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The Body of Christ as a Sacrifice to Pagan Gods? Mattathias Killing of a Jew in a Dutch History Bible of the 15th Century

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Fig. 1. Mattathias killing the apostate, Jew. History Bible, ca. 1430, The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek MS 78 D 38 II, fol. 86r, manuscripts.kb.nl (byvanck database)

Introduction

The body of Christ was subjected to threat throughout history. Passion narratives in the Gospels recount numerous physical aggressions against Christ's corporeal body, such as the flagellation, the bearing of the cross and the piercing of his side during the Crucifixion. This injuring of the body is only one of such threats. Disputes on the incarnation and Holy Trinity threatened the concept of the divine nature of Christ's body. Images of his body were threatened in periods of iconoclasm. The Host as the transubstantiated body of Christ became subject of heightened veneration in the late Middle Ages and was threatened both in its truth and physical integrity. It is this latter threat that is at the centre of a highly anomalous miniature from a fifteenth century Dutch Bible historiale (fig. 1). This miniature depicts the killing of a nameless Jew by the old priest Mattathias, a biblical narrative from the deuterocanonical First Book of the Maccabees.

The miniature depicts a church-like interior with an altar covered in several white cloths. A Jewish figure, identifiable by his wearing of a red pointed hat,¹ is in kneeling position in front of the altar while raising the Host. The Host as a symbol of Christ's body is traditionally depicted as a small white roundel containing a cross. The head of this Jew is being held by another man, identified as Mattathias, who is wearing priestly garments and a turban. Mattathias is about to stab the sacrificing Jew with a long sword. Behind the altar are two figures of males wearing turbans, of which one is being stabbed while he tightly holds the white altar cloths. On the left side of the miniature a mixed group of men wearing headgear similar to that worn by the sacrificing Jew witness the event at the centre of the image.

At first glance, the miniature seems to represent the killing of a Christian devotee. After all, the central figure is offering the body of Christ as the Eucharistic Host on a Christian altar. This leads to the assumption that we are looking at a martyr who is being killed for having persevered in the Christian faith, as were so many Christian saints. This would then suggest that Mattathias is evil. The figure is, however, clearly recognisable as a Jew by his clothing and headdress. When analysing the accompanying biblical narrative of First Maccabees, this typological interpretation also makes no sense. The biblical account of Mattathias' acts provide no point of reference for the Eucharistic iconography in question. This ambiguity raises the question of how the Eucharist ended up in a depiction of an Old Testament narrative in which the "Christian" is killed.

Through comparative iconographical research, this article aims to assess the aetiology of this highly anomalous miniature and shed light on possible anti-Jewish

¹ The pointed hat as a signifier for Jewishness has been debated in Sarah Lipton, *Dark Mirror: The Medieval Origin of Anti-Jewish Iconography* (New York: Metropolitan, 2014). In the case of this miniature, the accompanying text provides sufficient context to interpret the pointed hat as a sign of a Jew.

typologies in late medieval Dutch art.² First the formal aspects of the miniature will be presented, followed by a discussion of the biblical narrative in the book of Maccabees and its reception in the Middle Ages. The paper concludes with an analysis of the iconography in its historical context, in order to reconstruct how and why this image came to be.

The manuscript

The miniature of Mattathias killing a Jew is incorporated in a large (400 × 302 mm) two-volume vernacular Dutch Bible historiale made in the early fifteenth century in the Northern Netherlands, presumably in the city of Utrecht.³ Altogether, the manuscripts contain 492 column miniatures in colour or grisaille, 59 historiated or decorated initials, border decorations and pen-flourishes. The Bible historiale covers most of the canonical books of the Bible: from Genesis to Daniel, the Psalms, Alexander, Maccabees, the destruction of Jerusalem, the Gospels in harmony and the biblical pericopes. The vast amount of illuminations were made by five different artists and three illuminators who contributed only one drawing.⁴ The miniature in question and all other miniatures in the Books of the Maccabees were illuminated by the Alexander Master, who was named after his effort in illuminating the story of Alexander the Great in this and two related Bible historiales from Utrecht now kept in Brussels and Vienna.⁵ The patron of the bible is unknown, but the use of the vernacular suggests a lay readership.

² Anti-Jewish iconography has been studied extensively in art historical literature, mostly encompassing all of the art of Europe or Northern-Europe. Important studies include: Bernard Blumenkranz, *Juden und Judentum in der mittelalterlichen Kunst* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1963); Ruth Mellinkoff, *Ocasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Debrah Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, & Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); *Beyond the Yellow Badge: Anti-Judaism and Antisemitism in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, ed. Mitchell B. Merback (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Anthony Bale, *Feeling Persecuted. Christians, Jews and Images of Violence in the Middle Ages* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010). Also see Lipton, "Dark Mirror" and her first study on the Bible Moralisée: Sarah Lipton, *Images of Intolerance: The Representation of Jews and Judaism in the Bible Moralisée* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

³ Henri Defoer, Anna Korteweg, Wilhelmina Wüstefeld, *The Golden Age of Dutch Manuscript Painting* (Stuttgart: Belser Verlag, 1989), 131–135.

⁴ Both volumes of the Dutch History Bible (Den Haag, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, MS 78 D 38 I+II) have been studied extensively from a stylistic and formalistic perspective. Willem Byvanck recognized seven different illuminators in the Dutch Bible Historiale: The Alexander Master, Claes Brouwer, the Psalter Master, the Master of Otto van Moerdrecht, Master Azor and an unnamed Master F and G. See Willem Byvanck, *Noord-Nederlandsche miniaturen in handschriften der 14e, 15e en 16e eeuwen* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1922–1923), 13–15 (cat. no. 28).

⁵ Byvanck, *Noord-Nederlandsche Miniaturen*, 13.

The narrative and its legacy in the Middle Ages

The Middle Dutch text in the Bible Historiale recounts the story of the Maccabees in a translation of the Vulgate with additions from Petrus Comestor's *Historia Scholastica*. The biblical narrative takes place in the second century BCE, approximately 150 years after the conquest of Alexander the Great when Judea was separated and came under rule of the Seleucid kingdom. In the first chapter, this historical context is presented followed by extensive laments on the pagan oppression and the apostasy of many Jews. The miniature in question adorns First Maccabees chapter 2, which tells about Mattathias, a Jewish priest from the town of Modein. Deeply saddened by the desecration of the Temple, the prosecution of Jews and the Hellenisation of Jews in Jerusalem and Judea,⁶ Mattathias aims to rebel against the Seleucid king. One day, commissioners of King Antiochus IV Epiphanes enter the town of Modein and command, on behalf of the king, the Jewish population to discard their faith by bringing sacrifice to the pagan altar. Mattathias is asked to be the first to bring his offering, as he has an exemplary role in his community. But Mattathias refuses, based on his faith in the Law which does not allow for sacrifices to pagan gods.⁷ Even before Mattathias finishes his argument, a nameless Jew steps forward and offers sacrifice as the king's commissioners have commanded. This enraged Mattathias enormously. He was outraged and his "reins were trembling" because of the Jew's apostasy. Mattathias's anger turns to violence as he slays the Jew and one of the commissioners before he tears down the pagan altar.⁸ This killing of one of the king's commissioners is literally depicted in the background of the miniature in question.

This incident marks the beginning of the large-scale rebellion of the law-abiding Jewish people against pagan oppressors and apostate Jews in Judea. Mattathias's son Judas Maccabaeus led the Jewish army in their war against the Seleucid rulers and Hellenised Jews. The Maccabees were victorious in the war and founded the Hasmonean dynasty in Judea. This ultimately led to the restoration of the Temple, an event which Jews nowadays celebrate as Hannukah.

The killing of the Jew by Mattathias constitutes the first act of killing in the name of religion that led to a large-scale religious war. The narrative in First Maccabees refers to a similar killing of a Jew when Mattathias justifies his act by citing a passage in the book of Numbers. In this narrative, Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, spears a disobedient Jew named Zimri and thereby deflects God's wrath (in the

⁶ 1 Maccabees 2, 1–14. For a detailed analysis of Hellenising and conservative Judaism in the Seleucid empire see Erich S. Gruen, "Hellenism and Persecution: Antiochus IV and the Jews" in *The Construct of Identity in Hellenistic Judaism*, ed. Erich S. Gruen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 333–357.

⁷ 1 Maccabees 2, 15–22.

⁸ 1 Maccabees 2, 23–25.

form of a deadly plague) away from them.⁹ God praises Phinehas for his deeds and describes them as zealous. The justification for this killing, an act which the Law forbids, is presented in Psalm 106, which literally states that Phinehas's act was justifiable for all eternity.¹⁰ These passages lay the foundation for the justification of violence in name of religion, which occurred for the first time on a large scale in the wars as described in the books of Maccabees.¹¹ This "truly epochal event in world history" as the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann describes it, also gave rise to the act of dying for God, the inverse of zealotry.¹² Martyrdom was created in the Books of the Maccabees and became a core aspect in the Passion of Christ and many saints' lives in early Christianity.

From the fourth century onwards, the story of the Woman with the Seven Sons of the Second Book of Maccabees enjoyed great veneration in both Eastern and Western churches. This passage tells about seven Jewish brothers who refused the command to eat pork. Their gruesome martyrdom was forcibly witnessed by their mother, who stood by her sons in their steadfastness to refuse the pagan commands.¹³ These martyrs are the only Old Testament heroes who were sanctified by the Church and are celebrated in the liturgical calendar on August 1.¹⁴ Together with the three youths in the Fiery Furnace (Book of Daniel, chapter 3), they are the only Old Testament martyrs to be celebrated in the Christian church. We can therefore safely call the Maccabean brothers true Christian proto-martyrs.¹⁵ This typological aspect was positively commented upon in multiple patristic sources, such as the writings of Augustine, John Chrysostom and Gregory of Nazianzus.¹⁶ Their popularity culminated in the veneration of relics ascribed to the seven brothers, which were brought to Cologne in the twelfth century along with the relics of the three Magi, and are still kept in the early-sixteenth-century Shrine of the Maccabees in Saint Andrew's Church in Cologne. This shrine visually parallels the martyrdom of the mother and her seven sons to the suffering of Christ and Mary.¹⁷

⁹ Numbers 25, 7–13.

¹⁰ Psalm 106, 30–31.

¹¹ The rise of zealotry in relation to the books of Maccabees have been analysed in Jan Assmann, *Martyrdom, Violence, and Immortality: the Origins of a Religious Complex in Dying for the Faith, Killing for the Faith: Old Testament Faith-Warriors (1 and 2 Maccabees) in Historical Perspective*, ed. Gabriela Signori (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 39–60.

¹² Assmann, *Martyrdom, Violence, and Immortality*, 39.

¹³ 2 Maccabees 2, 1–40.

¹⁴ The origin of the Maccabean cult in Christianity is described in Gerard Rouwhorst, *The Cult of the Seven Maccabean Brothers and their Mother in Christian Tradition in Saints and Role Models in Judaism and Christianity*, eds. M. Poorthuis, J. Schwartz (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 183–204.

¹⁵ Raphaëlle Ziadé, *Les Martyrs Maccabées: de l'histoire juive au culte chrétien. Les homélies de Grégoire de Nazianze et de Jean Chrysostome* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1.

¹⁶ For an overview of patristic sources on the books of Maccabees see: *ibidem*.

¹⁷ Roswitha Hirner, *Der Makkabäerschrein in St. Andreas zu Köln* (Bonn: Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 1975), 17.

Their martyrdom in service of Mosaic law proved of little significance in medieval commentaries and explanations of the feast. In his extensive commentary on the Books of the Maccabees, Rabanus Maurus continued the late antique interpretation of the martyrs as dying for “Christ the Lawgiver.”¹⁸ The ultimate truth was simply not yet revealed at the time of the Maccabean revolt.

The zealotry of the Maccabees played a pivotal role in the justification of the crusades. Pope Urban II cited the Books of the Maccabees as a justification for the First Crusade in order to restore Christian rule over the Holy Land. In Guibert de Nogent’s transcription of the 1095 speech, Urban II cites the Maccabees as perfect examples for Christian soldiers.¹⁹ Mattathias himself is mentioned in Pope Eugene III’s call for the Second Crusades, stating that Mattathias’s lack of mortal fear should inspire the Crusaders in their retaking of the Holy Land.²⁰ But the zealotry and braveness of the Maccabean soldiers also found its way into Medieval romances that were more secular, such as Gautier de Belleperche’s *Judas Machabé* and Pierre du Riés *Chevalerie de Judas Macabé*, which used and praised the chivalric aspects of the Maccabean soldiers. As historian Robert McGrath explains, the figure of Mattathias’s son Judas Maccabaeus in particular evolved into the ultimate “preux chevalier,” similar to heroes such as Roland, Charlemagne and Lancelot.²¹

The broad and “positive” non-anti-Jewish legacy of the Maccabees in the Middle Ages illustrates the impossibility of viewing the miniature in the Dutch Bible Historiale as a negative commentary on the act of Mattathias, who is supposedly killing a Christian. Mattathias was after all but the first of the Maccabean zealots to kill Jewish apostates, and there were many who followed his example. It is unfortunate that one finds no biblical commentaries in patristic writings, and only a few in later medieval sources, on the Christian interpretation of the apostate Jew and his death.²² Neither the *Glossa Ordinaria* nor Petrus Comestor’s *Historia Scholastica*, the most influential exegetical sources, comment upon this apostate Jew’s significance for Christians. It is therefore necessary to turn to visual representations in order to assess how the apostate Jew might have functioned in medieval thought.

¹⁸ Daniel Joselyn-Siemiatkoski, *Christian Memories of the Maccabean Martyrs* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 10.

¹⁹ “If in olden times the Maccabees attained to the highest praise of piety because they fought for the ceremonies and the Temple, it is also justly granted you, Christian soldiers, to defend their liberty of your country by armed endeavor.” August Krey, *The First Crusade: the Accounts of the Eyewitnesses and Participants* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1921), 36–40.

²⁰ Penny J. Cole, *The Preaching of the Crusades to the Holy Land, 1095–1270* (Cambridge: Medieval Academy of America, 2013), 42.

²¹ Robert McGrath, *The Romance of the Maccabees in Mediaeval Art and Literature* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms Inc, 1963), III.

²² As Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski explained, the Books of the Maccabees were of less importance in biblical commentaries compared to the books of Genesis and Exodus. See Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, *Christian Memories*, 81.



Fig. 2. Mattathias killing the apostate Jew. Libri Machabeorum, The Leiden Maccabees, tenth century, Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek Ms Perizoniani F17, fol. 9v, www.leidenuniv.nl (catalogue of digitised manuscripts)

Iconography

The earliest known depiction of the book of Maccabees is in the third century frescoes at the Dura-Europos synagogue.²³ Christian depictions of Mattathias killing the apostate Jew and many other narratives of the books of Maccabees are limited to representations in book illumination, given its minor importance compared to narratives from the Pentateuch. The Mother with the Seven Sons had a far greater impact due to their liturgical role and extensive hagiography, thus their appearances on more monumental artworks.

²³ K. Weitzmann, H.L. Kessler, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990), 119–125.

One of the first known depictions of Mattathias killing the Jew can be found in a manuscript containing only the first two books of the Maccabees. This *Libri Machabeorum* was made in the tenth century at Sankt Gallen and contains the First Book of the Maccabees in Latin.²⁴ On folio 9 verso (fig. 2), the entire page is dedicated to illustrating the events in the first chapters. At the centre of the page, the apostate Jew holding a boar is about to be slain by Mattathias, who stands behind him. The Jew seems to have a rather coarse haircut, presumably signifying some form of wickedness.²⁵ The iconography follows the general tendency in illuminations of First Maccabees 2 to interpret the offering as pig meat, as this constitutes the ultimate “test” for adherence to Mosaic law.

The sacrificing of pigs is not mentioned in First Maccabees 2 but occurs in the legend of the Mother and the Seven Sons. The biblical account (Vulgate) in First Maccabees does describe the presence of idols on the pagan altar, which Mattathias tears down after killing the Jew. This attribute therefore appears in many depictions of Mattathias killing the apostate Jew. A thirteenth-century French Bible depicts both a pagan idol and the offering of a pig’s head (fig. 3). In another French Bible of the thirteenth century, the apostate Jew is depicted kneeling in front of an altar, which holds a typical bronze or golden statue of an idol (fig. 4).²⁶ Mattathias is depicted as a contemporaneous knight, whereas the apostate Jew is depicted in orientalisising garments and headdress. The pig is replaced by a goat in a fifteenth-century historical French chronicle, which also depicts an idol, but in this image the idol falls from the altar while Mattathias continues the killing of other apostate Jews (fig. 5). Note the depiction of a censer on the floor at the left side of the apostate Jew. In this miniature, the offering of a pig or swine is replaced by the use of a common liturgical vessel.

Due to the relative scarcity of illuminations of First Maccabees 2, we cannot speak of an iconographical tradition or the use of compositional models. Both the composition and attributes differ between depictions of the narrative. This becomes apparent when looking at the miniature from a related Bible historiale. As mentioned earlier, the manuscript in question is part of a group of two other richly-illuminated Dutch Bible historiales from Utrecht. The manuscript kept in Vienna²⁷ does not depict the killing of the Jew, but the miniature in the Brussels manuscript displays yet another iconography.²⁸ In this miniature (fig. 6), the same

²⁴ K.A. de Meyier, *Codices Perizoniani* (Leiden: Brill, 1946), 21–22.

²⁵ Strickland, *Saracens*, 38.

²⁶ For an extensive analysis of the iconography of the statue of the pagan idol see Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image Making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

²⁷ Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek codex Vindobonensis 2771, 2772, see Otto Pächt, Ulrike Jenni, *Die Illuminirten Handschriften der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek. Holländische Schule*, Bd. I (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1975), 146–151.

²⁸ Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Ms 9018–9019.

Alexander Master as in the manuscript from The Hague²⁹ chose to depict a fictitious moment only a bit later in the narrative. The first apostate Jew has already been killed by Mattathias. Some other aspects of the miniature remain similar: a Christianised altar without an idol or the inclusion of pigs or boars. In this miniature, the offering is completely left out.

Artists constructed images according to the wishes of the patron, the available space in a column or an initial, and the theological knowledge of the scribe and illuminator. The appearance of the pig, the censer and in our case the sacred Host, reveal the tendency of artists to visually resolve lacunae (the pig) or comment upon the narrative (the censer and the Host). Yet an explanation for the inclusion of the Host in the miniature of the Dutch Bible *Historiale* has yet to come. Does the manuscript itself offer any clue as to why the iconography shifted to include the Body of Christ?

The context within the manuscript

In both the The Hague and Brussels Bible *historiales*, the historiated initial at the start of the Books of the Maccabees differs from the usual narrative selection for this prominent place. In many Latin and French Bibles, the first image to illustrate the Books of the Maccabees concerns the desecration of the Temple by Antiochus, but in the majority of cases it concerns Mattathias killing the apostate Jew. As this narrative is illustrated in a column miniature accompanying the text, the Alexander Master chose to depict a narrative of the Second Book of Maccabees that is rarely represented in other medieval Bibles. In the initial (fig. 8), Heliodorus is represented, kneeling in front of an altar covered in coins or gold. A bishop-like figure is collecting the pieces from the altar. The narrative of Second Maccabees tells of the chancellor Heliodorus, who is sent by King Seleucus IV to confiscate treasures from the Temple.³⁰ As the priest Onias and the entire Jewish population of Jerusalem pray for divine intervention, a rider on horseback, followed by two youths, appears to Heliodorus in the Temple and scares him to near death, thereby preventing the theft of the temple treasures. It is this punishment that usually appears in visual representations, but never the repentance and sacrifice that Heliodorus offers at the end of the chapter.³¹ In the case of our Bible *historiale*, the patron or scribe deliberately placed this uncommon depiction of Heliodorus at the start of the Maccabees, to present the moral value of proper sacrifice and adherence to laws or rules regarding the handling of sacred treasures. The similarities in composition but differences in detail between the initial and the miniature of Mattathias only a few pages later impel the viewer to contemplate on proper and improper offerings throughout the Books of the Maccabees.

²⁹ Byvanck, *Noord-Nederlandsche Miniaturen*, 15–16.

³⁰ 2 Maccabees 3, 1–23.

³¹ 2 Maccabees 3, 35.

The *Bible Moralisée*

This moralising through juxtapositions of narratives also occurs in the visual and biblical exegesis of Old Testament scenes in the famous manuscripts of the *Bible Moralisée*. These manuscripts, which were also copied in the fifteenth-century Southern Low Countries, contain narratives of both the Old and New testaments, accompanied by a moralisation or a typological antitype in word and image. Many editions of the *Bible Moralisée* contain vast amounts of images³² as well as the narrative of First Maccabees chapter 2.

In a mixed Latin and French edition of the *Bible Moralisée*, the miniature accompanying First Maccabees 2 depicts the apostate Jew venerating a pagan idol, in this case a statue of a horned devil. The New Testament antitype, depicted and described below, concerns the “sale” or delivery of Christ by Judas.³³ On the left side of the miniature Judas is depicted holding a money bag while shaking hands with a priest. The written moralisation states that the Jew (the apostate, in the miniature above) signifies the disciple who sold his master. The apostasy of Judas is visually and verbally prefigured by the apostate Jew who is killed by the zealous Mattathias. This act of killing is not the focus of the moralisation, it focusses solely on the apostasy of the Jew and Judas.



Fig. 3. Initial E. Mattathias killing the apostate Jew (detail), Bible, ca. 1210, Paris, Bibliothèque Mazarine, Ms 137, f. 151v, www.bibliotheque-mazarine.fr/fr/



Fig. 4. Mattathias killing the apostate Jew (detail), Bible de Saint-Jean d’Acre, 1250–1254, Source: Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms Arsenal 5211 réservé, fol. 339r, gallica.bnf.fr (Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

³² For an overview of the manuscripts and their context see John Lowden, *The Making of the Bibles Moralisées*, Vol. I–II (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2000).

³³ The image follows the narrative in the gospel of Matthew chapter 26, which describes the deal between Judas and the chief priests to deliver Christ for thirty pieces of silver.



Fig. 5. Mattathias killing the apostate Jew, *Chronique de Baudouin d'Avesnes*, 1473–1480, London, British Library MS Royal 18 E V, fol. 232r, www.bl.co.uk (images of medieval manuscripts)



Fig. 6. Mattathias killing apostate Jews (detail), *Bible Historiale*, 1431, Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek Ms 9018–9019, fol. 17r, www.kbr.be (digitised manuscripts)



Fig. 7. Mattathias killing the apostate Jew, Judas's trade of thirty pieces of silver (detail), Bible Moralisée, fourteenth century, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Ms Français 167, fol. 225v, gallica.bnf.fr (Bibliothèque Nationale de France)



Fig. 8. Heliodorus in the Temple (detail), *Bible historiale*, ca. 1430, The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek MS 78 D 38 II, fol. 84v, manuscripts.kb.nl (byvanck database)

The depiction of a Host in the miniature of the Dutch Bible Historiale is only partially accounted for in the commentaries in the *Bible Moralisée*. Just as Judas traded or sacrificed Christ (depicted as the Host) for money, so did the apostate Jew trade his adherence to Jewish law for adherence to the pagan oppressor in order to live comfortably under the rule of the Seleucid king. This typology explains the significance of the apostate Jew in the Bible historiale, but it does not fully explain why the artist swapped a sacrificial pig for the Body of Christ in this Old Testament miniature.

Eucharistic piety and host desecration

The late Middle Ages in Western Europe are characterised by a focus on the Eucharist as the most important sacrament and core aspect of Christian liturgy.³⁴ Several historical events contributed to a heightened focus on the Eucharist, such as

³⁴ The complex history of the Eucharist has been excellently analysed by Miri Rubin. See Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi. The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); J.C. Snoek, *Medieval Piety from Relics to the Eucharist: A Process of Mutual Interaction* (Leiden: Brill, 1995). More recent books on this topic are: *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages*, eds. Ian Levy, Gary Macy, Kristen Van Audall (Leiden: Brill, 2011). For the relationship between the Eucharist and medieval art and objects see: Caroline Walker Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes: Devotional Objects in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2020), especially chapter 3, pp. 129–148.

the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which confirmed the doctrine of the transubstantiation for the Catholic Church. But more importantly, the introduction of the feast of *Corpus Christi* in thirteenth-century Liège contributed to this rise of Eucharistic piety. This liturgical feast day celebrating the Host as the Body of Christ spread rapidly across Western Europe.³⁵ Legends of Host-miracles correlate with the instigation of *Corpus Christi* and tell, for example, about spontaneously bleeding Hosts or miracles in which a Christ child or crucifix magically appears from the Host. In other miracles, the presence of the Host ignited changes or unusual behaviour in humans, natural elements and animals nearby.³⁶ A third category of Eucharistic miracles is at the core of the iconography in question: the appearance of blood to an abuser of the Host. In nearly all of these miracles, the abusers were Jews. In the 1370 Brussels *Miracle of Sacrament*, several Hosts miraculously started to bleed, after a group of Jews confiscated them and deliberately stabbed and abused the pieces of unleavened bread.³⁷ A sixteenth century panel from the Southern Low Countries illustrates the core narrative of this miracle, accompanied by a depiction of an enthroned God holding a crucifix containing three of the miraculous Hosts (fig. 9). In the lower tier of the panel, a group of five Jews are stabbing multiple hosts, while two Jews have already fallen to the ground. These Host desecration miracles follow the medieval trope of viewing Jews as “Christ killers,”³⁸ an act first committed in the Passion that continued in the present-day maltreatment of the Host. However, in the case of the Dutch Bible Historiale, this maltreatment of the Host was prefigured in the narrative of Mattathias killing the apostate Jew.

As the Brussels *Miracle of Sacrament* illustrates, stories about Host desecrations circulated in the Low Countries of the late Middle Ages and could well explain why the artist swapped the pig for the Host in the Dutch Bible Historiale. A number of sources indicate that, despite the lack of Host-desecration legends in the Northern Netherlands, narratives about them circulated in the region. Several Dutch songs about the 1453 Host-desecration of Wrocław and the Brussels *Miracle of Sacrament* were written down in the city of Deventer and retellings in Latin were published in a preaching aid called the *Speculum Exemplorum*, also printed in fifteenth-century

Also see the catalogue of the 2014 exhibition in the Morgan library: Roger S. Wieck, *Illuminating the Faith: The Eucharist in Medieval Life and Art* (New York: Scala, 2014).

³⁵ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 164–210; Walker Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes*, 133.

³⁶ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 118.

³⁷ Luc Dequeker, *Het Sakrament van Mirakel: Jodenhaat in de Middeleeuwen* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2000).

³⁸ For an extensive analysis of how the medieval Jews were held responsible of Christ’s death see Jeremy Cohen, *Christ Killers. The Jews and the Passion: from the Bible to the Big Screen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Also see Rubin, “Gentile Tales.” A recent study on legends of ritual murder, or “blood libels,” also sheds light on the complex dynamics in the utilisation of Jews in Eucharistic miracle-narratives. See Magda Teter, *Blood Libel. On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth* (London: Harvard University Press, 2020).

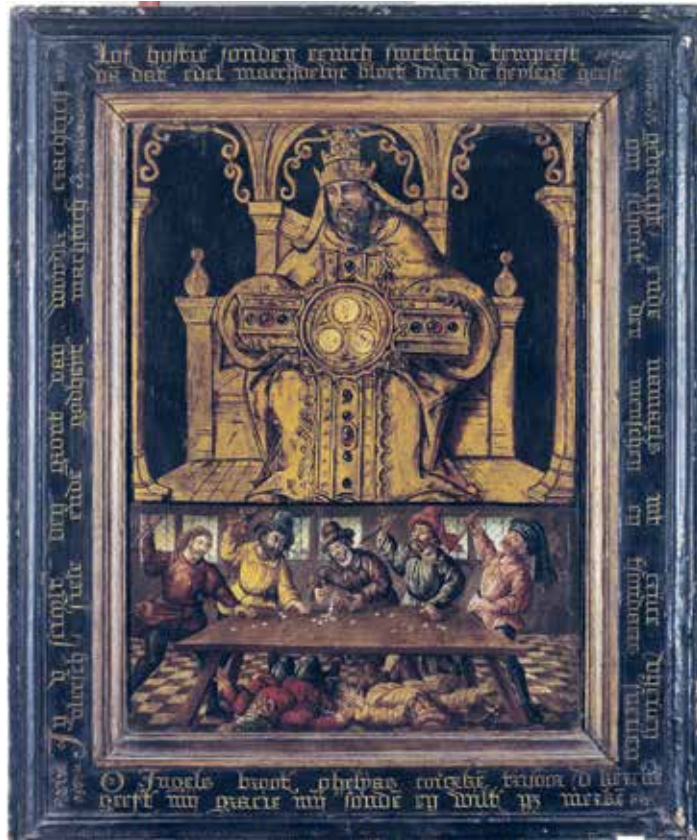


Fig. 9. Brussels Host Desecration Miracle (detail), oil on panel, second half of the sixteenth century, Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent ABM s463, photo: Ruben de Heer, adlib catharijneconvent.nl

Deventer. In one of the Dutch songs, the retelling of a Host-desecration miracle is preceded by an introductory stanza which links the betrayal by Judas and resurrection of Christ to everlasting Jewish shame and the solace of Christianity.³⁹ These retellings of the Host desecrations thus circulated in the Northern Netherlands through the highly influential Modern Devotion, as this pious movement (with a focus on the Eucharist), originated in the city of Deventer.⁴⁰

³⁹ Hermina Joldersma, "Specific or Generic «Gentile Tale»? Sources on the Breslau Host Desecration (1453) Reconsidered," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 95 (2004): 23.

⁴⁰ *De Moderne Devotie: Spiritualiteit en cultuur vanaf de late Middeleeuwen*, eds. Anna Dlabacová, Rijcklof Hofman, Wendy Litjes (Zwolle: Wbooks, 2018); Wybren Scheepma, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The Modern Devotion, the Canonesses of Windesheim, and their Writings* (Martlesham: Woodridge Boydell, 2004).

Both miniatures were made in the fifteenth century, a time in which Eucharistic piety reached its peak, as well as the prosecution, murder and expelling of Jews in many European cities and regions, often as a result of such Eucharistic blood-miracles or blood libels.⁴¹ The purpose of these tales were not primarily intended to incite aggression towards Jews. As historian Miri Rubin writes, “the Host desecration tale was told by Christians, to Christians, to make Christians act and redefine that which made them Christian.”⁴² By preparing the reader through the repentance story of Heliodorus, the scribe and artist put emphasis on proper sacrifice and warns the reader not to offer the Body of Christ to pagan gods like the Jew did, as this is a form of apostasy for which you could be killed by zealots.

It is ironical that in the case of the miniature of Mattathias killing the Jew, the artist conflated the apostasy of Old Testament and contemporaneous Jews through a biblical narrative that itself proves problematic, as the important aspect in the Books of the Maccabees is adherence to Mosaic law, which Christians themselves had abandoned. The legacy of the Maccabees and the miniature in question show that medieval Christians shaped and used the Books of the Maccabees according to their needs, whether it is to compel Christians to partake in a crusade or to educate, both on the proper handling of the Eucharist and the ubiquitous Jewish maltreatment of the Body of Christ. The Jewishness of the Maccabean soldiers and martyrs was not considered negative,⁴³ but the miniature in the Dutch Bible Historiale tells of continuous Jewish malevolence among some, or many of them.

SUMMARY

In a fifteenth century Dutch miniature, the depiction of the Body of Christ as a Host and held by a Jew raises many questions. The biblical narrative concerning Mattathias' killing of a Jew from the book of Maccabees has been textually and visually interpreted by Christians throughout the Middle Ages. This paper assesses the unique inclusion of a Host in this fifteenth century Northern Netherlandish History Bible. Through comparative iconographical research, touching upon anti-Judaism, zealotry and the Crusades, the confusing detail in the miniature will be explained and interpreted.

⁴¹ The history of Medieval antisemitism and the expelling of Jews is far more complex than just the rise of Eucharistic miracles that incorporated Jews as aggressors. Many more theological, cultural and socio-economic factors contributed to heightened aggression towards Jews. For a concise overview see Mitchell Merback, *Pilgrimage and Pogrom: Violence, Memory, and Visual Culture at the Host-Miracle Shrines of Germany and Austria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Rubin, “Gentile Tales.”

⁴² Rubin, “Gentile Tales,” 5.

⁴³ Joselyn-Siemiatkoski, *Christian Memories of the Maccabean Martyrs*, 79.