

The Melancholy Jew: Humoral Theory in medieval Jewish and Christian Polemics

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In medieval humoral theory, melancholy or black bile is one of the body's four humors. When it is unnaturally dominant in an individual's humoral complexion, it produces both physical illness and psychological disability. By assigning a melancholy complexion to Jews, medieval Christian theologians and natural philosophers forced upon them a diseased condition—either as a divine punishment for their rejection of Christian truths, or as a natural consequence of their peculiar diet and customs. The link between Jews and melancholy was so widely accepted that it was identified as “the Jews’ disease”, and sometimes accepted as such by Jews themselves. This assumption led Christian sources to attribute to Jews various signs of a melancholy disposition: an effeminate timidity, idleness, an aversion for manual labor, avarice, misanthropy, and despair often leading to insanity. In addition to these psychological effects of melancholy, many Christians held that nature sought to purge the excess of melancholy blood in Jewish men in an especially embarrassing manner: through bleeding hemorrhoids that appeared in the same monthly periodic fashion as a woman's menstrual cycle. Both physically and psychologically, then, the Jews' melancholy condition tended to feminize them.

This paper will survey medieval Jewish and Christian views on the Jews' melancholy and highlight in particular the interplay of science and theology for the construction of an image of the diseased Jew.