



The Queen and the Jews

Dynamics between Jews and their Rulers

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Go forth and see, daughters of Zion, and behold King Solomon with the crown wherewith his mother crowned him on the day of his espousals, on the day of the gladness of his heart. Words of Sponsa to the virgins (Song of Songs 3:11).

That King Solomon is crowned by his mother on his wedding day signifies [that] Ecclesia, the Holy Church, has been betrothed to Christ, to the one deity. She [...] preaches to the Jews, telling them to leave the blindness of their disbelief and to recognize Christ as true God.

Anonymous scribe, *Moralized Bible*, Paris, c. 1234¹

This illuminated biblical commentary on the Song of Songs 3:11 is found in one of the most costly Gothic masterpieces and anti-Jewish artworks of the High Middle Ages, the moralized

¹ *Moralized Bible*, Tesoro del Catedral MS s.n. II: 78r A1-2.

Bibles (fig. 1).² This manuscript, likely the third of its kind, was a royally commissioned picture Bible made in the workshops of Paris during the second quarter of the thirteenth century. Probably intended as a wedding gift for the young King Louis IX of France (r.1226-70),³ it has been called a "mirror of princes" (*Speculum principum*),⁴ a pedagogical and doctrinal model of behavior for kingly rule, and has been studied as a reflection of this king's relationship with the Jews during his reign.⁵ But what of its patroness, Queen Mother of France Blanche of Castile (r.1223-1252)? How are Jewish-queenly relations reflected in this work, and how does it mirror the behavior of this queen?

A medieval queen, of course, had many roles, but mediation was among those most significant.⁶ Traditional readings of history have called her the channel between king and heir, the nexus between king and subjects, even the dynastic link between two nations seeking alliance. Although she seldom ruled officially in her own right, medieval queens often stepped in for husbands on expedition or sons in minority. Just as Blanche interceded with religious and lay Christian communities, so too did she intervene in Jewish life and livelihood within her royal borders. Still, as queenly intercession was rarely formalized, the shrouded documentary evidence has not yet captured or characterized Jewish-queenly relationships in the Middle Ages.

Art and ritual are useful starting points. Medieval queens were concerned with shaping their dynastic memory and commemorating their families in visual and material objects, such as cathedral architecture and manuscript illumination. These objects were expressions of piety and power, often providing vivid insight into how the queen was seen, how she saw herself, and how she sought to be remembered.

The regency of Queen Blanche of Castile, for her son Louis IX of France, is an example of mediation that spanned decades, from the king's childhood to his absence on Crusade.⁷ Royal attitudes toward Jews became increasingly restrictive in northern France at this time and, while few have questioned Blanche of Castile's involvement, a number of examples indicate her mediation: royal ordinances to suppress Jewish usury in 1227, 1228, and 1230 were promulgated by the Queen Regent in the young king's name.⁸ A few years later, in the 1240s, royal efforts to investigate and censor the Talmud were reported

2 See the discussion in Robert Branner, *Manuscript Painting in Paris During the Reign of Saint Louis: A Study of Styles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

3 Daniel Weiss, *Art and Crusade in the Age of St. Louis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 67; John. Lowden, *The Making of the Bible Moralisée: Volume I: The Manuscripts* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 131.

4 James Heinlen, *The Ideology of Reform in the French Moralized Bible* (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1996), 194–95.

5 M. Cecilia Gaposchkin, "Kingship and Crusade in the First Four Moralized Bibles," in *The Capetian Century: 1214-1314*, eds. William Chester Jordan and Jenna Rebecca Phillips (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 71–112; Sara Lipton, *Images of Intolerance: The Representation of Jews and Judaism in the Bible moralisée* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

6 Theresa Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); John Carmi Parsons, "The Queen's Intercession in Thirteenth-Century England," in *Power of the Weak: Studies on Medieval Women*, eds. Jennifer Carpenter and Sally-Beth Maclean (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 147–77; Paul Strohm, "Queens as Intercessors," in *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 95–119, 99–102.

7 Lindy Grant, *Blanche of Castile, Queen of France* (London: Yale University Press, 2016); Élie Berger, *Histoire de Blanche de Castille, reine de France* (Paris: Thorin & Fils, 1895).

8 William Chester Jordan, *The French Monarchy and the Jews: From Phillip Augustus to the Last Capetians* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).

by some Hebrew accounts as the enterprise of Queen Blanche.⁹ A third instance deals with royal efforts to convert Jewish subjects via missionizing and monetary incentives,¹⁰ some of these documented while the realm lay in Blanche's hands.¹¹ Even from such documentary sources, one could argue that the hallmark of the queenship of Blanche of Castile was indeed her mediation, and no less in Jewish affairs than in any other aspect of the realm.

Additionally, like many queens of her time, Blanche invested much in the material construction of her dynastic memory, and evidence suggests that the Jewish presence in the realm played no small part.¹² Filled with representations of Jews and Judaism, these moralized Bibles are but a few of the queen's many great contributions to the Gothic arts that provide insight into her image.¹³ Much like other medieval kings, who relied on figures like King Solomon, King David, and Christ as biblical models of rulership for their role and self-representation,¹⁴ Blanche relied on biblical women, often the Virgin Mary. The mother, Queen of Heaven and mediator between heaven and earth, served well to convey expectations of the queen's duties as mediator between the king and his people. One popular medieval representation of the Virgin included scenes of her enthronement with Christ and/or her coronation by Christ in heaven – scenes that, by the largesse of the Crown, decorated the tympana of an even greater number of cathedral portals across France for townspeople and passersby to see.¹⁵ In these scenes, too, the Jewish presence could be found.

One example is in the source below (fig. 1), where we find a pair of coronation scenes relating to one biblical verse in which King Solomon is crowned by his mother Bathsheba; the text reads: *Go forth and see, daughters of Zion, and behold King Solomon with the crown wherewith his mother crowned him on the day of his espousals, on the day of the gladness of his heart* (Song of Songs 3:11). True to the biblical text, the top roundel scene depicts the coronation of King Solomon seated on his elevated throne. To the right, his mother Bathsheba, wearing the typical coif of the early thirteenth century, sits at his side to place the fleuron crown on his head. Like the biblical verse in which Solomon is crowned by his mother, the lower image, a commentary or "moralizing" roundel, represents all the necessary elements of the typical Coronation of the Virgin scene: a couple (Christ and Mary) is seated on a cushioned bench splitting center. They are flanked on either side by two figures, here by *Ecclesia* and *Synagoga*, the

9 Vikkuah Rabbeinu Yehiel miParis, ed. Samuel Grünbaum (Thorn: C. Domrowski, 1873). See discussion in Judah Galinsky, "The Different Hebrew Versions of the 'Talmud Trial' of 1240 in Paris," in *New Perspective on Jewish-Christian Relations: In Honor of David Berger*, eds. Elisheva Carlebach and Jacob J. Schacter (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 109–40; John Friedman, Jean Connell Hoff, and Robert Chazan, *The Trial of the Talmud: Paris, 1240* (Toronto: PIMS, 2012); William Chester Jordan, "Marian Devotion and the Talmud Trial of 1240," repr. in *Ideology and Royal Power in Medieval France: Kingship, Crusades and the Jews* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 61–76.

10 William Chester Jordan, *Louis IX and the Challenge of the Crusade: A Study in Rulership* (Princeton University Press repr., 2016), 155–57; Gerard Nahon, "Les ordonnances de Saint Louis sur les Juifs," in *Les nouveaux cahiers* 23 (1970): 18–35; Michael Lower, "Conversion and Saint Louis's Last Crusade," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 58 (2007): 211–31.

11 Lindy Grant, *Blanche of Castile, Queen of France* (London: Yale University Press, 2016), 197ff.

12 Judith Kogel, Patricia Stirnemann, "A Portrait of Abraham Ibn Ezra (Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal MS 1186)," in *Illuminating the Middle Ages: Tributes to Prof. John Lowden from his Students, Friends and Colleagues*, eds. Laura Cleaver, Alice Bovey, and Lucy Donkin (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020), 157–63.

13 Tracy Chapman Hamilton, "Queenship and Kinship in the French 'Bible moralisée': The Example of Blanche of Castile and Vienna ÖNB 2554," in *Capetian Women*, ed. Kathleen Nolan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 177–208.

14 John Carmi Parsons, "The Intercessionary Patronage of Queen Margaret and Isabella of France," in *Thirteenth-Century England VI*, eds. Michael Prestwich, R. H. Britnell, and Robin Frame (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1995), 191; John Carmi Parsons, "The Queen's Intercession," 153–57; Lois L. Huneycutt, "Intercession and the High Medieval Queen: The Esther Topos," in *Power of the Weak*, 126–46.

15 Alexandra Gajewski, "The Patronage Question under Review: Queen Blanche of Castile (1188-1252) and the Architecture of the Cistercian Abbeys at Royaumont Maubuisson and le Lys," in *Reassessing the Roles of Women as 'Makers' of Medieval Art and Architecture*, ed. Therese Martin (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 197–244.



Fig. 1. Bathsheba crowns Solomon; Below: Ecclesia preaches to convert the Jews. *Moralized Bible*, Paris, France, circe 1234. © M. Moleiro, *The Bible of St Louis*, vol. II, f. 78r. A1-2.

personifications of the Holy Church (at left) and Judaism (at right), not uncommon in Marian coronation imagery.¹⁶ An angelic being swoops ovetop to deliver divine approval of *Ecclesia's* nomination.

Unlike typical Coronation of the Virgin scenes, however, the central elements here are jumbled. Instead of Christ bestowing the crown on the Virgin, the Virgin – already crowned – bestows the divine crown on Christ. This inversion of the traditional scene is further complicated by the Virgin's headgear, a complete veil resembling that worn by royal widows and Queen Blanche herself. Assuming the role of crowning Christ in this sequence, the widowed queen is the embodiment of supreme authority. Despite the king's divine reception of the terrestrial sphere of earth and sea or moon and sun, relationships also evocative of those between Christ and the

16 Such as in the south façade of the Strasbourg cathedral, sculpted while Blanche of Castile was active c.1220s-1235. See Annette Weber, "Glaube und Wissen – Ecclesia et Synagoga," in *Wissenspopularisierung: Konzepte der Wissensverbreitung im Wandel*, ed. Carsten Kretschmann (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003), 89–126; Nina Rowe, *The Jew, the Cathedral and the Medieval City: Synagoga and Ecclesia in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Jeremy Cohen, "Synagoga Conversa: Honorius Augustodunensis, the Song of Songs, and Christianity's 'Eschatological Jew,'" *Speculum* 79 (2004): 330–31.

Virgin, the center of gravity in this image does not lie with him. Rather, our attention remains with the queen and her disquieting gaze directed at the woman, *Synagoga*, standing on the periphery. The queen, seated between the king and the Jewish figure, looks to *Synagoga* with the accompanying description of this image reading:

... Ecclesia, the Holy Church, has been betrothed to Christ, to the one deity. She ... preaches to the Jews, telling them to leave the blindness of their disbelief and to recognize Christ as true God.

To the far left, Ecclesia, the Holy Church, awaits her nuptials with Christ and preaches from the evangelium in her hand. *Synagoga*, while reserved, does not wear the traditional blindfold and meets the gaze of the queen, who swivels in a protective gesture toward the young Christ/king, subdued in his divine royalty. Within this moral image urging Jewish conversion, the Queen of Heaven and mediatrix to earth proclaims her watchful eye on the Jews to monitor that peace is held among men and that earth fulfills its heavenly plan.

The medieval viewer was accustomed to understanding the myriad overlapped meanings of an image. Considering the context of this image – in a book possibly gifted to the young king on the occasion of his wedding and proclaimed majority as monarch – one can easily perceive layered narratives of Blanche Queen of France, Mary Queen of Heaven, and the Jewish position in salvational history. If this image indeed reflects how Blanche of Castile wanted to be remembered – among other things with a watchful eye on the Jewish presence and a dominant position to mediate between king and Jewish subject – then it may be a clue as to why the queen interceded to suppress Jewish usury while the king was a minor and to assist in Jewish conversion efforts while he was away. Even more so, it is perhaps no wonder that the French monarchy, and Blanche in particular, would have led the investigations of the Talmud in the 1240s, charging that it contained slurs against the Virgin. If Blanche had identified so strongly with the Marian model of queenship, these allegations would have provided motivation enough for her.

In the end, living in Christian kingdoms was a reality of Jewish life in medieval northern Europe. Monarchs exercised a great deal of control over Jews, on matters ranging from where they could live to how much they paid in taxes, as well as aspects of their communal infrastructure. By the early decades of the thirteenth century, monarchs were also making significant efforts to convert Jews to Christianity. While the king was the head of this monarchical structure, he made extensive use of mediators. Medieval queens often filled this role, mediating between the king and the Jews behind the scenes. As queens, especially in France, were among the greatest early patrons of the arts, and had images of royalty and power chiseled, emblazoned and illuminated on objects in many medieval cities, their art sheds light on this mechanism of mediation. These objects and their visual language broadcast the beliefs and attitudes of their rule, portraying not only the queen's active role in the religious life of the kingdom, but also a variety of possible dynamics between Jews and their rulers in the Middle Ages.

Further Reading

- ❖ Theresa Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe: Queenship and Power*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- ❖ Lindy Grant, *Blanche of Castile, Queen of France*. London: Yale University Press, 2016.
- ❖ Sara Lipton, *Images of Intolerance: The Representation of Jews and Judaism in the Bible Moralisée*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- ❖ Ido Noy, "The Crown of Mrs. Zemah, Daughter of Rabbi Aaron: Conceptions of Royalty, Status, and Chastity among Ashkenazi Brides during the Middle Ages," *Chidushim – Studies in the History of German and Central European Jewry* 21 (2019): 84–113.
- ❖ Sara Offenberg, "Staging the Blindfolded Bride: Between Medieval Drama and Piyyut Illumination in the Levy Mahzor." In *Resounding Images: Medieval Intersections of Art, Music and Sound*, edited by Susan Boynton and Diane J. Reilly, 281–94. Leiden: Brepols, 2015.
- ❖ Sarit Shalev-Eyni, "Iconography of Love: Illustrations of Bride and Bridegroom in Ashkenazi Prayer Books of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century," *Studies in Iconography* 26 (2005): 27–57.