

M. Lindsay Kaplan, *Figuring Racism in Medieval Christianity*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). Print, 283pp., £22.99, ISBN: 9780190678241.



Review

This monograph, *Figuring Racism in Medieval Christianity*, is the latest addition to M. Lindsay Kaplan's studies focused on law, gender, race, and religious difference. She discusses the medieval Christian concept of Jewish servitude through theological discourses on texts about Jews that contributed to a racist construction of their identity. Starting with the figural interpretation of Cain, Ham, and Ismael as representing the enslavement of Jewish to Christians, the book proposes a cultural discourse that religion can operate like biological factors in constructing racial identity. The reapplication of these figures to similarly justify and subordinate other infidels as Muslims and the pagan inhabitants of Africa shows that racist ideas circulate and transfer from one group to another.

In a detailed introduction, Kaplan traces racism's history in drawing a line between medieval forms and contemporary white supremacy. Kaplan's purpose is, as can be read in the first lines of the text, to "[...] help us better grapple with contemporary manifestations of the problem" (p.1). While many studies of medieval discourse that articulate racial identities for Jews and Muslims do not focus on the theological texts from which these constructions emerge, Kaplan takes up Loomba's call to retheorize racial difference by focusing on not only religious identity but also medieval Christian theology's role in the formulation of racist ideas about Jews and Muslims.

In the first chapter “*Servitus Judeorum: Biblical Figures, Canon Laws, and the Construction of Heredity Inferiority*,” Kaplan identifies the Biblical figures of Esau, Hagar, Cain, and Ham and, through the interpretations of Paul and Augustine, she outlines their servile status as Jews who have been enslaved to Christians to punish their rejection and crucifixion of Jesus. The punishment of perpetual servitude constructs a racial status of inherent, hereditary inferiority that shapes the treatment of Jews in canon law; it also enters legal discourse by means of papal decretals, especially with Pope Innocent III.

This emphasis on their servitude grew out of the Jews’ flourishing in Christian lands in the twelfth century and Innocent’s desire to return them to their proper place in the Church. This is only one of the significant examples of how the articulation in law of the figural representation of *servitus* constitutes a racist construction of Jewish identity.

In Chapter two “The Mark of Cain and Embodying Inferiority”, the figure of Cain provides a means by which to embody the Jews’ subjection. The influence of figural slavery shapes accounts of Jewish physical distinctiveness in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century treatises on geography, medicine, and natural philosophy. The author demonstrates the influence and importance of the theological concept of hereditary servitude in the formation of Jewish corporal difference. Under its influences, discourses of natural philosophy and medicine represent Jewish bodies as materially infirm. Kaplan’s analysis is the first in demonstrating that Jacques de Vitry’s *Historia Orientalis* traces the discourse of Jewish bleeding as menstrual and the theological tradition that presents menses as a curse imposed upon both women and Jews. That menstruation is a punishment inflicted on the Jews for the crime of killing Jesus also emerges in a variety of exegetical texts.

The third chapter “Making Darkness Visible: The Colors of Subjection in Medieval English Psalter Illuminations” continues the exploration of the materialization of Jewish status and how to make that inferiority visible. English psalter illuminations were among the first to extend an image of the Crucifixion into a series of pictures of the life of Jesus and particular psalms were associated with events in the Gospel. Beginning with St. Anselm and continuing with the Franciscans’ preaching, Christ’s humanity is encouraged and is explored to develop empathy for his suffering. This is in conjunction with the perception of Jews’ crimes and the focus on the role of Jews increasingly emphasizes their identity as enemies of Christianity, which is made visual further by a range of negatively charged physical characteristics, such as dark skin and caricaturization. Kaplan considers representations of the damned and of devils portrayed as blue, gray, and brown to interpret images of similarly toned Jews in thirteenth-century psalters.

The last two chapters trace the history of perpetual servitude developed with recourse to the Jews. “Jewish Ham: Developing a Discourse of Hereditary Inferiority” focuses on how the development in patristic and medieval exegesis of the Jews, as figured in the cursed enslavement of Ham’s offspring, helped establish and disseminate an idea of heredity inferiority. Kaplan demonstrates the evolution of this idea and shows its wider popular circulation in medieval visual arts, poetry, and in Latin and vernacular manuscripts and printed editions. While medieval Christian commentaries on *Genesis* that link Ham to Africa do not mention Noah’s curse, the idea of Jewish cursed servitude appears adjacent to these considerations, thus paving the way for transferring hereditary inferiority from one group to the other. The association of Jews with Ham continues into the Reformation but subsides as the imperative to subordinate Jews gives way to intra-Christian enmity. The figure of Ham as representing a curse of Jewish perpetual slavery is eclipsed by a more profitable, opportunistic application to Africans that justifies their enslavement.

The final chapter “Cain, Ham, and Ishmael: The African Travels of Perpetual Servitude” traces the elaboration of this concept with recourse to Hagar and Ishmael. Hagar represents both Jews and Muslims, in canon law, and demonstrates the capacity for promiscuous re-appropriation of the figural slavery to Muslim and inhabitants of Africa. Popes and canonists begin describing Muslims as cursed with perpetual servitude for the crime of deicide, thus subjecting them to the same rationale that secured Jewish subordination to Christians, as enemies of the faith who can be battled and slaved in the course of a right war. The language of papal bulls transfers the figural concept of hereditary inferiority through the inclusion of the term “perpetual servitude” in edicts. These documents authorize the Iberian appropriation of African lands and allow the trade of African slaves that were considered inferior enemies of Christendom.

This book is a journey into the history of the concept of hereditary servitude in medieval Christian theology, exegesis, and canon law, supported by visual evidence. The image and perception of Jews, Muslims, and Africans can be traced back to medieval Western Europe, at the same time as the concept of Christian supremacy emerged. The constitutive force of hereditary inferiority for racism, that which migrates into medieval somatic discourses and materializes in visual images, results in a status of Jewish perpetual slavery. By delineating the construction of racist ideas, this book hopes to pave the way to dismantling it. Moreover, it will be a valuable contribution to many fields in the humanities, for the insights it offers, and the presence of many bibliographical references forms a strong basis for future studies on the subject.

Veronica De Duonni

Università degli Studi di Salerno



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