

**REVIEW**

Irven M. Resnick

***Marks of Distinction: Christian Perceptions  
of Jews in the High Middle Ages***

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America Press, 2012), hardcover, 400 pp.

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In this thoroughly researched and well-written work, Irven Resnick sets out to demonstrate that medieval Christians viewed Jews as different not only in terms of their religious beliefs and practices, but also on the basis of their physical nature. Although Resnick notes in the Introduction and Conclusion that such a claim also has suggestive implications for narrowing the differences between modern anti-Semitism and medieval anti-Judaism, the importance of this book lies in the admirable way that it succeeds in making its case for the medieval period.

Resnick begins by defining and discussing the notions of medieval physiognomy and bodily complexion, with special emphasis on how medieval Christian thinkers and authorities used these methods or disciplines to assess the nature of individuals generally, and the nature of the Jews in particular. Employing these disciplines, Peter the Venerable and others concluded, for example, that Jews were irrational and, as a result, essentially inhuman. In addition, scholastic theologians determined that Jews had unbridled sexual appetites and a defective nature overall. The second chapter extends this discussion by focusing on the supposed role of circumcision in restraining the excessive sexuality of the Jewish male. Resnick argues that even the Jewish badge and other restrictions on Jewish dress were largely meant to prevent sexual encounters.

The third chapter discusses the association of Jews with leprosy. Christian biblical exegetes linked Jews' alleged excessive

sexual appetites with leprosy, which they saw as a divine punishment. These exegetes claimed that the biblical precepts that proscribed sex with a menstruating woman and eating pork were observed by Jews in order to protect themselves from leprosy. Christians, however, did not need to practice these prohibitions in the actual (or non-allegorical) sense, since it was the Jews' imperfections and disposition for disease which made them much more susceptible to leprosy. Indeed, as Resnick shows in chapter four, the fact that Christians could eat and digest pork without becoming diseased was due, according to medieval Christian scholarship, to their superior constitutions and bodily complexion.

A melancholy complexion, associated particularly with Jews in several medieval traditions, was linked to both leprosy and hemorrhoids. In the fifth chapter, Resnick carefully works through the various biological symptoms that Christian scholars associated with Jews, noting also that in Christian thought, the inability to achieve a perfectly balanced nature and complexion was one of the consequences of original sin. As twelfth-century French philosopher William of Conches put it (cited on pp. 191-92), "the first human being was perfectly temperate, as he had equal shares of the four qualities that constitute a healthy complexion. But after he had been driven out of the amenity of paradise...never afterward has perfect health been found in humans."

Resnick also details the Christian claims that the blood of murdered Christian children was needed by Jewish males in part as treatment for several peculiar physical defects (including a monthly bloody flux and hemorrhoids), which led in turn to a pernicious degree of melancholy. The punishment of Cain and the mark that he received (which was typologically applied to all Jews) was understood by some medieval Christians, following the Septuagint and the *Vetus Latina*, to connote insanity or melancholy, as well as an associated trembling of the head or limbs. In chapter seven, Resnick discusses the impacts of the planets on the Jews, such as the supposed distinctive body odor or stench (among other maladies) that

medieval Christians linked to the planet Saturn. Finally, three case studies are offered as a means of bringing together the distinctive Jewish physiognomy that Christians associated with Jews. The last of these is the supposed dark Jewish complexion, which is deftly explained by Resnick and contextualized, in a variety of different ways.

Throughout his study, Resnick notes the inconsistencies and even the paradoxes within the Christian positions. Despite evidence that Jews could take up arms and fight “manfully,” Jews were thought of as having an effeminate or emasculated nature (pp. 49-53). Although circumcision was seen as a means of restraining the Jewish male’s excessive carnality, it was also used to identify the Jewish male with unrestrained female sexuality (p. 79). The Jews enjoyed relative immunity to leprosy because of their laws that prohibited the consumption of pork and sex with a menstruant, but the Christians were not encouraged to follow these (salutary) dietary restrictions (p. 143). Jews were supposedly both more and less likely to be leprous: more likely, because their dietary laws pointed to a flaw in their bodily constitutions that necessitated the avoidance of leprosy-causing pork; and less likely, because the Jews avoided leprosy by scrupulously observing the laws of sexual purity (p. 173). More generally, Resnick asks, if Jews were clearly marked by a variety of physical, natural differences and peculiarities, why was it necessary for Jews to wear distinguishing badges (pp. 249-50)?

Reminiscent of G. D. Cohen’s seminal study on “Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought,” Resnick’s book also shows that Jews often attributed to the Christians the very same defects or peculiarities that the Christians associated with them, such as irrationality and inhumanity (pp. 39-43); engaging in sexual relations with menstruants (pp. 130-31); and even the unhealthy nature of the Christians’ physical appearance (pp. 290-91; and see also pp. 208-14). Similarly, from the Jewish perspective, circumcision was viewed as a positive means of restraining excessive sexual desire while promoting intellectual virility (pp. 88-92). Indeed, these various counter-claims by the Jews can be extended and even expanded.

Following the lead of Anna Sapir Abulafia, Robert Chazan, and Jeremy Cohen, among others, Resnick has further elucidated the outsized importance of the Cluniac Abbot, Peter the Venerable, in establishing a number of the Christians' central anti-Jewish claims during the twelfth century (pp. 37-40, 43, 72, 170, 208-09). At the same time, the extent to which *Sefer Hasidim* (an unusual work of ethics and culture whose overall impact on contemporary Jewish society is a matter of some debate) is representative of Jewish responses in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (pp. 41, 83-84, 88-89) needs to be considered carefully in light of this work's hypersensitivity to Christianity, and to aspects of Jewish religious symbolism at the same time.

With palpable erudition, Irven Resnick has highlighted the extensive reflections by Christian thinkers in the high Middle Ages on Jewish physicality. The perception of the unique appearance and physiognomy of the Jews was not merely an instinctive or popular notion, but was instead one that medieval Christian exegetes, legal scholars, and churchmen anchored and further expanded on the basis of textual and scholastic study and analysis. As Resnick has convincingly demonstrated, the role of these issues in shaping aspects of medieval anti-Judaism was much weightier than heretofore imagined.