leaders and common Jews is not entirely absent from the plays. As the overseer of the crucifixion, Caiphas is more eager for Christ’s death than the crucifiers, who suspend their work at some point to divide between themselves Christ’s garment. While the Jews accuse Christ of disrespecting their Law, only Caiphas seems to be fully aware of the threat that this entails for their power and the dominance of their Law—he says to Annas at one point: “This man hase served to be dead, / and yf hee lightly thus be lead, / our lawe cleane will sleepe” (“Trial” 110–13).⁹ In this respect, his motivations resemble those of Pilate,

⁸ Both Kolve and Travis identify the issue of recognition or non-recognition of Christ’s divinity as central to the Chester passion plays and they both analyze it in the context of its structural function in the pageants. Kolve recognizes the tendency to fail to realize Christ’s identity as the Son of God by his judges and torturers in all English mystery cycles and interprets it as a result of imposing on the events connected with crucifixion a structure of a game. Once the perpetrators engage in the tasks assigned to them in the form of a game (either competitive or played just for amusement’s sake), the focus of attention shifts and the roles played by them are redefined, that is their identities are suspended as they assume the roles of the participants in the game (Kolve 181–82). However, it seems that the lack of awareness of Christ’s deity is a prerequisite to get engaged in the game, not the consequence of it, which can be illustrated with an example from *Ordinalia* cited by Kolve—while a blacksmith’s wife joins the executioners in a game to produce the best nails needed to crucify Christ, the blacksmith himself refuses to help them as he recognizes God’s son in Jesus (187). Travis observes a “pattern of recognitions” of Christ’s divinity (286) and interprets it as a device used to “alleviate part of the horror of his dying” (286).

⁹ The differentiation is also pointed to later, in the play “Christ on the Road to Emmaus; Doubting Thomas,” where Lucas says “To God and man wyse was hee, / but bushoppes—cursen motte the bee— / dampned him and nayled him on a tree, / that wronge never yett wrought” (49–52).

who is afraid of losing his office. On the other hand, the Jews who torture Christ seem to become so preoccupied with their task that they gradually distance themselves from the actual purpose of their actions, substituting it, as Kolve argues, with games, like the one consisting in stretching Christ's arms so that they fit the earlier-prepared holes (189). And when their purpose is to punish Christ, they think they punish him for his pride—they are “simply teaching a braggart a country lesson in humility” (Kolve 215). The speech of the Jews who torture Christ and nail him to the cross is formally distinguished from the standard Chester stanza. The rhyming pattern is retained but the lines are shorter and thus more dynamic in order to meet the pace of physical torture inflicted on Christ. According to Travis, “[b]y formalizing to the point of primitive ritual the words and actions of Christ's prosecutors, Chester suggests that they are agents involved in a rite whose movements are ultimately controlled by the power beyond their comprehension,” that is the power of God (282).

Those differences notwithstanding, both the Sanhedrin and ordinary Jews are unanimous in regarding Jesus as a “false man” (“Trial” 150). Their lines are at times sarcastic, at times outspokenly aggressive—even Caiphas resorts to a physical threat when he triumphantly opens “Passion” saying:

Nowe of this segger we binne seker.
 Agaynst us boote he not to beker.
 Though he flyre, flatter and flycker,
 this fiste shall he not flee. (1–4)

Still, regardless of the form, the underlying assumption is always the same: Jesus has committed blasphemy in calling himself king and the Son of God and this is why he deserves to be punished. Christ tries to explain his status when he is asked to do so, even though the questions are overtly provocative and sarcastic. Interestingly, the text of the play contains all but two fragments in which Christ speaks in the four Gospels. One of the lacking lines is a response to the Jews spitting and striking his face. Significantly, Jesus' interaction with Caiphas is present in the text. The Christ from Chester does not get involved in a discussion when he faces the act of mindless violence, but at the same time he tries, till the last moments, to make the Jewish people understand who he really is. The Jews, however, reject this revelation from the start, regarding it as blasphemous, and this is why, from their perspective, the testimony of Christ and his followers can only be ridiculed or silenced by the use of physical violence. The play seems to account for the blindness of the Jews by suggesting that they are too strict and hang on too tightly to their Old Law to become open to the New Law proposed by Jesus. The accusations of Christ

violating the Law reappear in the play a few times (cf. “Trial” 3, 61, 73) and they are fundamental to the determination to punish Christ exhibited by Annas, Caiphas and other Jews. As has already been mentioned, Caiphas is afraid that the value of the Jewish Law is going to decline unless Christ is severely punished.

The omission of the episode with Pilate’s wife hints at Chester’s consistency in arguing that no one can knowingly want to kill God. The lack of awareness of the characters who condemn Christ and carry out the sentence is contrasted with the attitude of Simon. Also the three Maries remind the audience of Christ’s divinity when they lament at the foot of the cross over what they understand to be the inability of Jesus, “God and man” (“Passion” 284), to free himself and come down. Another character whose illuminated observation stands in opposition to the blindness of the Jews is a centurion who recognizes God in Jesus. Caiphas’ response to the centurion’s revelation, “Centurio, as God me speede, / thou must be smutted; thou canst not read!” (“Passion” 368–69), is dismissive, but also ironic, as the audience realizes that it applies to Caiphas himself rather than to the Roman soldier. What seems to have been added to the “Trial” as another prophecy ironically made by Annas (or Caiphas, depending on the manuscript) is his justification for why Jesus should be executed (a fragment transferred to “Trial,” although the remaining part of the dialogue taken from John can be found in play fourteen):

Syr, yt is needfull—this saye I—
that one man dye witterlye
all the people to forbye
so that the perish nought. (“Trial” 17–20)

What might appear to be a sudden acknowledgement of Christ’s divinity and of the redemptive character of his passion is in fact a paraphrase of the biblical dialogue in which Caiphas responds to some Pharisee’s concern that if more people believe in Christ, Romans “shall come and take away both our place and nation” (J. 11.48). In the Gospel, Caiphas’ suggestion is that one man shall be sacrificed so that “the whole nation perish not” (J. 11.50). John suggests, however, that these words were in fact a prophecy: “And this spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation” (J. 11.51). A less self-evident instance of this kind of irony might be traced in the scene of throwing the dice for Christ’s garment. The substitution of Roman soldiers with Jews in this scene adds an additional emphasis to it, especially because it takes place in front of Caiphas and his only reaction is urging the crucifiers to come back to work and not let Jesus

stand naked for so long. Neither common Jews nor their leader are able to recognize the words of their psalm (cf. Psalm 22.18) becoming reality before their eyes.¹⁰

The characters who till the end of Jesus' life do not recognize him as the Son of God and the saviour are, apart from the Jews, Satan and the devils. As Kolve observes, in the passion sequences of York and N-Town the devil who initiates the events leading to Christ's crucifixion learns from other demons that Christ is the saviour and his death is ultimately going to bring an end to their reign over people's souls. This is why he tries to hold back what he has inspired, though to no avail (228–30). In Chester, Satan—who does not appear in the “Trial” and “Passion” sequence, but boasts of his part in it later (cf. “The Harrowing of Hell 129–33)—becomes aware of the consequences of Christ's passion only after Jesus descends into hell to defeat him, when David opens his eyes to the truth about the divine nature of Christ through interpreting his own Old Testament prophecies (cf. “The Harrowing of Hell 185–204). In their lack of awareness and blindness to the prophecies, the Jews are put on the same side as Satan. This is because Chester makes a very clear distinction and juxtaposition—unlike St. Thomas Aquinas, who wrote that “[t]he educated, who were called their [i.e. the Jews'] rulers, knew, as did the demons, that Jesus was the Messiah promised in the Law” (Turner 194), Chester stresses that one cannot at the same time believe in Christ and be his enemy.

D. THE COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS AND THE JEWISH “SELF-EXCLUSION”

Chester is also exceptional in that it does not include “Christ's Testament,” that is, Jesus' monologue in which he “interrupts the progress of his crucifixion and forces the spectators to share the guilt of those who allowed the passion to occur” (Travis 288). Travis argues that Chester, unlike other mystery cycles, does not put special emphasis on the theme of “the shared guilt of the spectators watching Christ's death” (276) but rather “requires of its audience a communal assertion of awakened faith in the divinity of Christ's Person” (276). The portrayal of the Jews as a group excluding

¹⁰ The fact that Jesus is stripped of his garments by the Jews, that is by his brothers, might have served as another link between the Old and the New Testament—in this light, the story of Joseph, the son of Jacob, who was stripped of his clothes and thrown into an empty cistern by his jealous brothers, becomes a herald of the passion of Christ. As Bestul remarks, the story of Joseph was interpreted as prefiguring Christ's passion in famous twelfth- and thirteenth-century treatises: *Stimulus amoris* by Ekbert of Schönau and *Lignum vitae* by Bonaventure (96).

themselves from the community of believers is in line with such an overall message and purpose of the play. At the same time, it provides a justification for the approach that England adopted towards the Jews and maintained in the times when the cycle was staged. Those that exclude—the English people—are absolved of responsibility for the expulsion and, at the same time, through this act of othering, they strengthen and empower their own community of those who had recognized Christ as God. The act of self-exclusion is predicted or even pre-planned by God. Jesus, when he responds to Pilate’s question of what truth is, states—and this is an addition not to be found in any of the canonical Gospels—that there is no truth on Earth now. The overall message of the cycle is that the reunion and inclusion in the community of those enlightened by the New Law is possible as soon as the truth is acknowledged. The model for that is provided in “Passion” itself, which, unlike in any other cycle, concludes with the conversion of two Jews—Joseph of Arimathea and Nichodemus—and their credo.

CONCLUSION

The Chester “Trial” and “Passion” plays undertake the challenging task of reconciling two rather contradictory positions. On the one hand, they present in a theologically consistent manner that the Jews are the killers of Jesus, but as they were unaware of the gravity of the deed, they cannot be accused of deicide and eternally condemned—Christ himself, paraphrasing Luke’s Gospel, asks God to forgive his oppressors since they do not know what they are doing (“Passion” 297–300). As it is the Jews that crucify Jesus, the statement concerns them directly. What is more, their actions seem to be beyond their control, as they are the fulfillment of God’s plan. On the other hand, the contemporary reality in which the Jews were expelled from England, as if they were indeed condemned, stands in opposition to the former conclusion. However, an explanation emerges from the plays—the Jews, focused on the Old Law and blind to the New Law, have excluded themselves from the wider community of the New Covenant. The fact that they are now rejected is a direct consequence of their rejection of Christ as God. The message of these particular pageants and the whole cycle is coherent as far as the status of the Jews is concerned. The theological understanding of the Jews seems here to be closer to the older, Augustinian tradition, but the later, more negative tradition harmonized better with the contemporary English reality and could account for it more effectively. The Chester “Trial” and “Passion” plays might not be as coherent as the teachings of particular exegetes. Yet the portrayal of the Jews as sketched in the cycle is compatible with the internal and external context of the

plays. The Jews were presented as the Other to both the believers from the plays and the Christian audience. This facilitated the delineation of their underprivileged position in the social reality of the viewers and at the same time it conformed to the overall message of the cycle, which seems to be that the successful act of recognition of Christ's divinity is of utmost, primary importance for one's salvation.

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