

Address by Rebecca Abrams at the Service of Repentance and Commitment on the Occasion of the 800th Anniversary of the Synod of Oxford at Christ Church Cathedral, 8th May 2022.

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Beyond Silence

“The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there.” So begins L.P. Hartley’s 1953 novel, *The Go-Between*. It’s a comforting idea. A comfortable position from which to view the past. One that frees us from having to think too hard about the often far-from-comfortable consequences and legacy of historical events.

But we’re here today to think about exactly that. To remember, as Jews and Christians, the consequences and legacy of an event that took place eight hundred years ago: the Oxford Synod of 1222.

The Synod began on April 17th of that year. It was convened by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, and attended by England’s leading Christian clerics. It was held at the magnificent Osney Abbey, described by one medieval visitor as ‘not only the envy of other religious houses, but of most beyond the sea.’ Stephen Langton had recently returned to the country after his years in exile during the turbulent reign of King John, and he saw the Oxford Synod as a chance to instigate much-needed reform of the English church.

By the time the Synod concluded a few weeks later, it had instituted fifty new canons. Most were aimed at bringing England into line with the rulings of the Fourth Lateran Council of Rome in 1215, which Langton had helped to draft. But the Synod also passed into English church law a raft of explicitly anti-Jewish measures, banning Jews in England from building new synagogues, employing Christian servants, and from entering churches for any reason at all. Jews were now forced to pay church tithes and they were no longer allowed to keep their belongings in churches for safe-keeping. The Synod also threatened with excommunication “any Christians who developed friendships with Jews or sold them provisions”.

These laws created real difficulties for medieval Jews. The ban on storing valuables in churches left them far more vulnerable to burglary, assault and looting in their own homes. The ban on Christian servants made Sabbath observance harder and deterred familiarity between Jews and Christians.

But of all the anti-Jewish laws of 1222 the worst and most shameful was that Jews from now on must wear an identifying badge. A representation of the Ten Commandments given to Moses at Mount Sinai, this was to take the form of ‘*two white tablets on the chest, made out of linen cloth or of parchment...two fingers in width and four in length*’, and be a different colour from the clothing it was attached to, so that ‘*by their effect a Christian is able to discern a clear sign of a Jew.*’

The alleged need for a badge only underscored how indistinguishable England’s medieval Jews were in reality. Its actual purpose was to construct physical difference where there was none. To create barriers and enforce division. Its purpose was to make Jews visible and set them apart.

How many people today know that England was the first country in Europe to impose and enforce the wearing of an identifying badge on its Jewish population? Seven centuries before the Nazis.

How many people know that England invented the 'blood libel', the baseless accusation that Jews killed Christians to use their blood in Jewish rituals? A complete fantasy that led to the deaths of thousands of innocent Jews over the centuries. The last blood libel trial was in Ukraine in 1913.

How many people know that in 1290, less than seventy years after the Oxford Synod of 1222, England became the first country in Europe to expel its entire Jewish community? The first, but not the last.

These are not comfortable things to remember. But they took place not in a foreign country but in *this* country, and if we want to consign the antisemitism that underpinned them to history, they need to be remembered.

In the seven decades between the 1222 Synod of Oxford and the 1290 Edict of Expulsion, Jewish persecution in England went from bad to worse. New anti-Jewish legislation was passed in every decade, alongside executions for alleged ritual murder, punitive taxations, physical attacks, collective mass imprisonments, and massacres of Jewish communities in towns and cities across the country.

The Oxford Synod did not create antisemitism, but it played a decisive role in creating this hostile environment, as today's service rightly recognises. It formalised Christian antipathy towards the Jewish people and the Jewish religion, enshrined both in law, and created a catastrophic blueprint for centuries to come.

An unholy trinity of religion, politics and economy under Henry III and Edward I forged a culture saturated in anti-Jewish myths and stereotypes, many of which were then exported to the Continent and remain alive and lethal, abroad and at home, to this day.

I am mindful, standing here, saying all of this, as a Jewish woman in a Christian cathedral, how much progress we have made since the thirteenth century. How utterly unimaginable this service, these words, would have been to the Jews and Christians of medieval England. How vital and precious it is that these words can indeed be spoken and heard with mutual good-will and understanding.

Next weekend in synagogues throughout England, Jews will recite the weekly Torah portion Emor, which corresponds to Leviticus 21–24. This same portion of the Bible was recited in May 1287, not in synagogues but in prisons, where the entire Jewish population had been incarcerated to force them to pay a final tax demand, even though by then the English Jewry was utterly impoverished.

Locked up in Winchester castle, a forty-four year old man called Asher, scratched a message on his prison wall, a small fragment of which has survived. It reads:

'On Friday, eve of the Sabbath in which the pericope Emor is read, all the Jews of the isle were imprisoned. I, Asser, inscribed this ...' Asher was the son of David of Oxford and Licoricia of

Winchester, and he was born in a house a stone's throw from here, on what's now the site of the modern Town Hall. His words do much more than provide the date and time of this mass arrest.

Emor includes an explicit reminder of God's commandment to observe the Sabbath as a day **'of solemn rest, a holy convocation'**, (a reminder of which was sewn on to the garments of Asher and his co-religionists in the form of the detested badge.) *Emor's* concluding verses address the question of appropriate forms of retribution for harm caused to person or to property. *Emor* is Hebrew for 'speak'.

This fragment of graffiti is Asher speaking out, and his rage and despair are still audible hundreds of years later. His mother had been murdered in her own home, his brother and nephew executed by the crown, he and all his people forced to wear the detested badge, subjected to repeated attacks, expelled from their towns, systematically reduced to poverty, and now stripped of their liberty and imprisoned while at prayer on their holy Sabbath.

As he scratched his message on his prison wall, was Asher appealing to his fellow Jews to hold onto their faith in the face of these repeated outrages? Or was he reminding their oppressors that no one escapes divine justice, be they ever so lofty, invoking the penultimate verse of *Emor*: 'You shall have one manner of law, as well for the stranger as for the home-born.'

The Oxford Synod of 1222 was, unquestionably, a terrible turning point in Jewish-Christian relations, and one that caused lasting damage, not only for the Jews of medieval England, but for Jewish people throughout Europe for centuries afterwards.

Is this history really so safely distanced, so foreign, from the present? Antisemitism certainly has not yet been consigned to history. Would we not be wise to heed the words of Bernard Schlink, who wrote of post WW2 Germany: *'If the ice of a culturally advanced civilisation upon which one fancied oneself safely standing was in fact so thin at that time, then how safe is the ice we live upon today? Has the ice grown thicker with time, or has the passage of time only allowed us to forget how thin it really is?'*

Osney Abbey was dissolved by Henry VIII in the sixteenth century. The Abbey bell hangs now in Tom Tower over the entrance to Christ Church and it rings out 101 times every evening, a loud reminder - if we know how to heed its message - of the suffering of the Jews of medieval England. We are here today, all of us, here together, to move beyond silence: to listen to the past, to speak to the present, and to ensure a better future.

Rebecca Abrams, 8 May 2022