Historical Malapropism and the Medieval Blood Libel in American Politics

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The blood libel was the false accusation lodged against Jewish communities that they ritually murdered Christian children for their blood, usually during the week of Passover, frequently in a ceremony mocking Christ's passion.[1] The blood libel was not particular to the Middle Ages, though its origins in the popular imagination are firmly rooted in the medieval world, notably with the boy martyrs William of Norwich and Hugh of Lincoln, whose murders were libelously imputed to Jews. As historians have observed, the medieval blood libel persisted even after the Middle Ages ended.[2] This article examines how the blood libel has been wrested from its medieval context and referenced in contemporary political discourse. The task of exploring the politics of the medieval blood libel has become urgent for scholars specializing in medievalism, given the rise of white nationalism and anti-Semitism, particularly in online spaces, and how racist ideologies have been entangled with fallacious views of the Middle Ages as a golden age for white, homogenous, Christian societies.

To the extent that non-Christian, religious minorities – and indeed all non-white Europeans and non-Europeans – have been subjects of interest in popular representations of the Middle Ages, their place in medieval society has always been understood to be in opposition to some imagined normative social order. In some cases, as with broad allusions to heretics and pagans, the "other" is anchored in historically muddied waters. In the case of Jews and the blood libel, there is a more insidious sensibility at play, one that ascribes

[1] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term "blood libel" first appeared in Russian, Yiddish, and German during the late nineteenth century, though its first use in English likely appeared in 1911 in the Jewish weekly the *Reform Advocate*. The synonymous "blood accusation" dates to the mid-nineteenth century.

[2] Hannah R. Johnson, *Blood Libel: The Ritual Murder Accusation and the Limit of Jewish History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), esp. 1–29.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787448957.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

essentialist and deeply troubling attributes to a whole category of people. The blood libel has been ripe for conveying varying degrees of, what I call, historical malapropism, or the misappropriation of the medieval past to draw similarities with the present.[3] When American politicians or pundits use the term "blood libel" to describe the victimization of themselves or others, it may illuminate a better understanding of how medievalism and the history of religious minorities – in this case, Jews – have intersected in public discourse. Historical malapropism depends not only on erroneous understanding of history, but also on the idea that historical precedent, however invoked, gives substance, gravitas, and explanation for current-day conflicts.

The Historical Context

There were many malicious rumors that plagued medieval Jewish communities, though the blood libel – the insidious story that came to be written down primarily in hagiographies and chronicles detailing the murder of Christian children – is likely the most well known. Even in the absence of contact with actual Jews, stories about their destructive force within Christian communities were popular. For example, long after the Jews were expelled from England in 1290, stories about Jews (Jewish men, in these narratives) suggested that they regularly entered local churches to steal the hosts used for the celebration of the Eucharist, after which they desecrated the hosts until they gushed blood. These "Gentile tales," as historian Miri Rubin calls them, mirrored the scourging of Christ and confirmed the miracle of transubstantiation. They also affirmed Christian identities by casting Jews as threats to the social order, a danger that was corrected once Christian dominance was reaffirmed. In fact, these narratives almost always ended with the punishment of the culprit and the conversion of his family to Christianity.[4] There were also rumors that Jews had poisoned wells, which some communities saw as causing the outbreak of bubonic plague in the mid-fourteenth century. Medieval officials were wary of these accusations against Jews because, as authorities in Cologne explained, "[i]f a massacre of Jews were to be allowed […] it could lead to the sort of outrages and disturbances which would whip up a popular revolt among the common people […]."[5] In this reading, resentment against Jews,

[3] This is similar to the argument put forward by Andrew B. R. Elliott (*Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century* [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017], 2), that "[…] elements, ideas, events, icons and symbols are increasingly expropriated from the Middle Ages to serve as ideological weapons in the present day, regardless of what we in the academy might think about it."

[4] Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), esp. 7–39.

[5] "Letter from Cologne to Strassburg," in *The Black Death*, ed. and trans. Rosemary Horrox (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 220.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787448957.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

if left unchecked, could unlock all manner of generalized suspicion and anger against higher social orders.

Unlike the rumors about Jewish culpability in spreading plague, the origin of the disturbing blood libel is unknown, although historians have traced some antecedents to sources dating to late antiquity, such as Socrates Scholasticus' fifth-century *Ecclesiastical History*. In this work, Socrates described Syrian Jews sacrificing a Christian boy as part of their drunken festivities.[6] It is clear, however, that the libel gained popular currency in the central Middle Ages (c. 1000 to 1300) with the rise of a "persecuting society" (to use R. I. Moore's term).[7] It was during this period that Jews and heterodox Christians came under increasing threat of persecution with the proliferation of passion plays, affective piety, crusades, a clergy trained to prosecute heretics and apostates, and a more legalistic culture that imposed barriers separating Christians from outsiders. Allusions to the blood libel began to suggest a plot spread far and wide, such as in the story famously recounted in Thomas of Monmouth's mid-twelfth-century hagiographical account of William of Norwich. William's martyrdom (described in horrific detail) is imagined to be part of a series of many ritual murders perpetrated by Jews across Europe. "[I]t was written that the Jews," Thomas wrote, relaying second-hand information from Theobald, a Jewish convert:

> without the shedding of human blood, could neither obtain their freedom, nor could they ever return to their fatherland. […] Wherefore the chief men and Rabbis of the Jews who dwell in Spain assemble together […] and they cast lots for all the countries which the Jews inhabit […] to carry out the same method with the other towns and cities […].[8]

This aspect of the blood libel, a conspiracy that stretched beyond national borders, is key. It imbued Jewish communities throughout Europe with the powers of a fearsome monolith, its members indistinguishable from one another, a cabal working to undermine Christian society. These fears were manifest in one of the most famous anti-Semitic works of the early twentieth century, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which claimed to be reports taken

[6] *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. Henry Wace and Philip Schaff (Oxford: Parker and Company, 1891), 161. Though in another account of tense Jewish-Christian relations in the *Ecclesiastical History*, Socrates described the Jews as forming "[…] conspiracies for the destruction of Christians" (159).

[7] R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Authority and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250*, 2nd edn (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), esp. 144–71.

[8] *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich*, ed. and trans. Augustus Jessop and Montague Rhodes James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896; repr. JRBooks, 2018), 59–60.

from a meeting of prominent Jews bent on world domination.[9] When, in 1920, the *Protocols* were revealed to be fake, it had only been seven years since the trial of Mendel Beilis, who was accused of ritually murdering a boy in Kiev (and for which he was almost convicted).[10] The Beilis Affair was a *cause célèbre* in Russia, and the ritual murder charge against Jews, as it was articulated in medieval sources and during Beilis's trial, persisted into the late twentieth and the twenty-first century, particularly in some parts of the Arab world.[11] In all these libelous narratives, from the desecration of hosts to the crucifixion of children, religion and culture not only mark Jews as different but also highlight the seeming hatred and disloyalty they harbor towards their non-Jewish neighbors. Jews are seen as dangerously anti-social because they disrupt Christian hegemony with terrifying force.

And what is old can become new again, reformulated for a new generation brought up on the politics of the twenty-first century. In 2018, President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority accused rabbis in Israel of orchestrating a secret plot to poison the water consumed by Palestinians, prompting journalists to compare this pernicious libel with similar ones that provoked mob violence against Jews during the Black Death. (He later apologized.)[12] Abbas's accusation harkened to both a dark period in medieval Jewish history (the well-poisoning rumors that prompted several pogroms) and a well-worn trope of anti-Semitism (a Jewish conspiracy to wreak destruction on non-Jews). As historian David Perry argued in *Pacific Standard*, the "new" blood libel – and its specific power to paint whole groups as monsters and predators who conspire to besmirch the purity of children – has been passed down to the twenty-first century as fake news, the type mainly propagated by conspiracy-mongers such as Alex Jones of *Info Wars*.[13] The targets of this new blood libel are not necessarily Jews, though the rhetoric deployed in depicting, for example, Hillary Clinton as a child-killer echoes the anti-Semitism of medieval chroniclers, whose stories influenced the cults of murdered boy saints. Although conspiracy theorists advance fake news targeting Jews and non-Jews, they draw on anti-Semitic tropes, some of which were established

[9] Michael Hagemeister, "The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*: Between History and Fiction," *New German Critique* 35.1 (2008): 83–95.

[10] Robert Weinberg, *Blood Libel in Late Imperial Russia: The Ritual Murder Trial of Mendel Beilis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), esp. 1–17.

[11] See chapters 4 and 5 of Raphael Israeli, *Blood Libel and its Derivatives: The Scourge of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Routledge, 2017), as well as Magda Teter's forthcoming book *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

[12] Isabel Kershner, "Palestinian Leader Apologizes After Speech Prompts Anti-Semitic Uproar," *New York Times*, May 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/04/world/middleeast/mahmoud-abbas-speech-apology.html>, last accessed July 18, 2019.

[13] David M. Perry, "The New Blood Libel," *Pacific Standard*, January 6, 2017, <https://psmag.com/news/the-new-blood-libel>, last accessed July 18, 2019.

in medieval sources and continue into the modern period, such as with Henry Ford's *The International Jew* (1920), which later influenced the thinking of Nazi leaders. Anti-Semitism weaves together long-standing prejudices of Judeophobia, mainly: an avowed internationalism that privileges Jewishness over national origin ("rootless cosmopolitan" as Stalinists in the Soviet Union once said); greedy self-interest, usually associated with the world of banking and money lending; sexual perversion and predation; and a conspiracy to subvert an ordered, Christian (or Western or Whatever Dominant) culture.[14] Though Perry's argument is persuasive, an exploration of the blood libel as it relates to ideas of medievalism in contemporary culture is further warranted to better understand its usage in the present political climate.

The Blood Libel and the Politics of Victimization

For centuries, the blood libel was used by anti-Semites to malign Jews. Now, some politicians use blood libel as a way to frame (and give historical form to) the idea of victimhood. Our story begins on January 12, 2011, when former Alaskan governor Sarah Palin released a video accusing her critics of blood libel. It had only been five years since Palin stormed onto the national stage as Arizona senator John McCain's running mate on the Republican presidential ticket. After McCain lost the presidential race, Palin had capitalized on the fame she had gained during the campaign to become a conservative activist and provocateur of sorts. She had come under particular scrutiny because of her incendiary rhetoric, which some believed created a hostile climate leading to a gunman's attack on congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and her constituents on January 8, 2011, in Tucson, Arizona. In the days following the attack, Palin circulated a video that served as both an *apologia* of her politics and a slick campaign-ad (at the time, pundits were still speculating that Palin might enter the 2012 presidential race).[15] Sitting in a well-lit room with a fireplace in the background flanked by an American flag, Palin expressed sympathy for the victims of the attack. She then assured viewers that all acts of violence resulted from individual, deranged action rather than from any social conditions that gave rise to it (such as, she implied, her party's anti-gun-control policies). And she took aim at opponents of free speech, saying, "If you don't like their ideas, you're free to propose better ideas. But, especially within hours of a tragedy unfolding, journalists and pundits should

[14] For more on anti-Semitism and the blood libel in Stalin's Soviet Union, see Elissa Bemporad, "Empowerment, Defiance, and Demise: Jews and the Blood Libel Specter under Stalinism," *Jewish History* 26 (2012): 343–61.

[15] Jeff Zeleny and Michael D. Shear, "Palin Joins Debate on Heated Speech With Words That Stir New Controversy," *New York Times*, January 12, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/13/us/13palin.html>, last accessed July 18, 2019.

not manufacture a blood libel that serves only to incite the very hatred and violence they purport to condemn. That is reprehensible."[16]

This reference to the blood libel made it clear that Palin and her speechwriters were unfamiliar with the term and its historical implications. More than likely, her speechwriters lifted the term from the *Wall Street Journal*'s Glenn Harlan Reynolds, who had referenced the blood libel in an opinion piece published two days before Palin distributed her video. Reynolds' piece lambasted Palin's critics for being both hypocritical and disingenuous when they accused her of inciting violence against her opponents.[17] Democratic politicians and journalists, Reynolds argued, were just as guilty of contributing to the same heated political discourse as that which they frequently assigned to conservatives. "So as the usual talking heads begin their 'have you no decency?' routine aimed at talk radio and Republican politicians," he wrote, "perhaps we should turn the question around. Where is the decency in blood libel?" Even in the context of Reynolds' plea to the "bothsidesism" of incivility, his evocation of the blood libel was aimed squarely at Palin's critics. In Reynolds' telling, because Palin was being unfairly criticized for inciting the bloody violence in Arizona, she was a victim of blood libel. When Palin referenced the blood libel a couple of days later, it was no wonder that it came off awkward in an otherwise polished speech.

As a result, many journalists and Jewish activists took umbrage with the tone-deafness of Palin's remarks. That Giffords, who survived the attack, is Jewish also cast an unseemly pall over Palin's appropriation of the blood libel to decry her critics. The blood libel allowed her to compare her perceived victimization to that of Jews, thus equating an ungenerous media treatment with the real-world predicament of Jews, who in the past had often faced violent retribution as a result of this false accusation. Palin's reference to the blood libel generated many think-pieces, which sought to historicize the term and question Palin's use of it. Juli Weiner's *Vanity Fair* article asked "What did Sarah Palin Mean by 'Blood Libel?,'" though she did not answer her own question, saying that Palin simply enjoyed coining neologisms.[18] That might have been true, though, as I argue here, Palin's use of blood libel was not a neologism so much as a historical malapropism – that is to say,

[16] Ben Werschkul, "Video: Sarah Palin on the Shooting in Tucson," *New York Times*, January 12, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/politics/1248069556517/sarah-palin-on-the-shooting-in-tucson>, last accessed July 18, 2019.

[17] Glenn Harlan Reynolds, "The Arizona Tragedy and the Politics of Blood Libel," *Wall Street Journal*, January 10, 2011, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703667904576071913818696964>, last accessed July 18, 2019.

[18] Juli Weiner, "What Did Sarah Palin Mean By 'Blood Libel,'" *Vanity Fair*, January 12, 2011, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2011/01/what-did-sarah-palin-mean-by-blood-libel>, last accessed July 18, 2019.

when medieval terminology is used to describe current events or a present condition without sufficient grasp of the medieval context.

When historical malapropism intersects with medievalism, it typically draws deliberate comparisons between ideas about the medieval and the modern, emphasizing that some event or condition – previously believed to have been horrible, antiquated, or exotic (that is, "medieval") – is actually mundane, current, and familiar (or "modern").[19] We might imagine historical malapropism operating on a continuum of misappropriation, from the mildly possible to the absurd, from the benign to the pernicious, which Palin's supporters in the media inadvertently demonstrated in the following days. Jim Geraghty, in an attempt to "both sides" the issue, compiled a list for the *National Review* detailing instances in which other politicians and journalists had used blood libel as a metaphor to describe an attack rooted in slander. "The Term 'Blood Libel': More Common Than You Might Think," read the headline, with the lede taunting would-be hypocrites by asking, "The use of the term 'blood libel' in non-Jewish contexts is out of bounds, eh?"[20] But what Geraghty seemed to miss is that, in some of the examples he provided, blood libel referred to a slandering of a whole group rather than an individual like Palin. He cited, for example, journalist Eugene Robinson's use of the term to refer to the Reconstruction-era characterization of black men, who were seen to prey on white women. He also pointed to its use by author and blogger Andrew Sullivan, who accused gubernatorial candidate Carl Paladino of blood libel when Paladino suggested all gay men were pedophiles. In these cases, Robinson and Sullivan used the blood libel to draw attention to how bigots demonize people for their race or sexual orientation.[21] While the specific historicity of the blood libel makes any one-to-one comparison problematic, the use of blood libel to articulate a state of victimhood in both Robinson's and Sullivan's examples is somewhat plausible given that the power of the blood libel was predicated on an image of the Jews as predators and corrupters of the young.

The blood libel's use in contemporary political discourse also suggests a certain kind of flexibility that, when stripped from its original historical context, can be invoked to critique those who malign the disenfranchised or poor. In a fiery opinion piece in the *New York Times*, economist Paul Krugman argued that Donald Trump's characterization of Mexicans,

[19] Elliott, *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media*, 14.

[20] Jim Geraghty, "The Term 'Blood Libel': More Common Than You Think," *National Review*, January 12, 2011, <https://www.nationalreview.com/the-campaign-spot/term-blood-libel-more-common-you-might-think-jim-geraghty/>, last accessed July 19, 2019.

[21] For the Eugene Robinson example, Geraghty cites an article by Ann Coulter, a conservative pundit. The link to Coulter's article is broken and a search online has not turned up Robinson's original quote. Even so, Geraghty's use of Robinson here is significant because Geraghty believes Robinson's use of blood libel is as justified as Palin's.

refugees, and immigrants as criminals and miscreants echoed the blood libel leveled against Jews. The Trump administration's frequent maligning of these groups, he argued, is purposeful – to justify the jailing, deportation, and dehumanization of society's most vulnerable people.[22] During and since the Middle Ages, the condition for many Jews was one of displacement, of being strangers in a strange land, and refugees in times of war, pogrom, and genocide. For Krugman, the return of the blood libel did not necessarily signal the resurgence of child-killing accusations, but rather a social climate that allowed the demonization of entire ethnic or stateless groups like the Jews, who had been perceived as a suspect population in the medieval (and even recent) past.

The charge of blood libel, however, can slip easily into a defense against any and all personal attacks. In 2016, for example, the billionaire Charles Koch, who regularly funds conservative organizations and candidates, said it was blood libel to suggest that he would support Democratic (and thus, liberal) presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.[23] Why can the blood libel be misappropriated this way? It is my estimation that the blood libel derives its power as an accusation from several factors. First, unlike other historical terms in popular medievalism, such as "Crusade" and "Inquisition," blood libel, as it specifically affected Jews and their history, has been insufficiently taught in American high school curricula. "Crusade" is an easy signifier for holy war, which resonates today given the decades-long conflict and American military presence in the Middle East.[24] "Inquisition" conjures images of violence, torture, an oppressive church, and perhaps the larger historical conflict centered on faith versus reason (for example, the trial of Galileo Galilei and its popular framing as part of that struggle).[25] Mary C. Boys, a professor of religious studies at the Union Theological Seminary, observed that the current use of the term blood libel is "[…] just not a useful analogy to use. … I think one of the problems is that very few people know its origin, so it's used as a generic nasty accusation."[26] As Boys points out,

[22] Paul Krugman, "Return of the Blood Libel," *New York Times*, June 21, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/21/opinion/blood-libel-trump-immigrants.html>, last accessed July 18, 2019.

[23] Philip Elliott, "Charles Koch Says Suggestion He Backs Hillary Clinton Is 'Blood Libel,'" *Time*, July 31, 2016, <https://time.com/4432409/charles-koch-hillary-clinton-blood-libel/>, last accessed July 18, 2019.

[24] Elliott, *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media*, 79. See also Nicholas L. Paul, "Modern Intolerance and the Medieval Crusades," in *Whose Middle Ages? Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past*, ed. Andrew Albin, Mary C. Erler, Thomas O'Donnell, Nicholas L. Paul, and Nina Rowe (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 3–12.

[25] Steve Guthrie, "Torture, Inquisition, Medievalism, Reality, TV," in *Cultural Studies of the Modern Middle Ages*, ed. Eileen A. Joy, Myra J. Seaman, Kimberly K. Bell, and Mary K. Ramsey (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 189–216.

[26] Lauren Markoe, "The 'Splainer: Was Charles Koch Using the Term 'Blood Libel'

because the medieval origins of the blood libel are relatively obscure, its usefulness, as a political analogy, is limited and ripe for misappropriation; it merely connotes, for some, an overly broad, malicious, and slanderous attack. Second, the term blood libel carries a semantic frisson, one that implies physical damage, perfect for those wishing to equate hurt emotions with actual violence. In contrast, "Crusade" and "Inquisition" are tied concretely to medievalisms rooted in images of knights and zealous churchmen. Finally, blood libel is one of those terms that embody both the historical and ahistorical. On the one hand, the term evokes a long historical genealogy of oppression (thus grounding it in gravitas) but, on the other, it also represents a term unmoored from historical specificity (thus allowing it a kind generalized power easily portable to different contexts).

Conclusion

Sarah Palin and Charles Koch appropriating the blood libel in ways that ignore the term's historical implications begs the question why people in positions of power – those who do not have to fear persecution based on their religion, skin color, sexual orientation, or national heritage – use it in the first place. For those who do not understand its historical dimensions and how it had been used as a blunt instrument of oppression, the medieval blood libel could be used to compare one's plight to Jewish victimization. This historical malapropism aims to draw on a type of sympathy that was previously reserved for those who were marginalized and targets of violence. Palin belongs to a demographic (white, conservative, Christian) that overwhelmingly views itself at odds with American progressive culture: that is, as "victims" of a changing status quo, which is perceived to be increasingly tolerant of liberalism, multiculturalism, and religious plurality.[27] In this scenario, those in positions of power see themselves as part of an embattled group, which must defend itself against the winds of cultural change. To claim to be a victim of blood libel is to take the position of a maligned and oppressed minority. Historical malapropism, in this sense, provides the politically powerful, who believe they are under siege, with historical precedent to argue that they are victims. Historical precedent – however misinformed or inappropriate – provides sufficient gravitas to claims of victimhood. But this invocation of precedent also depends on a fundamental ignorance of history, or else the analogy falls apart and loses its power to

Correctly?" *Religion News Service*, August 1, 2016, <https://religionnews.com/2016/08/01/the-splainer-blood-libel-and-the-2016-election/>, last accessed July 18, 2019.

[27] Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienech, and Robert P. Jones, "Beyond Economics: Fears of Cultural Displacement Pushed the White Working Class to Trump," *PRRI/The Atlantic Report*, May 9, 2017, <https://www.prri.org/research/white-working-class-attitudes-economy-trade-immigration-election-donald-trump/>, last accessed July 18, 2019.

persuade. Historical malapropism only exists when it is divorced from an understanding of history. This characteristic allowed Palin and others to essentially invert the blood libel charge, from one that threatened Jews in history to one claiming victimhood for anyone in anyplace.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787448957.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press