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(EN)GENDERING EVIL: SINFUL CONCEPTIONS OF THE ANTICHRIST IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND THE REFORMATION

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Human, All Too Human: Sexual Sin and the Origins of the Antichrist

In popular medieval versions of the Antichrist story, most of which are embedded in apocalyptic narratives or predictions, the Antichrist's origins and life parallel those of Jesus of Nazareth in the form of an evil parody: the Incarnation turned upside down. A central feature of these stories is the Antichrist's birth, usually from the union of a (Jewish) girl with her father or with the devil. Thus, incest or a diabolical origin is substituted for the immaculate conception, and the origin of absolute sin and absolute evil incarnate is traced to the womb of a woman. Making a woman responsible for the reign of Antichrist conforms to and confirms a number of very traditional ideas about sexual sin, female lust, and the origin of evil in the world -- in the line of Eve, Delilah, Jezebel, even Pandora (all beloved motifs of medieval art and theology).

As the concerns and priorities of Protestant reformers and evangelically-oriented common people began to shape religious discourse, including visions of the fast-approaching end, depictions of Antichrist changed accordingly. In his most recent book, Bernard McGinn has provided a detailed genealogy of the traditional Antichrist legend of the Middle Ages. In this tradition, Antichrist is understood as an evil human analogue of Christ. It is based more on the fourth-century *Tiburtine Sybil* and the seventh-century *Revelations* of Pseudo-Methodius than on Biblical sources.¹ When the Bible became the central focus of authority of the reformers, such legends were quickly deflated and lost currency among the educated.² The Antichrist legend also lost its moral genealogy, which was transferred to more threatening foes: the See of Rome and the pope. Thus, Rome as Babylon and the papacy as the Great Whore, in itself a complex gendering, became the new focus of gendered conceptions of evil. Sexual sin as a corrupt origin gives way to sexual misconduct as an ongoing evil practice. Increased emphasis on Biblical texts rather than glosses and historiated Bibles seems to have played a role in ending the

¹ For the Jewish and Biblical traditions and their interpretation by the early Church, see Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996/1994), 9-78.

² See Andrew Go, *The Red Jews: Antisemitism in an Apocalyptic Age, 1200-1600* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), on Agricola and Luther's attitude toward various medieval tales, including that of the Red Jews, 155-159.

traditional tale concerning the evil origins and role of Antichrist; while Protestant misgivings and hesitancy about the cult of Mary also help to explain the absence, in the Reformation era, of parodistic inversions of the immaculate conception.

In chapter 13 of Revelation a beast emerges from the sea. It is a figurative being, with seven heads and ten horns, built like a leopard, with feet like a bear's and the mouth of a lion. Deluded by its power, people worship it. In a parody of the Hebrew blessing-question "Who is like the Lord?" these people cry "Who is like the Beast? Who can fight against it?", and then receive its mark on their hands and forehead. The heads and horns suggest that it is the same as the similarly endowed beast on which the Great Whore of Babylon rides in Rev. 17. The beast is decoded allegorically in Rev. 17:9-14: the seven heads are seven hills, the ten horns are ten kings, and so on. The mixed and chaotic imagery of these passages stands in stark contrast to the relatively simple and straightforward ways in which the Apocalypse was depicted in medieval texts and images designed for a wider, lay audience. In these interpretive simplifications, if there is a beast, it is merely the one on which the Great Whore of Babylon rides (Rev. 17). The *first* appearance of the Beast (namely in Rev. 13) is usually, even conventionally subsumed into an extra-Biblical story concerning a figure invented in late antiquity: the Antichrist. His name is drawn from the first letter of John (2:18), not from Revelation, and he is the Liar, who denies the Father and the Son. In one important Christian exegetical tradition, which merges the legend with the letter, beginning in late antiquity, Antichrist is a human being who marks his followers on their hands and feet; he is the one they worship. In this way, the disjunction between the two descriptions of the beast of Revelation -- one says "like a leopard," the other says "scarlet" -- is suppressed and the first version is replaced by a concrete human being -- albeit an exceptionally evil one whose power also comes from the dragon, i.e., Satan.

In her book *Not of Woman Born: Representations of Caesarean Birth in Medieval and Renaissance Culture*, Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski discusses the birth of Antichrist in medieval texts and especially in illustrations.³ Antichrist's birth, usually from a sinful union, and often by Caesarean section, functions as an inversion of Christ's immaculate conception and birth. Blumenfeld-Kosinski focuses on male oppression of women, misogyny and monopolization of childbirth, especially when Caesarean section was involved. While these observations are valid and important so far as they go, her technical-medical agenda obscures crucial elements of the popular medieval legend of Antichrist and his sinful origins. Although she addresses the rich Antichrist tradition,⁴ her interest is largely confined to the place and perception of Caesarean section in medieval culture. A broader contextual approach to the late-medieval sources and a more focused theoretical approach promise to provide richer results. First, vernacular Antichrist books were a nexus of apocalyptic angst and a rare window into the 15th century world of the literate townsfolk who made, bought, and read them. Second, they conveyed far more than a misogynistic view of Antichrist's origins. Gender analysis, attention to ethnicity and "otherness," and an examination of the precise categories of sin involved in Antichrist's birth are required to make sense of this highly coded and morally fraught material from the infancy of the printing press.

Gerda Lerner has formulated the gendered core of sexual relations under patriarchy as follows: "[I]n the story of the Fall, woman and, more specifically, female sexuality became the

³ *Not of Woman Born: Representations of Caesarean Birth in Medieval and Renaissance Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 125-142.

⁴ See Andrew Gow, "The Jewish Antichrist in Medieval and Early Modern Germany," in *Medieval Encounters* 2, 3 (1996), 249-285; Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist*.

symbol of human weakness and the source of evil.”⁵ The free and open sexuality that she claims characterized the fertility-goddesses of pre-monotheistic religions -- a goddess represented by the snake of the Edenic tale -- was prohibited to “fallen” woman; her sexuality was to find expression only in motherhood, subordinate to her husband and bearing children in pain.⁶ The “fornication” that characterized the Great Whore of Babylon (Rev. 17) functions as a reference to pagan sexuality from within the framework of monotheistic patriarchy. Following Lerner, then, we can suggest that the extra-Biblical mother of Antichrist, who is characterized by her transgressive, illicit sexuality, was created in the shadow of the Biblical ur-whore. Patriarchal figurations of gender and sexual morality were instrumental in shaping medieval apocalyptic, especially in its popular forms.

However, it is not my intent to argue for the existence of an essentialist, ahistorical, unchanging state of patriarchy in western culture since Biblical times. Rather, patriarchal patterns and models that were not merely available, but possessed moral and cultural authority were used and reused in varying contexts to produce and reproduce gender roles, gendered conceptions of sin and evil, and gendered accounts of the past, present, and apocalyptic future. Fifteenth-century versions of Antichrist’s conception and birth represent an apocalyptic high point in the gendering of evil. The developing proto-bourgeois economies of the cities in which Antichrist blockbooks, historiated Bibles and other purveyors of the Antichrist legend were printed and consumed provide a certain amount of socio-economic context for my materials: burgher households, growing wealthy and ever more independent under the rule of a legally and economically powerful paterfamilias, as Herman Rebel has argued for the early modern period as a whole, intensify the reach and power of patriarchy at the household level with dire structural and personal consequences for its subaltern members. Comparable context for the Reformation era is provided by Lyndal Roper’s book *Holy Household: Women and the Reformation of Morals at Augsburg*⁷, in which she argues that Reformation doctrine as applied to women’s personal and family roles limited their options and helped intensify patriarchy in the burgher household.

Over the course of the Middle Ages, the negative moral content concerning the conception and birth of the Antichrist intensified and became increasingly specific. The pre-medieval Tiburtine Sybil had made popular the notion that Antichrist would be Jewish.⁸ However, there was more to the humanity of the Antichrist than Jewishness, which might be diabolical but was also the identity of the prophets, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. Hrabanus Maurus brought Antichrist’s Jewish birth and its sinfulness into direct association:

Antichristus est venturus permitente domino
In Babilonia nascetur conceptus de diabolo
Dan de tribu erit ortus ex Ebreorum populo.

⁵ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 201.

⁶ Lerner, 196.

⁷ Lyndal Roper, *Holy Household: Women and the Reformation of Morals at Augsburg* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁸ See Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979; see his translation of the relative passage on 49-50); see also his *Antichrist*, 38ff and 57-63, esp. 59 and n. 12 (296). Irenaeus was one of the first to insist on the Jewish origins of Antichrist, drawing on material from the Hebrew Bible that identified the tribe of Dan as a source of ultimate evil (Gen. 49:17, Lev. 24:10-11; Deut. 33:22; I Kings 12:29; Judges 18:11-31; Jer 8:16-17).

“Antichrist will come when God allows it/In Babylon he will be born, conceived by the Devil/He will go forth from the tribe of Dan, from among the Hebrew people.” Adso drew from this tradition and others when he wrote that the Antichrist

[...] will be born as the result of sexual intercourse of his mother father, like other men, and not, as some say, from a virgin alone. But he will be conceived entirely in sin [Ps. 23:3], he will be engendered in sin, and he will be born in sin [John 9:34]. At the very beginning of his conception, the devil will enter with him into his mother’s womb, and by the devil’s strength he will be fostered and protected in his mother’s womb, and the devil’s strength will be with him always. And just as the Holy Ghost came into the womb of the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ and covered her with his strength and filled her with divinity, so that she conceived from the Holy Ghost and what was born was divine and holy [Luke 1:35], so also the devil will go down into the womb of the Antichrist’s mother and fill her completely, possess her inside and out, so that she will conceive by man with the devil’s assistance, and what is born will be completely foul, completely evil, completely ruined.⁹

By the tenth century, then, a complete parodistic inversion of the birth of Christ had been invented as a necessary parallel to the legend of Antichrist understood as a human being, albeit a particularly evil one, who would appear toward the end of time to rule the world and persecute the true church. The devil takes the place of the Holy Spirit, and all the rest follows. Adso’s insistence that Antichrist must be born from the union of two human beings keeps the parallel’s with Jesus’ immaculate conception from becoming too strong: Jesus was conceived without an actual physical union, whereas the Antichrist is the result of an especially sinful union. The sinfulness of his conception, his “engendering” (by which I mean both his humanation as a male born of a sinful woman and his growth in utero), and his birth are necessary to this anti-biography. The further history of the Antichrist story in the west until the Reformation depends upon this insistence on a sinful human conception, a sexual event with a strong negative charge.

Hildegard of Bingen, rarely at a loss for words when confronting evil or wrong-doers, is drawn in by Adso’s logic: Antichrist must be born of a sinful physical union. She constructs a genealogy of evil that begins with the sexual misdeeds of Antichrist’s mother. Even as a girl she is led astray by the devil, and leads a life of vice and dissolution. Hildegard’s highly gendered narrative of evil origins climaxes in her depiction of Antichrist’s conception: he will be conceived in passionate fornication and his mother will not even know who his father is. In a perverse parody of the immaculate conception, Antichrist’s mother then claims that she has known no man and people will believe her claims and call her holy.¹⁰ Antichrist’s evil nature is not merely the result of diabolical influence, it is also the result of perverse and excessive female sexuality.

Adso’s view defined the Antichrist tradition in the Middle Ages. Honorius Augustodunensis’ spiritual compendium, the *Elucidarium*, drew heavily on Adso. This Latin work of the early twelfth century was translated into many vernaculars and exerted a wide-ranging and long-lasting influence.¹¹ The term “Endkrist” first shows up in a German translation

⁹ John Wright, trans., *The Play of Antichrist* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1967), quoted from appended translation of the *Libellus*.

¹⁰ *Scivias*. 2 vols. Ed. Angela Carlevaris and Adelgundis Fuhrkotter (Turnhout: Brepols, 1978), vol. II, 589-90.

¹¹ See Yves Lefevre, *L’Elucidarium et les Lucidaires* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1954).

of the *Elucidarium* of the late twelfth century.¹² In dialogue, we learn that the Antichrist was born in “magna Babylonia” of a prostitute from the tribe of Dan; he was already filled with the devil in his mother’s womb; and was raised in “Chorozaim” (Khorasan) by evil sorcerers. Not merely a sinful woman, as in Hildegard’s version, but a prostitute, Antichrist’s mother is the ground of evil. Sexual vice is a gendered source of evil. The prostitute-mother motif of the *Elucidarium* continues through the 15th century.

Berengier’s thirteenth-century French version of the Antichrist legend *De l’avenement Antechrist*, based loosely on the *Elucidarium*, has the Antichrist conceived by a prostitute of the tribe of Dan, who commits incest with her father. The sinful perversity of Antichrist’s family, Berengier says, explains why the son of such a union grows into a “cruel dragon.”¹³ Berengier also comments on the sharp contrast between the virgin birth of Jesus and the perverse conception of Antichrist. The urban environment had come, by Berengier’s time, to play a much larger role in the life of letters and learning than at the time of Adso or Hildegard. Urban reality now added a significant element to the mix: prostitution, a quintessentially urban phenomenon, is once again available as a recognizable social evil and can be used to heighten the sinfulness of Antichrist’s conception. This imagery is already and “for all time” authorized by her foremother, the mother of all whores, the Great Whore of Babylon.

The only surviving medieval French Antichrist play is *Le Jour du Jugement* of circa 1330. In this vernacular drama, a devil fathers a child on a whore at Babylon, a Jewess from the tribe of Dan. The child is Antichrist. The speeches of the devils and of the mother “particularly emphasize that [...] the mother is a Jew of the tribe of Dan.”¹⁴ Negative ethnic and gender connotations help compose this portrait of evil, which repeats the prostitute-mother motif of the *Elucidarium* and insists on Antichrist’s Jewishness. Ever since Joshua Trachtenberg published his magisterial if somewhat impressionistic study *The Devil and the Jews* during the second World War, it has been unnecessary to insist on the Devil’s association with Jews in the medieval popular mind.

Another influential encyclopedia, one of the main sources of later popular Antichrist tales, was the *Compendium theologiae veritatis*, written around 1260 by the Strasbourg Dominican Hugo Ripelin.¹⁵ Antichrist was conceived by human parents, but after his conception, the devil entered his mother’s uterus. Thus Antichrist was born, nurtured, and grew up under the devil’s influence and by his devices.¹⁶

The 14th-century Velislaus illustrated Bible, a huge codex made at Prague, drew on the *Compendium* for its depiction of Antichrist’s birth -- 12 of its 747 drawings are devoted to this topic [Figure 1]. The scene showing the conception, a tame affair by comparison with later woodcut images, is crowned by a Latin text cited from the *Compendium*. The addition of

¹² Karl Schorbach, *Studien über das deutsche Volksbuch “Lucidarius” und seine Bearbeitungen in fremden Sprachen* (Strasbourg: Karl Trubner, 1894), 7.

¹³ E. Wallberg, ed., *Deux versions inédites de la légende de l’Antechrist en vers français du XIIIe siècle* (Lund: Gleerup, 1928), lines 34-35.

¹⁴ Richard Kenneth Emmerson, *Antichrist in the Middle Ages: A Study of Medieval Apocalypticism, Art, and Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 174.

¹⁵ See Georg Steer, *Hugo Ripelin von Strassburg: Zur Rezeptions- und Wirkungsgeschichte des ‘Compendium theologiae veritatis’ im deutschen Spätmittelalter* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1981); and in the absence of a critical edition, see the version in Borgnet’s edition of the complete works of Albertus Magnus (Paris, 1895), vol. 34, 241ff.

¹⁶ “Hic ex parentum seminibus concipietur: sed post conceptum descendet spiritus malignus in matris uterum, cujus virtute et operatione deinceps puer nascetur, aletur, adolescet...”

diabolical midwives beside the labouring mother of Antichrist adds a whiff of sulphur.¹⁷ Bernard McGinn notes that this is the first depiction of Antichrist's conception and birth. However, McGinn comments no further on this theme, nor on its rich development in fifteenth-century historiated Bibles and the Antichrist blockbooks, except to notice their extraordinarily detailed account of Antichrist's life, and then passes on.

Rather more learned understandings of the Antichrist figure continued, beside the norm of popular theology, into the later Middle Ages. John Wyclif and Jan Hus both referred to the papacy and/or the pope as Antichrist for what they saw as its "anti-Christian" way of life and management of the Church. To Wyclif, the actions of popes, especially their use of titles and assumption of worldly dignities, teach us that they are Antichrists. Their denunciations, set in the language of their times yet motivated by their adherence to apostolic models and Gospel precepts,¹⁸ anticipated Luther's later polemical use of the Antichrist persona. In the fifteenth century, this kind of imagery seems to have remained the exclusive preserve of sharp critics of the Church hierarchy. Literate layfolk read more popular non-theological genres, some of them broadly exegetical in nature, and these tended to avoid such controversial stances.

Medieval texts ranging from learned treatises for the educated through Latin encyclopaediae and compendia to vernacular legends and plays were a large portion of the stream of extra-Biblical material that went into the Antichrist tradition. The culmination of the medieval Antichrist legend comes in the 15th century with the so-called Antichrist books, prophesies of the End that drew their Biblical narratives from general compilations such as the *Compendium* and the *Elucidarium*, but focus on the Antichrist and his apocalyptic role. The oldest surviving manuscript dates to 1430.¹⁹ There are eight manuscripts extant.²⁰ These blockbooks are, I would like to suggest, part of a broader late-medieval trajectory. To a Huizinga, or perhaps even to a Luther, this tendency would seem to reside in a "decadent" interest in fantastical extra-Biblical materials and sources. From the perspective of the producers and buyers of Antichrist blockbooks, however, the attraction of extra-Biblical stories was hardly some putative air of fin-de-siecle perversity, but rather their affiliation with well-known and authoritative traditions that interpreted Biblical material through typically medieval lenses. The acceleration and heightening of late-medieval contents -- especially apocalyptic contents -- inherent in the compressed, schematic illustrations and short texts of early printed books helps to explain their crude and vibrant urgency. They were intended for a vernacular-reading audience, most of whom would have been urban layfolk whose familiarity with the text of the Bible could not have surpassed their knowledge of traditional legends. For example, a 1498 Delft edition of the popular fifteenth-century devotional work known as the *sielen trost* reassures the reader that it is "drawn from many good books, such as the Passion-books of the Bible, the *Historia Scholastica*, that is the Mirror of History, and confirmed by the chronicles, the books of the fathers and the

¹⁷ Karl Stejskal, ed., 2 vols. *Velislai biblia picta* (Prague: Sumptibus Pragopress, 1970); fol. 130b.

¹⁸ See John Wyclif, *Select English Works of John Wyclif* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1871), 342-343, in which Wyclif writes the true vicar of Christ should be the poorest and meekest of all men, which is how Peter lived; see also Heiko A. Oberman, "Hus und Luther: Der Antichrist und die zweite reformatorische Entdeckung," in *Jan Hus: Zwischen Zeiten, Volkern, Konfessionen*, ed. Ferdinand Seibt (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1997), 319-346.

¹⁹ Peter Christoph Burger, "Endzeiterwartungen" in *Der Antichrist: Kommentarband zum Faksimile der ersten typographischen Ausgabe eines unbekanntem Strassburger Druckers, um 1480* ed. Friedrich Wittig Verlag (Hamburg, 1979) 18-78, 18.

²⁰ Burger, "Endzeiterwartungen," 19.

patristic collections and also from many other good books.”²¹ This text, which was a favourite in the Netherlands and lower Rhineland, was a vernacular Bible lectionary salted with all manner of stories and tales; its sources were all authorized by tradition, but were of divergent provenance. The Biblical material and interpretations it contained were conventional and familiar.

The first known blockbook was published as early as 1450 with woodcut pictures and handwritten text. This so-called chiroxylographic blockbook is entitled *Der Antichrist*, and has been published in facsimile, accompanied by a volume of commentary, from the copy in the Bibliothek Otto Schafer (Schweinfurt).²² A xylographic edition (text and images are woodcuts: Nuremberg, 1472) and a number of typographically printed editions (e.g., the Strasbourg *Antichrist* of 1480 with woodcut illustrations²³) are also known.²⁴ A late edition appeared at Erfurt in 1516. The text of these early printed versions is in essence identical.²⁵ First, the father of the Antichrist is depicted “courting his own natural daughter in fleshly lust. She submits to him and becomes pregnant with the Antichrist.”²⁶ Next, “the Antichrist is conceived in his mother’s womb by the power of the Devil who leads him and fills him with all evil and wickedness. A father sleeps with his daughter; he is the father of the Antichrist.”²⁷ (Figure 2) The image suggests that she is a lustful participant, and agent; her left arm is around the back of the male figure, holding him to her.

The concrete details are fleshed out as never before; the illustrations drive home the sinful nature of his conception in graphic detail: an old man is depicted in bed with a young woman, who is identified in the caption as his daughter. The powerful theme of incest was the topic of

²¹ *Sielentroest* [Delft: H. Eckert van Hombergh, c. 1498] (UB Utrecht, F. 2^o. 46); fol. ii: Hier begint die tafel van desen boeck welc is geheten d[ie?] sielen troest ende is ghetogen wt menighen goeden boecken. Als wt die bibel passionael wt die scolastica historia dat is wt dat spighel der historien Ende is ghvesticht wt die cronicken wt dat vader boec. ende wt den vaderen collacie. ende oeck mede wt veel anderen goeden boecken...

²² Theodore Musper, ed. *Der Antichrist und die funfzehn Zeichen vor dem Jungsten Gericht* (Munich: Prestel, 1970), 2 vols.

²³ For the text, see *Der Antichrist: Faksimile der ersten typographischen Ausgabe* (Hamburg, 1979). The text has been rendered in modern German by Karin Boveland in the companion volume (as above).

²⁴ Another fifteenth-century xylographic version, undated and without place of publication, can be added to the list: *Enndtkrist: Hie hebet sich ann von dem Enndkrist* (title incomplete), 27 sheets in-folio; and another undated typographic edition, without place of publication, of 20 sheets, also in-folio. Another edition came out at Strasbourg in-quarto, published by Hupfuff, undated; there is also a late Erfurt edition by Hans Maler (Maller), in-quarto, typographic, of 1516: Theodor Oswald Weigel, *Verzeichnis der Xylographischen Bucher des XV Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig, 1856), 6.

²⁵ An English edition, published by the astute businessman Wynkyn de Worde, begins with the words *The Byrth and Lyfe of the Moost False and Deceyfull Antechryste*. This version appeared around 1520. It was based on an edition published as early as 1505, and was derived at least in part from the German *Antichrist*-books. The other sources of the English text are the *Livre de Auctorites de Sainctes Docteurs: Touchant de L’Advenement et du mauvais Antechrist* (Lyons, Wynkyn de Worde, 1505). See Joseph M. Ricke’s PhD thesis “The Antichrist *Vita* at the End of the Middle Ages: An Edition of The Byrth and Lyfe of the Moost False and Deceyfull Antechryst” (Houston: Rice University, 1982). Ricke’s edition is from the sole surviving print, preserved at Cambridge University Library, Syn. 7.52.17.

²⁶ *Antichrist 1480*: fol. 2, 1: “Hye sitzet des Enndkristis vatter und wirbet umb synn lipliche dochter in uppickeit/die ime als denn gefolgigk wirt/und wirt des enndkristis swannger.”

²⁷ *Antichrist 1480*: fol. 3, b: “Hye wirt der Enndkrist empfangen in muter leib durch die kraft des teuffls der in furet/und erfullet alles ubels und aller poshait/Und ain vater beschlaft sein tochter. Und der selv ist des Enndkrist vater.”

numerous prohibitions and moral narratives in the Hebrew Bible.²⁸ Indeed, as one commentator has recently argued, the Levitical rules against incest and other “mixtures” (Lev. 18 and 20) probably exercised more influence on Western law and morality than any other Biblical rules.²⁹ These prohibitions also helped form and inform medieval morality. Now incest is added to the list of sins that frame Antichrist’s conception. Antichrist’s mother is thus doubly evil: an unmarried fornicator and incestuous.

The evil nature of Antichrist is thus guaranteed and heightened by the sinful nature of his conception: his wicked mother *consents* to her father’s incestuous blandishments. She is sexually at fault for consenting to break one of the oldest and strictest sexual prohibitions. Her sinful sexuality is one of the sources of the sexually charged evil that defines Antichrist; the other source is the influence of the devil. In these books, the Antichrist is born by Caesarian section, an ancient motif that is associated with supernatural influence and throughout the Middle Ages either with good fortune and a happy destiny or with evil origins and a horrific fate.³⁰

These late-medieval books, intended in the first instance both for readers of the vernacular and for “unsophisticated people, of whom many may have been illiterate or semi-literate”³¹, set the tone for popular ideas concerning Antichrist at least until the time of the Reformation. The last German printing of 1516 conveniently closes this chapter in the Antichrist legend. The scene shifts dramatically when Luther begins to call the papacy Antichrist, replicating the learned tradition of a corporate Antichrist that had existed alongside the personal vision all through the Middle Ages and had been used by both Wyclif and Hus in a similar fashion. The difference, of course, is that Luther’s accusations (or rather, his analysis of evil and its manifestation in the world) were broadcast via printing and in the vernacular to a much more heterogeneous audience than any theologian had reached since Paul wrote his Epistles.

Precisely the norm of Biblical text operated as a defining mechanism that recentered authority -- away from tradition, away from legend, and in Scripture. This recentering places at centre stage once again the gendered conceptions of evil in Revelation that helped to give rise to the legend of Antichrist’s conception and birth. This is a major shift away from Antichrist and toward Scriptural figures such as the Beast and the Great Whore of Babylon. In Protestant propaganda, Antichrist himself plays a very different role, and is largely absent from imagery and arguments that draw directly on biblical texts. Only when the pope himself was depicted as a man of sin were traditional features of Antichrist used for shock effect. When Cranach illustrated Luther’s German New Testament (September Testament) in 1522, he depicted not the Antichrist or his mother, but the Whore of Babylon of Revelation 17, clad in purple and scarlet, bedizened with gold and jewels and pearls, holding a golden cup full of obscenities and the

²⁸ See Athalya Brenner, “On Incest,” in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, Athalya Brenner, ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 113-138, esp 114ff and 119ff; Calum M. Carmichael, *Law, Legend, and Incest in the Bible: Leviticus 18-20* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997).

²⁹ Carmichael, *Law, Legend, and Incest*, 14ff. However, note that Leviticus contains no *explicit* rule against a father’s sexual advances on his daughter (7-8, 17); rather the rule is couched as a daughter’s offense against her father -- thus making such an offense the fault or responsibility of the daughter. Carmichael sees the fragmentary nature of these prohibitions as evidence that these laws were written not in response to contemporary problems or cases, but as a series of responses to events or issues in the historical traditions of Israel, and for the purpose of creating for the nation of Israel its own ancient legal traditions, its laws explicating the epics of the past (9-10). For the classic statement of the anthropological-biological analysis of incest, see Emil Durkheim, *La Prohibition de l’Inceste et ses Origines* (Paris, 1897); see also the comprehensive thematic study by W. Arens, *The Original Sin: Incest and its Meanings* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

³⁰ Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born*, 1-3.

³¹ Rudolf Hirsch, *Printing, Selling, and Reading: 1450-1550* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1974), 4.

foulness of her fornication, riding a seven-headed beast. His woodcut generally follows the Biblical text. However, in the first edition, she is also wearing the triple tiara of the papacy [Figure 3].³² The sexual charge of evil, previously associated in popular legend with the mother of Antichrist, is diverted to the lightning rod of the papacy in this and many similar images and in Luther's ringing condemnation of the papacy as the Great Whore, the mother of iniquity with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication. The papacy is thus gendered female, and its sins are specifically the traditional female sexual sins of lust, of fornication. The male position of moral superiority assumed by the authors of the New Testament (e.g., Paul) and by the Fathers (e.g. Augustine) with regard to female sexuality is thus faithfully reproduced, with inevitable variations, by the evangelical reformers, whose concern with apostolic purity was moral as well as textual. The commentary "The Woman you saw is the great city that holds sway over the kings of the earth" (Rev. 17:18) can only have strengthened Luther's sense that Rome was that city and that whore, and was about to fall, which related the prophesy of Revelation to his own immediate time.

On the other hand, the *Passional Christi et Antichristi* of May 1521, consisting of thirteen pairs of woodcuts by Lucas Cranach, contains no overt references to gendered forms of evil or sexual sin. Rather, the key passages for this view of Antichrist, for Luther and for many other reforming preachers were not drawn from Revelation but from 2 Thess. 2: the Enemy who comes at the end of time is a "man of sin," the "son of perdition." This transcendentalizes ultimate evil, dehumanizes it and takes it out of the realm of human sexual politics.³³ Evil is more powerful than mere humans. Thus, the decoupling of sinful sexuality from the Antichrist understood as a flesh-and-blood human being might reflect a step toward dissolving the age-old association of women with the origins and expressions of sin. If anything, Lutheran and other reforming traditions adopted the vibrant medieval topos of clerical immorality and pointed to fornication not merely in "the Great Babylon" but in vicarages, rectories and monasteries.

The return, in other contexts, to the New Testament version of gendered evil, in which a woman whose sexual activities (i.e., fornication) defined her as evil, was at the very least a shift in the trajectory of gendered evil. The Antichrist's mother disappears -- but it is hard to imagine that the powerful associations surrounding her and Antichrist did. Although much Reformation-era writing about Antichrist stressed the "wicked man" or "man of sin" and "son of perdition" motifs from 2 Thess. 2, and the papacy as Antichrist needed no gendered antecedents, the papacy understood as the Great Whore both refutes and rides the wave created by the medieval legend of Antichrist's sinful conception and birth. Moreover, the apocalyptic connotations of this identification redirect the reader's attention from Antichrist's evil role to that of Rome, at least in Luther's gloss. In the later Middle Ages, the evil figure of Antichrist's mother expressed a normative gendered association of female sin with diabolical evil. The *Malleus maleficarum* and the actual witchcrazes bear the same relation to each other as late medieval beliefs about the diabolical nature of female sexuality and Protestant reform of marriage, celibacy, sexual behavior in general; the former is not a program for the latter, but rather a precursor, a prototype that is adopted and reconfigured to suit the uses of later generations. Indeed, the *Antichrist* books and the *Malleus* were born in much the same environment and out of the same gendered

³² See Robert Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 170-171.

³³ I am very grateful to Robin Barnes for his critique of an earlier version of this paper and have incorporated his suggestions in this passage.

understanding of sex, sin, and evil.³⁴ Neither Stone nor Clark, however, paid any attention to the Jewish identity of the medieval Antichrist, nor to the gradual disappearance of Jews from Western Europe between 1350 and 1550. Neither does gender form a part of discussions of Antichrist, while it is the constant theme of witchcraze studies. Projections of Jewish identity and gendered evil provide crucial context for understanding the shifts from the Jewish to the papal Antichrist, from the Jew in league with the Devil to the witch in Satan's service.

In the event, the evangelical insistence on Biblical text and accuracy displaced the legendary figure. Evil no longer could be said to become incarnate in a parody of Christ's humanation; rather, flesh and blood human beings were incorporated into the allegorical figure of the Great Whore in a move that appealed to the manifold authority of Scripture. Luther and Reformation propaganda turned Christian's attention from the medieval legend to the Biblical text, as in so many other areas. As on so many other occasions, Luther and Reformation culture were simultaneously pushing on the accelerator pedal of change, and stamping on the medieval brakes.

³⁴ See Lawrence Stone's comment on the simultaneous decline of the Antichrist story and the rise of witchcraft narrative and persecution: "An interesting parallel to the rise and fall of belief in a world torn between God and the angels on the one hand and the Devil and the witches on the other was the rise and fall in the belief in Antichrist." in *The Past and the Present Revisited* (London & New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), cited by Stuart Clark, *Thinking With Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 347, at the beginning of a chapter on the life and times of Antichrist.



Figure 1: Antichrist's conception and birth. Velislav Bible, Fol. 130b (second half of the fourteenth century). Reproduced from Karel Stejskal, ed., *Velislav Bible Picta* (Prague: Pragopress, 1970).



Figure 2: The Conception of Antichrist: a man impregnates his own daughter. From *Der Antichrist*, Strasbourg, ca 1480



Figure 3: Illustration to Rev. 17 from Luther's September Testament of 1522

